The "*Kammatthan* Buddhist Tradition" of Mainland Southeast Asia: Where Do We Stand?

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Abstract—This review article explores the distinctive Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition of meditation, so-called *kammaṭṭhān*(*a*) or *yogāvacar*(*a*) tradition in recent literature, initially identified by T.W. Rhys Davids in the late 19th century. French scholars like F. Bizot and British scholar K. Crosby have continued to study this tradition, revealing its unique practices and vernacular literature in mainland Southeast Asia. Crosby's recent work, *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (2020), is critically examined in this study. The analysis assesses her new findings, discusses her sources, and offers reflections to enhance understanding within contemporary Buddhist studies.

Keywords: Esoteric Theravada; *Kammatthan* Buddhist Tradition; Kate Crosby; Southeast Asian Buddhism; Tai–Khmer Meditation Practices

More than a century ago, T.W. Rhys Davids, the founder of the distinguished Pali Text Society in the UK, published the romanized edition of a meditation treatise titled *Vidarśanapota* (Vid), written in both Pali and Sinhalese. He freely translated it as *The Yogāvacara's Manual* in 1896. Thomas William Rhys Davids, along with his wife Caroline Augusta Foley who wrote the preface to the translation of Vid (F.L. Woodward 1916), found themselves puzzled by this Buddhist text. In their views, it differed in many respects from the conceptions and teachings contained in the Pali corpus of the Mahāvihāra, which is, in principle, the authoritative source of the tradition of Buddhism labeled as "Theravada". These differences pertained to "spiritual exercise" or meditation (P., *kammaṭṭhāna*),

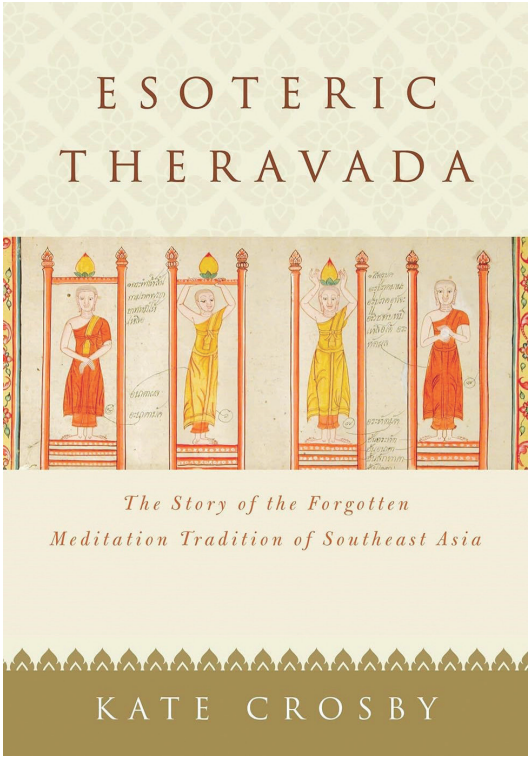

Figure 1: Book Cover of *Esoteric Theravada* © Shambala Publications

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while simultaneously relying on Pali terminology and Buddhist conceptions found in the *Abhidhamma* and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (T.W. Rhys Davids 1896: vii–xxx; C.A.F. Rhys Davids 1916: xiv).

Since then, French scholars have identified a number of texts, most of which were composed in mainland Southeast Asia, evidently related to the *Vidarśanapota* and seemingly reflecting a distinctive form of Buddhist practice (e.g., Leclère 1899: 42–43; Finot 1917: 76–83; Cœdès 1956). However, it was only from the 1970s onwards that this tradition became the subject of more in-depth study, thanks to the pioneering works of François Bizot, then a researcher at the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). Bizot published a series of monographs and articles in French on the so-called *kammaṭṭhān*(*a*) or "*yogāvacar*(*a*) tradition", relying on related vernacular literature and distinctive rituals that he was able to find and observe in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. His work inspired several other specialists who have continued to conduct research on this tradition, such as François Lagirarde and Olivier de Bernon, also members of the EFEO.

British scholar Kate Crosby's keen interest in the subject emerged later, and since 2000, she has produced a number of English publications on this Buddhist trend, particularly related to its transmission in late 18th-century Sri Lanka. Her first book on this topic aimed to be a synthesis of what she called the *borān kammaṭṭhān* (see below for a critical discussion on this term), considering the reasons for its gradual disappearance, as its title suggests (Crosby 2013). Her latest book, *Esoteric Theravada*: *The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia* (Crosby 2020) **[Figure 1]**, under review here, is a new attempt to outline this Buddhist tradition of meditation, addressing both historical and analytical aspects. The question of overlaps and repetitions with her previous monograph inevitably arises, to the extent that a significant number of passages are found verbatim in both volumes. Crosby acknowledges the duplications and justifies this by stating that "both the field and [her] knowledge have developed", adding that new authors have brought to light material significant enough to justify this new publication (p. 4). This review article aims to appraise her new findings in the book, provide an overview of her sources, and offer critical remarks on her analysis and avenues of reflection to enhance the understanding of this not well-known regional tradition in contemporary Buddhist studies.

What is the "*Kammatthan* Tradition"?

At the outset, it is crucial to emphasize that *Esoteric Theravada* may seem somewhat perplexing to readers unfamiliar with the so-called *kammatthan* tradition or those who are not acquainted with Bizot's previous work. In line with the latter, Crosby introduces this specific tradition of meditation as "distinctive from all other forms of Theravada meditation practice" (p. 30). This strong statement aligns with the labelling of this tradition as "unorthodox", which is indeed how it is perceived by scholars and some Buddhist practitioners in Southeast Asia. However, the author hardly explains at the beginning why, how, and to what extent this tradition

can be referred to as such, especially as the terms "distinctive" and "unorthodox" repeatedly appear throughout *Esoteric Theravada* (pp. 6, 25–34, 60, 63, 197, 234). Crosby discusses the validity of such qualifications in later chapters, but it is surprising that this terminology is not addressed at the outset. What the "old *kammatthan*"—which can more prosaically be referred to as the Tai–Khmer[2] method of Buddhist meditation—consists of will only be gradually and partially elucidated in her study.

In Chapter 1, Crosby looks "at attitudes to Theravada Buddhism and its meditation during the colonial period", in order to explain why this tradition came to be "marginalized and dismissed as contrived or corrupt" (p. 5). It is true that Buddhists in French and British colonies and protectorates often had to face "expectations of what Buddhism and religion should and should not be" (p. 12). One can nevertheless find curious such a methodological approach that begins a study by analyzing the alleged extinction of its very subject, without having previously provided an overview. Moreover, one may question the assertion that this tradition "disappeared" during the colonial period. Certainly, the Tai–Khmer method began to be overshadowed by Burmese "Vipassanā" techniques in the modern period, but Bizot witnessed and documented many related rituals and practices in the 1970s and Bernon as late as the 1990s. Crosby likewise extensively addresses the colonization issue in relation to British Burma and Europe, which, as we shall see, is not directly related to meditation.

Moreover, Crosby's approach amounts to considering this tradition mainly from an etic perspective—that of European scholars and reformist religious elites—rather than from an emic point of view, that of the local people, the Buddhist practitioners of mainland Southeast Asia. The issue of European views on the Buddhist religion that led to a kind of "neo-Buddhism" has been thoroughly addressed for the Theravada world, especially in the last few decades (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1992; Dapsance 2018). However, it appears from these studies that the movement some have called "Protestant Buddhism" was not specifically directed towards meditation—even less so to one method in particular—but more broadly to any facet of Buddhism that was considered as irrational such as divination, searches for supernatural power, spirit cults, protective spells, apocryphal works, and other indigenous practices. In fact, a whole segment of vernacular Buddhist literature and practice have been discarded over the last century, to such an extent that a number of texts and notions have become hardly comprehensible for most people, even scholarly monks.

The first attempt by Crosby to define the so-called *kammatthan* tradition appears in Chapter 2, but only in a limited fashion. She first cites an excerpt (p. 29) from a meditation instruction given by Luang Pu Sot Candasaro (หลวงปู่สดจนฺทสโร; 1884–1959),

[2] The term Tai here refers to populations speaking a Tai language, in particular the Siamese (central Thailand), the Yuon (northern Thailand and northwest Laos), the Lao (Laos and northeast Thailand), the Lue (northern Laos and Xishuanbanna State in China), the Khuen (Shan States of Myanmar), etc.

former abbot of Wat Paknam Phasicharoen (วัดปากน้ำภาษีเจริญ) in Bangkok, considered by the modern Thammakai movement (on which, see further below) to have rediscovered an ancient meditation technique believed to have been used by Buddha Gotama himself—a narrative that obviously serves to legitimize this modern movement. Luang Pu Sot's method, called *witcha thammakai*[3] (Th., วิชชาธรรมกาย; P., *vijjā dhammakāya*), is a modernized and simplified version of the so-called "old *kammatthan*" (Newell 2008: 256–257; *contra*, Niras 2015: 274–283), with which it has, moreover, significant differences. It is thus not representative of the tradition as a whole. While the first section of this chapter is supposed to depict the "distinctive features of Esoteric Theravada meditation", it only gives a few hints, both too general and too specific to be self-explanatory. To say that *borān* (*sic*) (lit. "ancient") meditation should start with evoking the five "joys" (P., *pīti*), which in the Pali commentarial literature are experienced in the approach to, and during, the first *jhāna* or "mental absorption" (pp. 30–31), although correct, is not sufficient to define the specificity of this teaching. This terminology is already well-known to anyone acquainted with Pali texts considered today as authoritative with regard to meditation, such as the (*Mahā-*) *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* (D II 290f; M I 56f), the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism) or the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (Abhidh-s), the latter being two "exoteric" Buddhist practice manuals. Crosby rightly identifies the fact that *nimitta*s or "signs" seen in meditation can appear to the meditator as "spheres of light" as an original feature of the tradition. Unfortunately, she only refers to this specificity and gives little further information on the subject in the rest of the book (pp. 56–57).

The concept of the "fetus as a model for spiritual transformation" (pp. 31f) is correctly identified, but the explanation the author gives is so terse that, once again, readers unfamiliar with this belief can hardly grasp what this is about. The same can be said for "the potency of the Pali language" and "numerology" (pp. 32f), which are presented as distinctive features but in terms too vague to be clear. It should also be pointed out that "the Pali alphabet understood as a creative and potent force" (*ibid*.) is not a conception that is specific to the Tai and Khmer traditions. It was already effective in Buddhism when practiced by the ancient Pyu and Mon, as evidenced in numerous early Pali inscriptions from upper Myanmar and central Thailand (5th–10th c.) bearing mantras and apotropaic formulae.[4] In fact, Vism as well as *Abhidhamma* commentaries already describe Pali as a magical language (Gornall 2020: 40). Moreover, Bizot and von Hinüber (1994: 38) have pointed out that numerology is not entirely absent from the Tipiṭaka.[5]

[3] Thai (and Lao) words in this article are romanized according to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS). Khmer words are freely transcribed according to the actual pronunciation.

[4] See for instance Revire 2014. Also worthy of note is the *yantra* engraved on an Angkorian stone slab first found in Bat Chum temple (Cambodia)—and in other places such as Oudor Meanchey (Dominique Soutif, pers. comm.)—which represents lotus petals arranged into 49 squares and containing the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet (Cœdès 1952). This *yantra* is probably not, however, to be linked to those that are widespread in the Pali tradition of Southeast Asian Buddhism (see Bizot 1981b: 256).

[5] In particular, the number of syllables in the verses

The following brief section that examines "similarities with Tantra" (pp. 33f) rests on ambivalent and rapid comparison and is thus more confusing than enlightening. Much more can be said on this matter (see below). Then comes a brief overview of the two methods of meditations that are today recognized as authoritative for the Theravada tradition—at least among the religious elites and most Buddhist scholars—, that given by Buddhaghosa in Vism (fl. 5th c. CE), and the Burmese "Vipassanā" technique, which was introduced in 19th century-Burma and popularized by Venerable U Sobhana Mahāthera (Mahāsi Sayadaw, 1904–1982) in the mid-20th century, before it spread to Thailand and Sri Lanka. At this point in the book, these two methods are actually described in more detail (pp. 38–42) than is the "old *kammatthan*", to the extent that Crosby's discussion obscures comprehension of the latter practice.

This late and laconic description of the Tai–Khmer method of meditation in *Esoteric Theravada* is puzzling. For readers unfamiliar with this tradition, it can be useful at this point to draw on Bizot and Lagirarde's description of the distinctive traits of the path of the "practitioner of spiritual discipline" (Kh., យោគាវចរ, *yukiaveachor*; Th., โยคาวจร, *yokhawachon*; P., *yogāvacara*) towards deliverance:

> The *yogāvacara* must (1) recollect the successive stages of his [or her[6]] own embryonic formation within the maternal womb; (2) by means of breathing exercises, build up a new body, beginning with generating new organs made from syllables, which are encapsulated portions of the Dhamma; (3) visualize inside himself, at the level of the navel, this new body in the process of being created, which first takes the form of a one-inch tall buddha; (4) in the course of his lifetime achieve the building of this "body [made] of Dhamma" (P., *dhammakāya*), stripped of impurities, which at the moment of his death will take over his current body and lead him to *nibbāna* (Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 38; my translation).[7]

From this short passage, one can already see that this technique primarily rests on the visualization and internal mimesis of the development of the embryo in the mother's womb, which aims to make the *yogāvacara* symbolically reborn in a new existence, deprived of all impurity. This process of initiatory *regressus ad uterum* (Bizot forthcoming), which the practitioner must carry out through meditation and breathing exercises in order to reach spiritual liberation, is unfortunately not clearly elucidated in *Esoteric Theravada*.

During this process, the *yogāvacara* goes through a series of individual physical

of praise to the Triple Gem—starting with *iti pi so*—totalize, by way of an artifice, the auspicious number 108 (Bizot & von Hinüber 1994: 38).

[6] The practice of *kammatthan* is also open to women and a woman can theoretically even be a master, even though such cases rarely occur.

[7] Crosby provides an English translation of this passage in a "Bibliographic essay" of Bizot's work along with a list of key features that characterizes, according to her, this tradition (Crosby 2000: 141–142, 170). Another excerpt of the *Saddavimala* is quoted by Crosby in *Esoteric Theravada* (pp. 105f), but is not explicitly related to meditation.

and psychological experiences, following a pattern presented to him—but never fully explained—by his "Master of initiation" (Kh., គ្រូកម្មដ្ឋាន, *kru kammatthan*; Th., ครูกรรมฐ์าน, *khru kammatthan*; P., *garu kammaṭṭhāna*). The Master ought to interpret signs (P., *nimitta*) of progression and thus determine whether or not his disciple is ready for stepping into the next stage or "topic of meditation" (Kh., មូលព្រះកម្មដ្ឋាន, *mul preah kammatthan*; Th., มูลพระกรรมฐาน, *mun phra kammatthan*; P., *mūlakammaṭṭhāna*). Experienced "signs" and "topics of meditation" may slightly vary from one master to another in terms of number, order, and details, and according to time and place, but generally follow the same pattern. Notwithstanding some distinctive features, this pattern broadly adheres to that given by Buddhaghosa in Vism (Bizot 1992: 49; Bernon 2000: 461f; Skilton & Phibul 2014: 92).

In mainland Southeast Asia, the initiation of the *yogāvacara* takes place within a highly ritualized framework, which highlights the intimate relationship between the disciple and his (or her) master. One illustrative example is the "ritual of salutation to the Master" (Kh., វន្ទាគ្រូព្រះកម្មដ្ឋាន, *vontia kru preah kammatthăn*), which takes place at the beginning of the apprenticeship and, in a simpler form, on a daily basis when the disciple reports to the Master what he (or she) experienced during the disciple's "meditation watches" (Kh., អង្គុយភាវនា, *angkuy phiaveania*; P., *bhāvanā*) (Bernon 2000: 416). A number of ritual objects are necessary for the disciple's initiation (e.g., incense sticks, candles, areca nuts, flowers, different kinds of trays), another peculiar feature of the Tai–Khmer method with regard to other meditation systems. Characteristic of this tradition is the "ceremony of compression" (Kh., ពិធីសង្កត់, *pithi sangkat*) during which the *yogāvacara* reproduces before the Master the same spiritual exercise he or she accomplished in his cell, in order to "generate" (Kh., បង្កើតស្ថិត, *bangkaet sthoet*) once again relevant *nimitta*s on defined parts of their body, viz., just under the navel, two finger-breadths above the navel, at the center of the abdomen, at the solar plexus, and at the level of the heart. This must be done according to six different schemes or "entrances" (Kh., ចូល, *chol*; Th., เข้า, *khao*), that is, in different predetermined orders, for example "in succession" (Th., ลำดับ, *lamdap*), viz., 1 2 3 4 5 5 4 3 2 1, "by alternation" (Th., สลับ, *salap*), viz., 1 3 2 4 3 5 5 3 4 2 3 1, "by inching forward" (Th., คืบ, *khuep*), viz., 1 4 2 5 3 5 2 4 1 3, etc. (Bizot 1992: 50f; Mettanando 1999: 210; and Bernon 2000: 492). This ritual is executed at the pace of the fall of small lead marbles from a lighted candle, on which they have previously been fixed, into a bowl of water placed underneath. At the sound of the fall, the *yogāvacara* moves on to the next topic of meditation (T.W. Rhys Davids 1896: xiii; Bernon 2000: 511f). In Cambodia, the making of the "beads of fixation" (Kh., ល្អកសង្កត់, *luk sangkat*) also follows a dedicated ritual process, which includes the engraving of magical diagrams (Skt., *yantra*) before melting and shaping. *Esoteric Theravada* is entirely silent on this whole distinctive ritual apparatus. In addition, the book does not give any detail on the crucial role the Master plays in the initiation of the disciple, the *yogāvacara*.

It should be borne in mind that the so-called *kammatthan* tradition of mainland Southeast Asia is not limited to meditation practice—this fact, by itself, makes the

designation quite problematic. As rightly stated by Crosby (pp. 68f), it also includes cosmogonies, creation myths, and narratives, which often parallel the *yogāvacara*'s visualization of the individual's physical and psychic conception with the genesis of the universe. In this vein, for example, the ancient Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* is reinterpreted in premodern Cambodia as if Rāma's action actually takes place within the human body (Bizot 1989). The tale of the "Fig tree with five branches", recorded in Bizot's pioneering eponymous book (1976),[8] is also significant since it relates the journey of the "spirit children" (Kh., ចិត្តកុមារ ចិត្តកុមារី, *cittakumāra cittakumārī*; Th., ลูกดวงจิต, *luk duang chit*). These children are on leave from Yama's realm in search of a new womb to be reborn in the Land of the Rose Apple tree (P., *Jambudīpa*), symbolic of the human sphere. To escape from the endless cycle of death and rebirth, they begin to search for a "jewel orb" (Kh., ដួងកែវ, *duang kaeo*; Th., ดวงแก้วมณีโชติ, *duang kaeo manichot*) which will allow them to access the "City of Nibbāna" (P., *nibbānanagara*). However, this jewel is hidden in the "Fig tree with five branches", guarded by six birds of prey called "*indriya*" (Kh., ឥន្ទ្រី, *entri*; Th., นกอินทรี, *nok insi*, "eagle"), which they must kill if they want to seize it. This narrative is obviously an allegory for the journey of the individual's psycho–physiological principle during transmigration (P., *nāmarūpa*, or *citta-viññāṇa*), in which Buddhist principles are metaphorically signified. The birds *indriya* (Th., *insi*) thus represent, through a phonic amalgamation, the faculties of sense (P., *indriya*).

This tradition has also developed a specific cosmogony that depicts the genesis of the universe from the five primordial syllables (P., *akkhara*) NA MO BU DDHĀ YA (*namo buddhāya*), "homage to the buddha(s)", which are associated with the five buddhas, the five elements (P., *dhātu*), viz., earth, water, fire, wind, ether, as well as the five aggregates (P., *khandha*) (Leclère 1899: 42; Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 39f). The "holy jewel" (Th., พระแก้ว, *phra kaeo*) in turn creates the three syllables MA A U, which epitomize the three divisions of the Doctrine, namely, the *Vinaya*, the *Suttanta*, and the *Abhidhamma*. This is a Buddhist reinterpretation of the sacred mantra OṂ, which in Hinduism can symbolize—among other things—the Trimūrti, where the three Sanskrit letters A U M are equated to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, respectively (Gonda 1968: 222; Bailey 1979: 153). This cosmogenesis of the Tai–Khmer tradition is meant to serve as an introspective support to the *yogāvacara* during the process of the inner creation of a "body of the Dhamma" (P., *dhammakāya*, which can also take the more prosaic sense of "body of the Doctrine").[9] Similarly, the *yogāvacara* must find in himself the "teaching of the buddha", here materialized by "heart-formulae" (Kh., បណ្តាល, *bandol*; Th., หัวใจ, *hua chai*), made of Pali syllables, which encapsulate fundamental principles of the Tipiṭaka such as MA A U, which gives rise to the head, the trunk, and the legs of the embryo, KU SA LĀ A KU SA LĀ (*kusalā akusālā*), which conveys his

[8] Lagirarde (1994) made a comparative study between Khmer and northern Thai recensions of this narrative.

[9] The double meaning of the term "body" is evident in the expression "the Triple Basket within" (Kh., [ត្រៃ]បិដកក្នុងកាយ [*trai*] *peidok knong kay*) found in Cambodian texts (Walker 2018: 531).

karmic acquisitions, A Ā I Ī U Ū E O which produces the organs, the aforementioned NA MO BU DDHĀ YA formula which creates the five constitutive elements of his body, as well as the five aggregates and physical components. These five syllables also link the individual with the persons he is in debt to for their "legacies" (Kh., គុណ, *kun*; Th., คุณ, *khun*; P., *guṇa*), who define him both biologically and socially in this world, namely, his mother, his father, his relatives, his prince, and his master or *kru* (Bizot & von Hinüber 1994: 39f). Not only the *yogāvacara*, but more broadly all Buddhist followers are required to "recollect [their] parents' legacies" (Kh., រលឹកគុណបិតាមាតា, *roluek kun beida mieda*; Th., รู้จักคุณพ่อคุณแม่, *ruchak khun pho khun mae*), that is, the bodily fluids and solid organs, which each mother and father pass on to their offspring during gestation. These bodily components, a total of 12 and 21 in number respectively, are assimilated to the water-elements (P., *āpodhātu*) and the earth-elements (P., *paṭhavīdhātu*). These components actually correspond to the stereotypical lists found in canonical and postcanonical texts when describing the parts of the human body (P., *dvattiṁsākāra*, "the 32 components") where they are depicted as topics of meditation for the *yoga* practitioner.[10] However, the connection established with the "legacies of the parents" is specific only to the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition.[11] These concepts are not explained in *Esoteric Theravada*.

Until recently, analogies to this principle of rebirth in the womb could be observed during specific rituals in Cambodia, such as the *chak bangsokol* (ឆាកបង្សុកូល; P., *paṁsukūla*) in which the practitioner symbolically replicates the journey of a dead person between two existences, and simulates, through a walk in a labyrinth made of white cloth, his rebirth within and emerging from the matrix (Bizot 1981a).[12] Another example is the "cavern of birth" ritual, which was also recently still performed in Cambodia, where village pilgrims enact their own *regressus* in the womb just as does a practitioner of meditation.[13] As it happens, the ordination ritual (P., *upasampadā*) in this tradition also includes this symbolism, as the candidate is compared to a transmigrant entering into the womb, who is about to be "reborn" again, as his status of monk makes him a new being. The monastery as a whole participates in this metaphorical figuration: the preaching hall (P., *sālā*) represents the father, and the sanctuary (P., *vihāra*) or ordination hall (P., *uposatha*), the mother or maternal womb. The sanctuary's eight outer boundary stones (Kh., គោលសីមា, *koul seima*; Th., ใบเสมา, *bai sema*; P., *sīmā*)

[10] See Khp 2; M III 90; A III 323; A V 109; Vibh 82, 193f; D II 293; D III 104f; Vism 242f, etc. Tai–Khmer tradition lists 33 components instead of 32, as the last item, *matthake matthaluṅgaṁ* ("the brain in the skull") is divided into two components, brain and skull (Finot 1917: 81).

[11] On the importance of the "legacies" of parents in mainland Southeast Asian Buddhism, see Kourilsky 2007, and Kourilsky 2022: 162–166.

[12] This ritual is not attested in Buddhist practice in Sri Lanka and India. However, it can be compared to Japanese *kanjō* ritual, where monks simulate the buddha's journey towards enlightenment by walking through white sheets hung up to form a labyrinth (e.g., Strickmann 1996: 209).

[13] Described in Bizot (1980). This ritual is very similar to tantric rituals that are performed in Japan and other parts of East Asia (e.g., Stein 1988).

constitute symbolically the recipient's body openings which are the right and left eyes, the two nostrils, and so on, while the central stone (Kh., សីមាកិល, *seima kel*) acts as his navel (Bizot 1988: 36f, n. 31; Bernon 2000: 210–219). Furthermore, the different parts of the monastic cloth—seven in number in the Tai–Khmer tradition, three in the Pali *Vinaya*—are also associated with the different components of the matrix in such a way that, for example, the waist belt is equated with the umbilical cord, the upper robe (Kh., ចីពរ, *cheipor*; Th., จีวร, *chiwon*; P., *cīvara/uttarāsaṅga*) represents the placenta, and so on.[14]

Finally, Bizot documented various other distinctive regional features, with regard, for instance, to the ordination procedure and its liturgies, the monk's accessories such as the walking stick, the ecclesiastical grades sanctioned by dedicated rituals, etc.[15] The so-called *kammatthan* tradition can thus be described as a cultural bedrock that encompasses different worldviews, values, and conceptions, some of which are specific to this part of Southeast Asia. Although Crosby acknowledges that the "[old *kammatthan* is] part of a broader culture" (p. 68), she stays silent—aside from a short section on narratives (see below)—about any of these particularities, as the book mainly addresses meditation practice.

Terminological Issues

A number of terms Crosby uses for referring to her subject of study—the method of Buddhist meditation as practiced in premodern Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, and, earlier in Sri Lanka as well as related Buddhist practices and conceptions—deserve further discussion.

One may first reflect on the term "esoteric", which repeatedly occurs in the book, starting with its title. Other authors have also used this term to qualify specific features of Tai–Khmer Buddhism (e.g., Bizot 1980: 228, 253; 1988: 107; Cousins 1997: 185f; Bernon 2006: 62). More recently, however, some scholars have been critical of the use of this term for referring to this tradition (e.g., McDaniel 2011: 100–109; McGovern 2017: 6–10). Crosby uses this term, first, because the practitioner needs to receive an initiation, and there is a close relationship between the meditator and his master. On the one hand, initiation provided by a teacher to selected disciples is certainly a feature that has similarity with tantras (p. 34), the esoteric tradition of Indian Buddhism and Hinduism. On the other hand, the Master-student relationship does not, in fact, drastically depart from the wider traditional meditation type found in South Asia, which involves direct instruction from teacher to pupil. The qualification of the Master of meditation in the Tai–Khmer tradition as a "good friend" (P., *kalyāṇamitta*) in which complete trust and devotion is advocated is, for example, already found in Vism.[16] Therefore, this way of open transmission is not sufficient to qualify the Southeast Asian traditional meditation as necessarily "esoteric".

[14] For the full list, see Bizot 1980: 246.

[15] For an overview of these distinctive features, see Bizot 2000.

[16] Vism I 19, 89, 97–122, and Vism II 43f, 471–480. On the relationship of the disciple with the Master, see Gethin 2004: 203, 212. *Contra*, see Polak 2011.

At any rate, one may wonder to what extent the practice of this kind of meditation can be referred to as "esoteric", without clarifying it. As is well known, esoterism first refers to secret teachings, which in ancient Greece were reserved only to insiders (ἐσώτερος, *esóteros*; lit. "inner"). This term has also been used in Europe to designate teachings and trends within Christianity that belong to restricted groups of people. Nowadays, it more broadly refers to marginal currents of thought with a secret or strange component, which are accessible only to the initiated; in Europe, Freemasonry is a contemporary example of this. Certainly, Khmer Buddhists use the expression "inner path" (Kh., ផ្លូវក្នុង, *phloew knong*), referring to the practice of meditation in broad terms, in opposition to the sole study of texts, which is, conversely, considered as the "outer path" (Kh., ផ្លូវក្រៅ, *phloew krau*) (Bizot 1992: 33, 247). This distinction between study and contemplation as two different "burdens"—viz., *ganthadhura* and *vipassanādhura*—in fact corresponds to one which is also found in the Pali commentaries (e.g., Dh–a I 7, 68) without involving any kind of sectarianism. As for Chinese Buddhism, the doctrine of the buddha as a whole is considered the only true teaching, precisely because it is "internal" 內 (*nei*) (Strickmann 1996: 357). Likewise, the Tibetan word for "Buddhist" is ནང་པ་ (*nang pa*), literally meaning "insider", i.e., someone who looks inwards.

The term "initiation" is also worthy of closer consideration. According to the definition of esoterism given above, "the initiated ones" concern only individuals who have been accepted into a selected group. As a result, teachings are deemed "secret" to those who are external to this group. In China and Japan, for instance, the masters of tantric Buddhism or Taoism form a group of initiates, bound by secrecy, whose rites and texts remain largely inaccessible and unintelligible to the layman (Strickmann 1996: 46). In reality, "mystery" (μυστήριον, *mustérion* in Greek) is also part of Christianity and more broadly of every religion, at least during their earliest phase of development. Paul Lévy (1957: 97f) proposed classifying Buddhism as among the "mystery religions", which he said were characterized "by the fact that their principal rites and revelation are kept secret, [and consequently] create at least two classes within the societies in which they flourish: the initiated and the uninitiated". However, in the Tai–Khmer tradition, it is not only the uninitiated but the disciple himself who remains a stranger to the deeper meaning of the teachings he receives. The Master of initiation never gives any explanation to the disciple when interpreting the "signs" or *nimitta*s during the practical sessions. However, the reason for this omission is not necessarily to conceal the details of his method. It may also be that the actual basis of this structured technique is the concrete achievement of all stages of meditation rather than the intellectual understanding of this process. If the way of the *yogāvacara* is locally said to be "hidden" (Kh., លាក់, *leak*), it is because it rests on personal and solitary experience which cannot be taught by a lecture-based course as is the case for the teaching of the scriptures (P., *pariyatti*). Vernacular manuals teach that the ultimate Dhamma, secret to ordinary

mortals, lies hidden in the depths of the mind—i.e., the "Fig tree with five branches"—and only becomes perceptible, in the form of a jewel orb, after intense breathing exercises (Potprecha 2022: 36). The disciple thus receives a method, rather than a dogmatic teaching, which enables him to "seek within himself" (Kh., រកក្នុងខ្លួន, *rok knong khluon*) the path to purification (Bizot 1992: 33f). In other words, the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation is a praxis in the Aristotelian sense of the term, rather than a theoretical or contemplative activity.

Additionally, Crosby convincingly argues that the "[old *kammatthan*] was visible, sponsored as it was at the highest levels of court society as well as practiced at key points in the Buddhist and harvest calendar among the rural population" (p. 19). How, then, can its practice still be regarded as esoteric?[17] Even more suggestive is her credible assumption that these practices were known, supported, and probably regarded as the conventional meditation system used by the Thai or Siamese and Lao religious elites until the late 19th century (p. 191; also Crosby et al. 2012: 19). In fact, this is perhaps not surprising if we look at tantric Buddhism in East Asia—also often labeled "esoteric"—which also received royal patronage and support from ruling elites and whose experts were in direct contact with emperors (Strickmann 1996: 40). Crosby's convincing presentation of the "old *kammatthan*" as a mainstream form of Buddhist meditation practice in pre-modern Thailand (formerly Siam) and Cambodia is arguably—and paradoxically—the main outcome of her book.

A further argument one could put forward to support this idea is linked to related rituals, such as that of the "Cavern of birth" in Cambodia (Bizot 1980) and distinctive ceremonies sanctioning ecclesiastical grades in Tai Lue communities of northern Laos (Bitard & Lafont 1957), in which pilgrims and villagers openly participate. Moreover, key notions of the tradition, such as the five joys or *pīti*s, can be found in learning contexts other than meditation, such as the ceremony of homage to the traditional dance master (Bernon 2000: 232). Even texts containing these types of teaching, far from being kept secret, can be read by the monks to their lay audience during ceremonies in the monastery. This is the case, for example, in Thailand and Laos with the *kayanakhon* (กายนคร, P. *kāyanagara*, "The body [as a] city"),[18] which sets out the mystical phylogenesis of man, described by analogy with the development of the characters of the alphabet and the "body of the Doctrine" (*dhammakāya*) (*ibid.*: 37). These examples show that this tradition was not reserved to a small number of initiated people but, on the contrary, was part of common knowledge and local cultural life.

Another argument put forward by Crosby for referring to this tradition as

[17] McGovern (2017: 8) argues the use of the word "esoteric" is acceptable for qualifying the Southeast Asian tradition as it "refers not to actual secrecy and marginality so much as a rhetoric of secrecy and a program of assigning deeper 'inner' meanings to outward forms". This is itself certainly not incorrect, but one could claim that any discipline—religious or not—includes advance levels of knowledge or practice that are taught or made accessible to only a limited number of students or apprentice. Yet not all of these disciplines are regarded as esoteric.

[18] This text also exists in Cambodia, under the title *Mul nokor* (មូលនគរ).

"esoteric" is the alleged circulation of a limited number of related manuscripts (p. 78). The "nine *borān kammaṭṭhān* manuals" she identifies at the Digital Library of Lao Manuscripts (DLLM) (pp. 81f) —which is indeed very few if one considers the over 12,000 titles accessible through this database[19]— apparently refers solely to texts titled *Munlakammatthan* (P., *Mūlakammaṭṭhāna*). Unfortunately, these only represent a tiny proportion of the whole corpus. It might have been preferable for her to try to access other titles such as ບົວອະພັນທະ *Bualaphantha* (P., *pavarabandha*), ພະທັມສາມໄຕ *Pha tham sam tai*, ສັທທາວິມາລາ *Satthavimala* (P., *Saddavimala*), ກາຍະນະຄອນ *Kanyanakhon*, ພະກັມມັດຖານ *Pha kammatthan*, ລັກຂະນະ *Lakkhana*, ປະຖົມພະຍານະກະສິນະ *Pathom phanyana kasina*, ອະພິທັມຮອມ *Aphitham hom*, and so on. In reality, hundreds of related texts are available on DLLM; the same can be said with other online or physical monastic collections found in Thailand.[20] As for Cambodia, the scarcity of texts related to traditional meditation is only due to the destruction of nearly all Buddhist manuscripts during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), irrespective of their contents (Bernon, Sopheap & Kok-An 2004: xx). In the past, no monastic repositories would have contained only vernacular texts to the exclusion of others and, conversely, no monastic manuscript collections would have been solely limited to the "orthodox" corpus of the Mahāvihāra—providing this notion had a sense from a local perspective before the 19th century reforms.[21] The use and circulation of different texts, as well as the performance of rituals, heavily relied on personal preferences or the knowledge of monks rather than serving as a distinctive mark for belonging to a particular religious trend. Meditation practices changed according to time, context, and opportunities.

Let us now turn to the main terminological issue of Crosby's book, the term she uses for referring to the *borān kammaṭṭhān* (or *kammaṭṭhāna*), i.e., "the old meditation" system.[22] This term is questionable in several ways. A first issue is purely technical, as it represents an odd and hybrid combination of words in transcription and transliteration. An accurate transliteration in Pali should have been *purāṇa kammaṭṭhāna*, literally "old meditation practice", *purāṇ*(*a*) *kammaṭṭhān*(*a*) in Khmer (បុរាណកម្មដ្ឋន), *porāṇ*(*a*) *karma*[*ṭ*]*ṭhān*(*a*) in Thai (โบราณกรรม[ฏ]ฐาน), and *polān*(*a*) *kammatthān*(*a*) in Lao (ໂບລານກັມມັດຖານ). In all three vernacular languages, the original unvoiced consonant /p/ in Pali becomes voiced, while, on the other hand, the Pali voiced consonant /b/ becomes unvoiced—with an aspiration in Thai and Lao /ph/ and a particular tone. Oscillating between transliteration and free transcription, the term *borān kammaṭṭhān* is thus inconsistent. The correct (phonetic) transcription form in Thai, following the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS) and without any diacritics, is simply *boran kammatthan*.

[19] See: https://digital.crossasia.org/digital-library-of-lao-manuscripts/?lang=en (accessed 22 October 2023).

[20] See in particular the Digital Library of Northern Thai Manuscripts (DLNTM): https://digital.crossasia.org/digital-library-of-northern-thai-manuscripts/?lang=en (accessed 23 October 2023).

[21] On the concepts of Tipiṭaka or "Pali Canon" in the Theravada traditions, see Skilling 2022.

[22] Crosby has been using this term over the last decade (see, for example, Crosby, Skilton & Gunasena 2012).

An even more serious linguistic problem is the association of the two words together, as *boran kammatthan*. This is incorrect with regard to the local syntax of vernacular languages. In Khmer, as well as in all Tai languages, the determinatum always precedes the determinant or modifier, whereas in Indic languages like Pali and Sanskrit the qualifier before the qualified is generally the standard style for uncompounded words. Thus, the correct transcription and word order for "old meditation [system]" in Khmer, Thai, or Lao should be *kammatthan boran*.[23] It is surprising that the author constantly uses, even imposes, an expression that is just not accurate in any vernacular.[24] One can therefore only question the assertion, repeated twice by Crosby (pp. 1, 22 and n. 27), that "*borān kammaṭṭhāna* [...] was applied by early twentieth-century scholars in Thailand".[25] This expression is neither used in Cambodia nor in Thailand as far as I am aware.[26]

Moreover, to label this tradition "*boran*" ("old") implies accepting the terminology of reformists, which has a pejorative connotation.[27] Use of the qualification "old" or "ancient" (Kh., បុរាណ; Th., โบราณ; Skt.–P., *purāṇa* or *porāṇa*) is an expression coined by modernists to discredit a broad range of texts and practices especially found in vernacular Buddhist literature and rituals not recorded in the tradition of the Mahāvihāra. By contrast, the practices and written corpus of texts promoted by reformists—mainly printed editions and translations of the Pali Canon and its commentaries—were labeled as *samai* (Kh., សម័យ; Th., สมัย; P., *samaya*), viz., "[of present-]time".

To continue referring to this tradition as the "*kammaṭṭhān*(*a*)", or the "*yogāvacar*(*a*) tradition", consistently with Bizot and Bernon's usage, is also problematic. The fact is that both terms *kammaṭṭhāna* and *yogāvacara* are also widely used in Vism and *Abhidhamma* commentarial literature, to refer to "meditation" and "*yoga* practitioner", respectively. None of these terms, therefore, is appropriate as a label for an alternative method to practice spiritual

[23] Certainly, we find in Thai and Khmer terms as បុរាណវត្ថុវិទ្យា (*purāṇavatthuvidyā*), "ancient artefact", โบราณคดี (*porāṇagatī*), "archeology", or បុរាណកាល/โบราณกาล (*porāṇakāla*) "ancient times". However, these are neologisms that were implemented in modern times in academic contexts and elaborated on the model of Sanskrit and Pali compounds. Should this method be applied to our case, the correct form would be *purāṇakammaṭṭhāna* (*borannakammatthan* in vernacular transcription), a form which, in any case, is neither attested in Thai nor Khmer lexicons.

[24] Woodward (2020: 109) acknowledges that "the two words together sound weird to anyone who knows some Thai". However, he finds the term "useful [precisely] because of its artificiality [as] it means whatever Crosby, Skilton, and Phibul say it means".

[25] To support her assertion, Crosby provides a precise reference to a book published in 1936 by the Thai scholar Yasothonrat (see her bibliography) where this expression is supposed to occur on p. 2 (see also Crosby 2013: 129). However, I was unable to find this association of words either in the indicated page, or in the entire volume. In contrast, the word กัมมัฏฐานโบราณ *kammatthan boran* is widely attested in Thai publications (see for example, Phra Thep Nyanawisit 2558; and Sirisak 2559).

[26] This does not mean that it will never become locally recognized over time after repeated use in academic circles and scholarly publications. It has already been recently endorsed by some Thai scholars, such as Phibul Choompolpaisal, Potprecha Cholvijarn and Woramat Malasart (see references). One might assume that this will add more confusion than clarity in the future, as was the case with the modern creation of the Theravada category.

[27] This contrasts with Pali texts in Thailand where references to "ancient" (P., *porāṇa/purāṇa*) things generally carry a positive connotation, often used to legitimize discourse.

exercises and even less so to denote a particular form of vernacular Buddhism.

Nowadays, the custodians of this meditation tradition in Thailand—particularly at Wat Ratchasittharam in Bangkok—refer to it as *Phra kammatthan* (*matchima*) *baep lamdap* (พระกรรมฐาน (มัชฌิมา) แบบลำดับ), meaning "the progressive (and middle way) meditation method", or, more descriptively, *piti ha yukhon hok suk song* (ปีติห้ายุคลหกสุขสอง), translated as "[the method] of five joys (*pīti*), six pairs (*yugala*), and two wellnesses (*sukha*)"—which in this tradition correspond to the first three "topics of meditation" (P., *mūlakammaṭṭhāna*)—(Bernon 2000: 419; Skilton & Phibul 2014: 90). In this regard, it should be noted that the Thai term แบบลำดับ *baep lamdap*—as its Khmer equivalent ថ្នាក់ *thnak* signifies—literally means "in order", "in succession", or "gradually". Thus, it simply means that the disciple must go through different successive stages of spiritual attainment during his initiation cycle. This does not sound different from the conception of insight reflected in both the Pali *nikāya*s and Vism, in which the different states of mind developed in successive *jhāna*s likewise follow "a gradual progression" (Gethin 2019: 195). With all this in mind, the question arises as to whether the broader distinctive notions and practices depicted by Bizot, Bernon, and others could simply be referred to as Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition of meditation.

Apart from the problems of terminology mentioned above, some language inaccuracies, such as misspellings, can be noticed in the book, for example *baablumdup* (p. 86) instead of *baep lamdap* (see above paragraph), *bpap srei* (p. 221) instead of *chbap srei* (Kh., ច្បាប់ស្រី, "morals for girls"), *Thammavitjayanusat* (p. 190) instead of *Thammawitchayanusat* (Th., ธรรมวิจยานุศาสน์, lit. "Instructions on the conquest through Dhamma"),[28] etc. The few linguistic explanations provided by the author are also confused, as for example those that concern Thai honorifics (pp. 55f) or the use of the RTGS. Also lacking is clarification concerning vernacular words or expressions, central to some key-notions of this tradition. For instance, Crosby systematically translates the Sanskrit loan word *garbha* (P., *gabbha*) as "womb" (pp. 43, 57, 66, 139, 142, 151, 155, etc.), especially in the context of the spiritual exercise that consists, for the practitioner, to visualize a one-inch [approx. 2.5 cm] tall buddha at the level of the navel. Although Tai–Khmer tradition uses the obstetrical metaphor in the context of this exercise, there are others where the term *garbha* takes on the meaning of fetus or embryo. This ambivalence is actually also found in Sanskrit, where *garbha* can more broadly refer to both a "container" (womb) and a germ (embryo). Thus, the *yogāvacara* must distinguish between two types of visualization: (1) of himself or herself as an embryo in the mother's womb, the process of rebirth equated to the creation of the universe; (2) of a nascent new body "made of the Teaching (*dhamma*)" that must be built within the self. In the second case, the term "womb" is understood metaphorically, with the idea that any individual possesses within the self the "essence of

[28] This is the title of a book written by venerable Ubali Khunuppamacharn (พระอุบาลีคุณูปมาจารย์) or Chan Sirisantho (จันทร์ สิริจนฺโท; 1857–1932), first published in 1915 (2458 BE), mentioned by Crosby, without providing references.

a buddha" (*buddhadhātu*).[29] Crosby takes perhaps the word too literally when she remarks "the practitioner, whether male or female, is identified as female, at least symbolically" (p. 58)—while admitting that this identification is never established in the existing teachings.[30]

Another terminological problem may concern the general use of the term "Theravada". The subtitle of the book entails that the Tai–Khmer tradition of Buddhism belongs to this trend. The issue here is not to discuss the relevance of the term Theravada, which has been thoroughly addressed in recent studies.[31] What is significant with Crosby's book is rather the requirement to include this specific meditation technique or some of its features within the category of "Theravada Buddhism". This very categorization is regarded as problematic, at least to the eyes of Western scholars and modernist monks as will be discussed below.

An Enquiry into "Orthodoxy"

Talking about Theravada as a specific Buddhist school means that Buddhists who are believed to belong to this lineage share similar religious foundations, that of the Mahāvihāra school of Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka. It is now well-known that the use of "Theravada" to refer to a form of Buddhism was first coined only in the 20th century by Western scholars and formally adopted at the First Conference of World Fellowship of Buddhism in Colombo in 1950 (Perreira 2012: 454). This label was originally based on textual usage: those Buddhist communities which used, even only partially, the Pali Canon (Tipiṭaka)—believed to contain the original teachings of Buddha Gotama—were considered "Theravada". Therefore, the question arises: What do the canonical scriptures tell us about meditation and on what basis could a given form of meditation be called "orthodox" or, on the contrary, "unorthodox", as is the case for the Tai–Khmer method?

In the same way as in her previous book on this topic (Crosby 2013: 6), the author uses two "comparators" (p. 36) to evaluate the so-called "orthodoxy" of the technique that was in force in the Tai–Khmer cultural sphere, namely the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism) and the modernized form of meditation from Myanmar labeled Vipassanā (pp. 61f). The relevance of considering the Burmese method is questionable since it was established recently in the 20th century, even though supporters of the Vipassanā claim that it rests upon authoritative texts of the Pali corpus.[32] As for the Vism, despite the status that Buddhaghosa's work has achieved over the centuries, it does not make this manual of training for Buddhist practitioners of meditation the sole authorized source. Moreover, as Crosby notes, Vism is actually "a selective synthesis of canonical material

[29] This metaphor is extended when, for example, the monk's clothing does not fit regulation standards and he finds himself metaphorically in the situation of having a "miscarriage" (Kh., រលួត *ralut*) (Bizot forthcoming).

[30] In fact, Khmer language considers "Buddhist monk" as a distinct "gender" (Kh., ភេទ *pheit*) (Bizot forthcoming).

[31] See in particular Skilling 2009; and Skilling et al. 2012.

[32] It comes from mainly the Abhidh-s, a 12th-century text which is obviously not canonical. For a study that explores the rise and development of Vipassanā meditation in Myanmar at the turn of the 20th century, see Braun 2013.

that discarded some practices described in the Pali canon" (p. 40); by itself, it invalidates Buddhagosa as "a useful comparator". One can thus question Crosby's assertion that Vism "can also be taken to represent Theravada orthodoxy, making it a valuable reference point" (p. 35).

Rupert Gethin (2004: 202–207, 217) has shown that the Pali canonical corpus does not provide any indication of an "orthodox" way to meditate.[33] The few canonical *sutta*s that address meditation practice, which are often cited as references, such as the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* (D I 47f), the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhānasutta* (D II 290f; M I 56f), or the *Ānāpānasatisutta* (M III 78f) give only general recommendations, such as searching for a quiet place, sitting down cross-legged, concentrating on some object of contemplation such as the breath, and endeavoring to attain certain mental states characterized by distinctive emotions and feelings.[34] Crosby correctly states that the issue is not so much a question of orthodoxy, i.e., correct doctrine, but one of orthopraxy or "correct practice" (p. 98).[35] Ultimately, however, the issue is whether or not a given method of meditation conforms to the teachings of the historical Buddha. Certainly, a number of techniques taught in the Tai–Khmer tradition, such as breath retention (Skt., *niśvāsa*), are absent from the Vism, while they may be found in various Hindu texts (Bizot 1976: 132). This is, however, insufficient to qualify these techniques as unorthodox from a Buddhist point of view.

Moreover, it should be borne in mind that meditation is not an invention of Buddhism. The historical Buddha, as told in the scriptures, received instructions on this matter by several different masters, who taught him "a form of early [Brahmanical] meditation" (Wynne 2007: 63). The criticism the Buddha eventually made against the spiritual practices he was taught was directed towards their mundane purpose, not their intrinsic technique. In fact, there is reason to believe that Buddhist meditation has been from early times connected with methods of *yoga* practiced in ancient India, even some features of the latter are rooted in the former.[36]

Thus, to describe the Tai–Khmer meditation tradition as "non-canonical" or "non-orthodox" has no tangible textual basis, and can therefore be considered speculative. Above all, from both the Sinhalese and Southeast Asian perspectives, the alleged orthodoxy of Theravada has always been evaluated through the purity of its lineage (P., *nikāya*), which rests primarily on *Vinaya* rules related to ordination procedure. Diverging ideas, conceptions, beliefs, or different spiritual practices have never been an issue as far as meditation techniques are concerned.[37] In this regard, the many

[33] T.W. Rhys Davids (1896: xxviii) also admitted that passages of the *piṭaka*s on meditation "throw little light on the details and process of the mystic exercises referred to".

[34] On this, see also Shaw 2006 and Wynne 2007: 63f.

[35] One could even argue that Buddhism as a whole is nothing more than an orthopraxy, as shown by the many rules laid down in the *Vinaya* and the high record of disputes within the Saṅgha throughout the centuries.

[36] For instance, recent works have highlighted the influence Buddhism exerted on Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (White 2014: 10f). Later texts, such as the *Amṛtasiddhi* of the *Haṭhayoga* tradition, evidently come from a Buddhist environment (Mallinson 2020: 410f).

[37] Bizot (1988) first made this observation by showing that Southeast Asian Buddhism had ordination procedures that slightly differ from those which are defined in the Sinhalese corpus. Although

occurrences of the word "lineage" in *Esoteric Theravada* (pp. xi, 25, 27, 40, 78, 86, 94, 98, etc.), referring to meditation teachings, is somewhat confusing.[38]

A close comparison with the Vism on the list of topics of meditation (P., *mūlakammaṭṭhāna*) on which the *yogāvacara* must concentrate shows more resemblances than differences. Here lies another main outcome of Crosby's study, although the author does not note that such correspondences have already been pointed out by Bizot (1992: 48–51) and, more thoroughly, by Bernon (2000: 235, 282f). However, these two scholars have highlighted the differences more than the similarities between the two systems and inferred that the Tai–Khmer method must have different roots. Crosby takes the opposing view by showing that, despite a different configuration, almost all of the topics of meditation as taught in the Sinhalese *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* are found in Vism. In this regard, the comparative tables given on pp. 46 and 51–54 are illuminating. It should be added that a number of meditation manuals that are found in Siamese, Lan Na (present-day northern Thailand), and Lao traditions reflect a close affinity with Vism, and may even explicitly refer to it.[39]

It is also significant that both terms—*kammaṭṭhāna* and *yogāvacara*—are, as said above, widely used in Vism, as well as in other *Abhidhamma* treatises, while they do not occur in the Tipiṭaka itself.

Following T.W. Rhys Davids, Bizot and Bernon also pointed out that the terminology used in the vernacular manuals largely rests on that of the Vism. In particular, both traditions give a central place to the *nimitta*s, which are "signs" that the *yogāvacara* experiences during his meditation sessions. Both also make the same distinction between two forms of sense stimuli: "experienced signs" (P., *uggahanimitta*) and "signs of counterpart" (P., *paṭibhāganimitta*) (Bizot 1992: 50f; Bernon 2000: 416).[40] Crosby notes that whereas "both the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* teach the *nimitta* as the primarily visual characteristic of experiencing the outcome of a meditation, [...] their use in [*kammatthan*] texts is far more extensive" (p. 48). One may find that this difference is not enough to make it a "heterodox" method *per se*. Crosby rightly states that another dissimilarity between both systems—here again, already established previously by Bizot (1992: 47–56) and Bernon (2000: 246f)—is the preeminent role given to the five joys, "raptures" or *pīti*s which constitute the first five topics of meditation (p. 30). The five *pīti*s also occur in the Vism but have a different status, as the fifth and final stage is a constitutive factor of the first *jhāna*,

these differences led, at times, to controversies, even to some schisms in the Southeast Asian monastic communities with the creation of *sub-nikāya*s, it did not fundamentally revoke the sense of belonging to one and the same specific lineage of Buddhism, called Theravada today.

[38] Admittedly, initiation in the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation links the disciple to a lineage of masters (P., *paraṁparā*). However, this lineage is supposed to go back to Buddha Gotama himself, or, according to other interpretations, to his disciple Aññāta-Koṇḍañña, or his son Rāhula (Mettanando 1999: 37, 45; Bernon 2000: 405–409, 471; Skilton & Phibul 2014: 109).

[39] This is the case, for instance, of the Khmer *Mūlakammaṭṭhān* and the Lao *Saddavimala* (see Bizot 1976: 107; Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 46). Woodward (2020) also shows that "the program of meditation [included in an illustrated Siamese manuscript] is derived from the *Visuddhimagga*".

[40] The role of *nimitta* in the exercise of the *yogin* is actually explained in several other Pali texts—both older and later than the Vism—especially in *Abhidhamma* manuals (Cousins 2022: 7–11).

while the vernacular corpus includes them among the topics of meditation. More significantly, they are considered the main causative agent (Kh., ដើមហេតុ, *daoem haet*) of all other *mūlakammaṭṭhāna*s (Bernon 2000: 246, 261). Morover, the *pīti*s—as well as the *pāramī*s ("perfection") and the *kammaṭṭhāna*s—are considered "holy [entities]" (Kh., ព្រះ, *preah*; Th., พระ, *phra*) and have their own existence. This is attested through their "invocation" (P., *ārādhana*) by the *yogāvacara* in order for them to "arise" in his body, while in the teaching of the Mahāvihāra, they are merely seen as processes or states. But, once again, one may wonder whether this evolution in the conception of *pīti* is a feature that is so significant as to deny the so-called orthodoxy of the Tai–Khmer system.

Yet Crosby argues that precisely here lies the main distinctive feature of the traditional Tai–Khmer method as opposed to the *Visuddhimagga* and the Burmese Vipassanā systems. She argues that "meditation objects, processes, or states [...] are here all treated as being akin to subtle objects that can be physically manipulated inside the body of the practitioner, in combination with different aspects of consciousness and physicality" (p. 47). It is thanks to such required materiality that the *yogāvacara*, as Crosby puts it, aims to create "a new body, enlightened body" (p. 43), which entails that he is not only psychologically transformed, but also physically altered. As "the locus of personal transformation", the meditator's body is not only the object, but also the subject of his introspection, while other meditation systems today labeled as "Theravada" focus on only the transformation of mind (pp. 43, 236). The *yogāvacara*'s quest for the acquisition of supernatural bodily properties (P., *kāyasiddhi*) with the aim of transforming his body in the search for deliverance and making a "one-inch-tall buddha" appear within himself resonates with Hindu methods of *yoga* and tantrism, while highlighting the originality of this conception with regard to Pali texts of the Mahāvihāra (pp. 36, 203). In this regard, we can certainly follow Michel Strickmann (1996: 321) when he states that "tantric ritual intentionally creates visions, whereas traditional Buddhist meditation usually seeks to exclude them" (my translation).

One might add that the *yogāvacara*'s exercise in producing a "body of the Dhamma" (*dhammakāya*) within itself is no different from that of a tantric Buddhist practitioner who strives, as Rolf A. Stein (1988: 74) puts it, "to become a Buddha in his own body". In a manner analogous to the latter practitioner when he perceives the six bodily elements as identical to those of a buddha (Faure 2015: 61), the *yogāvacara* matches the 32 constituent parts of his new body in gestation with the "32 specific marks of a Great Man" or *dvattiṁsamahāpurisalakkhaṇa* (Bizot 1992: 30).

The observation of rites for "opening the eyes" (Kh., បើកព្រះនេត្រព្រះជីវិត, *baoek preah net preah chivit*) of statues in Cambodia, during which a buddha image is empowered by the recitation of "*dhammakāya* verses", [41] reveals the link between the process of animating religious images and the ordination ritual, especially through the obstetrical metaphor used in both ceremonies (Leclère 1899: 139, 152; Bizot 1994: 101–135).

[41] For a similar practice in northern Thailand, see Woramat 2021: 84–87.

This relationship is also visible in East Asian tantric Buddhism (Strickmann 1996: 192). Moreover, the use of "seed syllables" (Skt., *bīja-mantra*, Th., หัวใจ, *hua chai*) in this process is attested in both traditions.

Other similarities with tantric teachings can be noted, such as the aforementioned analogy between the macrocosm—the universe arising from primordial syllables—and the microcosm of the practitioner's own body, made through visualizations resulting from breathing exercises (Strickmann 1996: 46). Such similarities have led Bizot and others to talk, rightly or wrongly, about "tantric Theravāda".[42]

In contrast, some core aspects of tantrism are absent from the Tai–Khmer tradition of Buddhism, such as the identification—or union—of the officiant with the divinity (Bernon 2000: 384),[43] or, as Crosby rightly notes (p. 34), a call to social transgression and sexual representations. Moreover, Crosby makes the important point that this process of transformation, that of "an unenlightened individual to an *arhat*,[44] or Buddha", already inchoately exists in the *Abhidhamma* (p. 34). Therefore, she establishes a clear connection between the process by which the *yogāvacara* "gradually" builds his new body and that of the substitution of "certain types of *citta* [...] by other type of *citta*", both aiming to move the *yogāvacara* on the path to *nibbāna* described in the *Abhidhamma* (p. 43). More specifically, she relates the practice of gradually abandoning one set of mental states and replacing them with increasingly refined and healthy sets—substituting one combination for another—with "the *Abhidhamma* understanding of consciousness as composite and ever-changing" (p. 59). Hence, she interestingly asks whether the South-east-Asian meditation technique is a corruption of an original conception or, rather, "the only Theravada system of meditation that seeks to complete the process of transformation laid out in *Abhidhamma* [or later exegeses]" (p. 238).

The idea that the Tai–Khmer tradition partly rests on the *Abhidhamma* is actually not entirely new,[45] but Crosby is to be applauded for clarifying this connection between both traditions. This connection, however, deserves to be further explored. First, it is significant that in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, texts related to meditation are generally included in the *Abhidhamma* category, as evidenced, for instance, in the DLLM and DLNTM databases. In fact, some of these texts even include the word *Abhidhamma* in their title, such as the Lao ยอดอะพิทัม ເຈັດຄຳພີ *Yot Aphitham chet khamphi*, northern Thai อภิธรรมเจ็ดคัมภีร์รวม *Aphitham chet khamphi ruam*, Tai Lue อภิธรรมกัญแจ *Aphitam kanchae*, Khmer អភិធម្មត្រាំយត្រាំង្យ *Aphithoam trai troeng*, etc.[46] In this regard, Crosby's assertion that the "[*Abhidhamma*] framework is not immediately visible" in the tradition (p. 2) needs revision. This connection is not surprising considering that *Abhidhamma* texts and exegeses or

[42] See *inter alia* Bechert 1988: 10, 12; Bizot 1992: 27–31; also Crosby 2000. *Contra*, see Revire 2022: 252, n. 109.

[43] Union with the divinity (or a buddha) that the officiant has invoked is, according to Michel Strickmann (1996: 25, 85), what primarily characterizes tantrism.

[44] Or an *arahant* in the Pali tradition.

[45] See for instance C.A.F. Rhys Davids (1916: xiv–xv).

[46] For a complete translation of the *Abhidhamma chet khamphi ruam* ("A summary of the Seven Books of the *Abhidhamma*"), see Swearer 1995.

related compendia are locally regarded to serve as a basis for meditation (Sumanapada 2008: 271f). The reference to the *Abhidhamma* in the so-called *kammatthan* technique makes perfect sense when considering that parts of the *Abhidhamma* deal with "training subjects" or "topics of meditation" (P., *kammaṭṭhāna*) on which the meditator relies in order to achieve different "states of mind" (P., *jhāna*). The training subjects, in some late *Abhidhamma* treatises, consist precisely in describing the processes of creation, both physical and psychical, and the "active meditator" (P., *kārakayogin*) (Sacc 1) is prompted to make use of mental visualizations that are not unlike the teachings of the Tai–Khmer tradition.

Descriptions of the development of the fetus in the womb, which we have seen to be central to the tradition, are also partly inspired by the commentarial literature, including that of the *Abhidhamma* (e.g., Vibh-a 21f; Abhidh-av-ṭ II 172; Spk I 300f; Nidd-a I 247), where Buddha Gotama is said to have enumerated the initial phases of the genesis of the embryo by using similar metaphors such as a drop of sesame oil (P., *tilatelassa bindu*), the water having washed meat (P., *maṁsadhovana-udaka*), the leaden mud (P., *vilīnatipu*), the piece of flesh, and then the appearance of branches (P., *sākhā*) which will give limbs, and so on. The *Kathāvatthu* also discusses questions related to the embryonic development and the congeniality of the organs and senses (Kv 493f). Again in the *Abhidhamma* the seven-day period during which the embryo is constituted is expounded and "name and form" (P., *nāmarūpa*) are defined in detail. The "32 bodily constituents" (P., *dvattiṁsākāra*), the organs contrasted with the 12 "sense factors" (P., *āyatana*), and the four (or five) "elements" (P., *dhātu*) (Vibh 82, 193f) are also enumerated. From what precedes, we can see how and to what extent the vernacular teachings are fundamentally connected to the Pali *Abhidhamma* and other later exegeses that rely on it, such as Vism. In addition, Crosby pertinently observes that ultimately "all Theravada meditation systems, beyond the elementary practices of the initial stages, relate to *Abhidhamma*", starting with Buddhaghosa (p. 236). This again provides a new perspective on the issue of the alleged "unorthodoxy" of the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation.

Having affirmed this embryology describing the processes of creation, the role that the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition assigns to the *Abhidhamma* is obviously foreign to the teachings of the Mahāvihāra corpus as we know it. This distinctive role is surprisingly not addressed in *Esoteric Theravada* and yet it is essential. The "Seven books of the *Abhidhamma*" (Kh., អភិធម្ម ៧ គម្ពីរ, *Aphithoam 7 kompi*; Th., อภิธรรม ๗ คัมภีร์, *Aphitham 7 khampi*)—symbolized by the first syllables of their respective titles, viz., SAṀ VI DHĀ PU KA YA PA[47]—contribute to the development of the embryo, by making the body, form, and mind. Indeed, liquid and solid "elements" (P., *ākāra*) provided by parents are only "the wood" and "the tools", which are insufficient to create a complete human being. Some vernacular texts provide an alternative description of the role of the *Abhidhamma:* the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī, Vibhaṅga, Dhātukathā*, and the

[47] [*Dhamma-*]***Saṅ****gaṇī,* ***Vi****bhaṅga,* ***Dhā****tukathā,* ***Pu****ggalapaññatti,* ***Ka****thāvatthu,* ***Ya****maka* and [*Mahā-*] ***Paṭ****ṭhāna.*

Puggalapaññatti create the "sense organs" (P., *āyatana*) of sight, hearing, smell, and taste of the individual, respectively, together with the corresponding objects of consciousness (P., *ārammaṇā*); the *Kathāvatthu* creates his "formal body" (Th., รูปร่าง, *rup rang*), which is associated with the sense of touch; as for the last two books, the *Yamaka* and *Paṭṭhana*, they bring to the embryo spirit and breath, respectively (Bizot 1976: 89–92; Kourilsky 2015: 58–60).

In short, the Tai–Khmer traditional ontogenesis creates an osmosis between psycho-philosophical notions of the canonical *Abhidhamma* and vernacular conceptions relating to the creation of the individual and his relationship with his progenitors. This syncretism leads Crosby to ask—as did Bizot and others before her (e.g., Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 46, and Bernon 2000: 641)—to what extent the conceptions underlying this method are a "corruption" of the original teachings of Buddha Gotama as recorded in the Tipiṭaka and whether the superimposition of the *Abhidhamma* terminology is "an attempt to make non-orthodox teachings appear orthodox" (p. 35). Bizot maintained throughout his work (e.g., 1976: 27) that the specific traits of this Tai–Khmer tradition were the heritage of a heterodox "non-Mahāvihāravāsin" school, coming from ancient Indian traditions already in place among Mon–Khmer populations, which was gradually replaced by the "orthodox" Mahāvihāra school of Sri Lanka.

Given that the Pali Canon and the commentaries (P., *aṭṭhakathā*s) include no thorough description of an appropriate way to meditate, nor forbid any kind of meditation (see above), the question of the orthodoxy of the so-called *kammatthan* method appears of little relevance. As it happens, very little, if anything, is known about how monks of the Mahāvihāra practiced meditation before the 18th century. Paradoxically, the Siamese-inspired *Vidarśana* is the oldest documented method found to date on the island of Sri Lanka. In premodern Myanmar, also, there is no evidence of the kind of meditation monks practiced before modern Vipassanā systems arose. On the contrary, there are hints that suggest that their methods had common traits with their Khmer and Tai neighbors, such as the practice of meditation in caves and tunnels used in Bagan as a kind of initiatory path (Lubeigt 1998: 268f).

To sum up, from a Theravada or Theriya perspective, orthodoxy is to be seen merely with regard to the purity of the lineage, which relies on the observance of the *Vinaya*, and the validity of ordination rituals and procedure. Significantly, Buddhist controversies in mainland Southeast Asia have concerned only points of *Vinaya* practice, not doctrine, such as the issues concerning the determination of monastic boundaries (P., *sīmā*), the correct pronunciation of Pali formulae, or monastic cloth, and so on. What connects the Saṅgha of mainland Southeast Asia together with Indo–Sinhalese Buddhism is its claim to belong to the same monastic lineage (Skilling 2009: 63). This connection is not locally claimed on the basis of particular worldviews, conceptions, textual corpus, or orientation in Buddhist practice, even less so on a proper method of meditation.

Exploring the Origins of the Tai–Khmer Tradition of Meditation

Scholars who have previously studied the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation

have been puzzled by the fact that it rests on conceptions and terminology shared with the Mahāvihāra school, while at the same time having features that seem to drastically depart from Pali scriptures and meditation methods regarded by today as authoritative.[48] Some scholars have advanced various hypotheses to explain this apparent contradiction by attempting to trace the origins of its features outside the Theravada.[49] However, none of these hypotheses has yet proven to be more than conjecture.

Crosby (1999) has addressed this question, especially with regard to Bizot's earlier assumption that this tradition could be a reminiscence of the Abhayagiri school of Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka, supplanted in the 12th century by the Mahāvihāra. She advanced strong arguments that tended to invalidate this hypothesis. She investigated further possible roots in *Traditional Theravada Meditation* (2013) and continues in this vein in *Esoteric Theravada* (Chapters 4–5). Given the emphasis she already put on the connection with the *Abhidhamma*, it is surprising that Crosby does not follow up with her own hypothesis that the "old *kammatthan*" could be "a development within *Abhidhamma*-based Buddhism that formed organically within Theravada" (p. 35; see also above). Rather, she prefers to explore other tracks in order to search for the "origins" of this tradition.

Crosby uses a comparative approach as her main research method, chiefly with regard to other Indian religions, but also to broader systems of thought or technologies. To this reviewer, her comparisons are more often than not based on abstract representations and formal resemblances, irrespective of any historical or geographical consideration. Incidentally, the book does not include maps—or any other illustrations[50]—, which would have helped to understand better the centuries-long linkages Southeast Asia has had with the Indic world as well as the connections between Southeast Asian cultures themselves. For example, she highlights common traits with Ayurvedic medicine, such as the importance in both systems of balance or imbalance of the four or five constitutive bodily "elements" or *dhātu*s, viz., earth, water, fire, wind, and ether (pp. 115f). This comparison is, on the one hand, relevant to some extant since breathing techniques and physiological representations typical of the Southeast Asian tradition have a practical application in traditional medicine.[51] On the other hand, these conceptions are not phrased in the same terms and the

[48] The late Cousins (2022: 160) points out that scholars who have so far studied the *Vidarśanapota* and related texts found them "rather unusual, if not aberrant".

[49] For a good overview of these scholars' hypotheses, see Cousins 1997: 187, 191–193, and Cousins 2022: 161–163.

[50] One exception is the book cover **[Figure 1]**, which is extracted from an illustrated Siamese version of the Three Worlds cosmology (known as *Trai Phum* ไตรภูมิ), dated from the reign of King Taksin (1767–1782). This image, briefly described by Crosby on pp. 178–179, shows the eight stages of the *ariyapuggala* on the supramundane path. The last illustration is the figure of an *arahant*-to-be holding a "crystal ball". The same picture (coming from the same manuscript, which is held at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin) has already been used as an illustration in two other recent articles (Terwiel 2019: 6; Woodward 2020: 107).

[51] This topic has been thoroughly addressed by Mettanando 1999 and Souk-Aloun 2001 (Crosby refers only to Mettanando).

role the Ayurveda assigns to "humors" (Skt., *doṣa*) mentioned by Crosby (p. 144) is, as far as I am aware, absent from the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation.[52] Moreover, they are actually found in the *Abhidhamma* literature, where the five *dhātu*s are related to the five *khandha*s or aggregates and *ākāra*s *or* physical components, in spite of aforementioned divergences.

The author also gives parallel descriptions of embryological development in the Tai–Khmer tradition with Ayurvedic obstetrics (pp. 151–157). She assumes that "the methods for treating the unborn fetus in Ayurveda are applied [in the "old *kammatthan*"] in inducing change in the meditation practitioner as they generate a Buddha within themselves" (p. 151). She further states that in both systems "the delivery methods are applied with the help of the techniques of substitution and combination", the sole difference is that the Tai–Khmer method replaces Ayurvedic pharmaceutical substances by the *nimitta* that arise in meditation.

Crosby is right to highlight the prevalence, in the Tai–Khmer meditation method, of a "process of constant substitution [of different items such as syllables and experienced *nimitta*s] by directing it, generating higher states of consciousness to replace lower states in a detailed progression from ordinary mortal to enlightened being, to the attainment of *nibbāna*" (p. 238). In a recent article, Potprecha Cholvijarn (2021: 79–80) shows that the ritual reading of the *yantra*s worked on a similar principle of combinatorial substitution, applied in meditation through exercises involving the visualization of sequences of characters of the diagrams in successive orders. However, it is more difficult to follow Crosby's argument when she relies on the mere presence of this same notion of "substitution" in Ayurvedic medicine or in Brahmanical and Hindu rituals to establish a direct relationship between the latter and the so-called "old *kammatthan*". Once again, the reader is left wondering why the author does not further explore the plausible hypothesis that this type of process is essentially an extension of the concepts set out earlier in the *Abhidhamma* texts.

Furthermore, Crosby's statement, "the use of the intranasal cavity to bring the *nimitta* [...] into the body of the meditator at his or her 'womb' is based on the medical method of using the intranasal cavity of the mother to deliver pharmaceutical and alchemical substances into the body of the baby-to-be located in the mother's womb" (p. 157), rests upon a too literal interpretation of the existence of an alleged practitioner's "womb". Even if taken literally, the point is that any deduction from such a general analogy is bound to be hazardous.

At a more general level, one must ask if comparisons of this type constitute a reliable method. Firstly, common elements may not necessarily involve transmission or direct connection. One example Crosby gives is the right side/left side categorization and their association in the Tai–Khmer tradition with male and female—or *vice versa*—, which is found in Hinduism and

[52] Hippocratic medicine is also grounded on the correlation between the body's "humors" and the elements of the cosmos (earth, water, fire). The equilibrium or disequilibrium of these factors determines human health.

Vajrayana Buddhism (pp. 33–34, 152). Such a common concept says little about the relationship between these traditions. Gender-based polarizations are commonplace in many societies geographically and culturally remote from one another, in which, for instance, the male principle is linked to the sun, the right side, the eastern direction, etc., while the female principle is equated to the moon, the left side, the western direction, and so on (Bourdieu 1998: 112). The same applies to the *kammatthan* division of bodily components as to whether they come from the mother or the father, a division also found in the *Carakasaṁhitā* composed in Sanskrit (p. 153).[53] Not only is this conception found in other Indic texts such as the *Agnipurāṇa* (O'Flaherty 1976: 365f), but also in various societies throughout the world.[54] These descriptions do not reflect positive ontologies, but metaphors, or "fictions" (Godelier 2010: 165), which act as symbolic representations of filiation and heredity, and more broadly of hierarchies, ideologies and social organization.

Secondly, elements of comparison may not always be significant, especially when dealing with representations such as symbols or allegories. Comparing a symbol or allegory with another symbol or allegory amounts to placing two mirrors face to face, scarcely helping meaning. An exemplary case is the parallel Crosby makes between the practice of "old *kammatthan*" and alchemy (pp. 157–161), in particular the "purification of mercury used in turn in the purification of gold". The purification process that the *yogāvacara* follows would be, according to her views, comparable to "the purification of gold and silver in a furnace or crucible" as described in Indian treatises of alchemy (p. 158). This chemical process, she tells us, is presented in some Śaiva tantras as analogous to that which leads, through an inner transformation of the practitioner, to immortality. Arguments given for such a parallel include the use of a common allegory—viz., the creation of a new being through the union of male and female elements" (p. 60)—and vocabulary, such as "womb" (Skt., *garbha*, which, as written above, can refer to a "container" in its broader sense), and the significance given to "repetition". In this connection, Crosby's strongest argument is an excerpt from a Sinhalese litany, *Vākkapprakaraṇa*, in which the requestor asks to become "pure like silver or gold burnished in the mouth of a furnace" (p. 161).

Presented in this manner, it might seem no more than an unremarkable metaphor. The fact that it appears in two distinct corpora of texts, which are neither historically nor doctrinally related, restricts our ability to draw meaningful conclusions. To strengthen

[53] In this regard, Bizot (1976: 132) pointed out more relevant common features with *saṁhitā*s, such as the description of the body as a microcosmic replica of the universe or the awakening of the *kuṇḍalinī*, the spiritual energy coiled at the base of the spine, through an initiatory process that must lead to the awakening of the yogin which is reminiscent of the possession of a "jewel", based at the navel.

[54] The idea according to which parents transmit defined bodily components (e.g., flesh, bones, skin, blood, breath, etc.) is found, for example, in China, Vietnam, Tibet, Assam, Siberia, and even in ancient Greece (as evidenced in Aristotle). It is also shared by several minority populations such as the Inuits (North America), Na (China), Trobrianders (Papua–New Guinea), Baruya and Telfolmin (New Guinea) peoples, and so forth. See Godelier 2010: 324, and Kourilsky 2015: 41–50.

her argument, the author could have underscored that this parallel finds resonance in early Mahayana texts. In these texts, the metaphor involves a goldsmith purifying gold, removing impurities repeatedly until pure gold is obtained, symbolizing the effort to purify one's mind when receiving teachings (Gómez 1987).[55] Similarly, Tibetan Buddhist tantras draw a comparison between the transformation of the "contaminated" body into a pure essence—taking the form of a bejeweled buddha image—and the alchemical process of turning iron into gold (Bentor 2020: 79–80). Noteworthy is the presence of this metaphor in the *Ghanavyūhasūtra* ("Sutra of the Dense Array"), a significant text in the Yogācara tradition. In this context, the "buddha-embryo" (Skt., *tathāgatagarbha*), inherent in all sentient beings, is equated to pure, luminous gold hidden in rock, revealed only through the practice of meditation.[56]

In this regard, it is surprising that Crosby does not attempt to connect the embryological representations of the Tai–Khmer tradition with the conception of *tathāgatagarbha* ("matrix/embryo of the one who has thus gone [i.e., a buddha]") developed in a number of Chinese and Tibetan schools of Buddhism. This conception rests on the idea, present in many Mahayana texts, according to which all living beings have in themselves the nature or essence of the/a buddha, that is, have the potential to attain buddhahood. These Mahayana schools have elaborated contemplative practices through which the meditator aims to develop an embryonic buddha to which he can—metaphorically—give birth. In the two short paragraphs Crosby dedicates to "similarities with Tantras" (pp. 33–34), the core conception of "buddha within" is not mentioned. Only later in the book (p. 43) does she mention the existence of this very notion among certain practitioners of the "old *kammatthan*", without, however, making any parallel with the Mahayanist views.

While these similarities among various Buddhist trends are noteworthy, caution should guide us against hastily concluding direct connections between them. It is plausible that the Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia, akin to those in East Asia, might have developed ideas latent in early Buddhist writings, including those associated with the *Mahāvihāra*. A concept akin to *tathāgatagarbha* is *buddhaṅkura* (literally, "sprout of enlightenment"). In Pali commentaries (e.g., Dhp-a I 83, Ja VI 56), it metaphorically refers to one destined to become a buddha but locally took on the more literal meaning of "embryo of the/a buddha". In Thailand, this term evolved into a title for kings, signifying their future enlightenment (Potprecha 2022: 36).

In early canonical writings, the lower ordination symbolizes a "departure [from the family]" (P., *pabbajjā*), followed by an "entry into [the Buddha Gotama's] lineage" (P., *gotrabhū*). The metaphorical expression of this lineage change is the term "son (or child)" (P., *putta*) of the [historical] Buddha, used in early texts and contem-

[55] The metaphorical use of gold also appears in the Pali scriptures, but in a different form: the "true Dhamma" is associated with pure gold, and the corrupted Dhamma with counterfeit gold (S II 224). On this notion, see Eltschinger 2020: 155–156.

[56] See: http://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Ghanavy%C5%ABhas%C5%ABtra (accessed 25 October 2023).

porary religious life to denote monks and sometimes lay followers.[57] The *upasampadā* rite, as traditionally conceived by Tai–Khmer Buddhists, materializes this metaphor by assimilating the candidate to a transmigrating being in the state of a fetus, ready to be born again with a new and pure body. This belonging to the new lineage is reactivated or reaffirmed monthly by monks during *uposatha* ceremonies, which have transformed into rites of purification in most Buddhist communities, deviating from their original collective confession purpose in the *Vinaya* (Faure 2015: 69). The qualification of a meditator as "one in the lineage of the *yogāvacara*" (P., *yogāvacarakulaputta*) in certain meditation texts, particularly those addressing the notion of *dhammakāya* (Walker 2018: 351; Woramat 2021: 84), is likely to be understood in this light.

Similarly, the notion of "body [made] of Dhamma" (*dhammakāya*), although reminiscent—but not identical—to that of *tathāgatagarbha* in Chinese and Japanese tantric Buddhism, is metaphorically present in canonical scriptures (Bizot 1992: 29; Woramat 2021: 85). Buddha Gotama often alludes to the "Doctrine as [his own] body" (*dhammakāya*) and claims that "whoever sees the Dhamma sees [him]" (e.g., Dhp 381).

Grammar, Words and Letters

Considering the important place that the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition gives to language, letters, and syllables, assigning them creative power in the genesis of the human being and universe, Crosby takes the generative grammar of Sanskrit as a basis of reflection. She notes the traditional grammars of Sanskrit and Pali teach that an "entire language can be generated from a set of roots and formulae" (p. 110). Taking Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (ca. 500 BCE) and the *Śivasūtra*s as references (pp. 111–120), Crosby emphasizes how generative grammar can make use of code letters that "just as in algebra, requires an act of substitution".[58] This is similar, according to her, to the mechanism that "underlies momentariness and change in *Abhidhamma*" (p. 120).

Crosby is indeed correct in pointing out that the manipulations of letters and syllables in Buddhist practices in Southeast Asia trace their origins back to the earliest Indian grammatical treatises. However, establishing a direct link between these two traditions requires a significant leap, considering the nearly two-millennia gap and the absence of evidence suggesting the circulation of works such as the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in ancient Tai or Khmer realms. Ignoring historical and geographical data, the comparative method swiftly encounters its limitations and risks drawing overly broad connections between disparate elements. This applies, for example, to Crosby's statement that permutation and combination are found in "both generative grammar and the method of memorization applied to learning Vedic hymns", as well as in mathematics,

[57] See S I 192, It 101, J III 21; Faure 2015: 95; also Kamala 2007.

[58] In fact, the connection between basic algebraic structures or computational models and Panini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* is well established (see, for example, Subbanna & Varakhedi 2010, and Kompella 2018).

medicine, *Abhidhamma* and, eventually, the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation (pp. 113f).

In reality, there might be no need to delve as far back as ancient India, the Angkorian period, or the "pre-Sinhalization" era, as Bizot did (1976: 27; 2000: 525–527). Despite Myanmar being relatively overlooked by scholars investigating the origins of the so-called *kammatthan* tradition, it stands as the focal point to which most paths lead. Since approximately the 11th or 12th century, when direct contacts with Sri Lanka occurred, Mon–Burmese cities of Bagan (Pagan), Thaton, Bago (Pegu), and Mottama (Martaban) were important centers of Pali scholarship. In particular, a significant number of scholarly works dealing with grammatical and philological matters were written in these locations, inspired by Pali and Sanskrit grammars (Bode 1909: 36; and Ruiz-Falqués 2017: 1, 4). It so happens that the *Kaccāyanavyākaraṇa* or Kaccāyana's grammar (Kacc) and its exegesis are evidently sources for meditation texts circulating in Thailand and Laos. In particular, the *Saddavimala* includes a narrative that can be found only once in the whole Pali corpus, and that is in the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddessa* (Kacc-nidd), a commentary on Kacc ascribed to the Burmese scholar Chapaṭa (12th c.).[59] Even though, to this day, the traditional Tai–Khmer form of meditation has not been attested in Myanmar yet, a number of its specific features bear the mark of the Burmese medieval corpus. Abbreviation or syllable-reduction of title or notions, numerical sequencing of syllables and their reordering according to different schemes, palindromes, riddles, and so forth, are at the core of several Burmese treatises such as the *Saddabindu* (Sadd-b), the *Paramatthabindu*, and the *Vidaddhamukhamaṇḍana*, all written in Pali *circa* the 13th century.[60] Pali texts composed or used in 15th–16th century Lan Na such as the *Saddabinduvinicchaya* (Sadd-v), and the *Vajirasāratthasaṅgaha* (Vss) and its *ṭīkā* (Vss-ṭ), have evidently been inspired by these Burmese models (Skilling 2014: 360–361; Schnake 2018: 98). Cyphering techniques and linguistic manipulations taught in these texts are borrowed from the Sanskrit literary genre known as *citra*, to which tantrism gives an esoteric dimension (Schnake 2018: 140–141). In this connection, epigraphy attests that various Sanskrit *śāstra*s and tantras circulated among Mon–Burmese Buddhist communities in the 15th century;[61] some traces can even be found in Lao legal texts.[62] Some of these texts have been localized into Pali and must have played a key role in the regional diffusion of these techniques.[63]

[59] See Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 67–72. Curiously, these authors only briefly mention this Burmese connection, and prefer to focus on the Mūlasārvastivādin corpus, where this narrative also exists, albeit in different forms and languages (Sanskrit and Tibetan).

[60] On the *Saddabindu* and its sub-commentary, see Lottermoser 1987.

[61] I am thinking in particular of an inscription dated 1442 CE found in Bagan (Bode 1909: 101–109) listing nearly 300 texts given to a temple, some of which can be traced to Mahayanist or tantric trends. See also Ray 2002: 41–46.

[62] This is the case of the *Rājasavaṇī*, partially studied by Louis Finot (1917: 84–85).

[63] *Mānavadharmaśāstram* and *Amarakośa* are examples of Sanskrit texts that have been localized into Pali—i.e., *Manusāradhammasaṭṭham*, *Amarakosa*(*-vinicchaya*)—during the medieval period in Myanmar.

Also connected to medieval Burmese Buddhism is the interplay between performative use of letters, grammar, and the psycho-physiological notions of the *Abhidhamma* found in the *Saddavimala*, for example the correlation established between linguistic categories defined in Kacc with internal and external "phenomena" (P., *dhamma*). A number of Pali Mon–Burmese texts analogously fuse Pali and Sanskrit grammar with theories contained in the *Abhidhamma*. In particular this holds regarding phonetics and sound articulation, for instance, by recognizing the word (P., *sadda*) as both meaningful sound and material phenomenon (P., *rūpadhamma*) (Ruiz-Falqués 2017: 36–39, 45–46). In Burmese texts of this period, *Abhidhamma* teachings are also mixed with methods of "coding" letters, such as the *kaṭapāyadi* system of ancient India (Schnake 2018: 290). Finally, Burmese tradition attributes a mystical role to letters and syllables, for example by equating groups of consonants to days of the week, planets, cardinal directions, and great disciples of the buddhas (Maung Htin Aung 1959: 10–18; Robinne 1998: 97–99). A number of medieval Mon texts belonging to this tradition have been identified in Myanmar, in particular the *Ānisaṁsa Kamma*[*ṭ*]*ṭhān* and the *Lokasamutti*, which are related to the Thai–Lao *Bualaphantha* (Lagirarde 1998: 51f). Moreover, death rituals described in these texts are practiced in Burmese Buddhist communities to this day (Halliday 1922: 28–35; Lagirarde 1998: 51–52).

The evident influence of Mon–Burmese Buddhism on the Tai–Khmer tradition does not negate the possibility of other influences, nor does it diminish the potential for local Buddhist scholars and practitioners to introduce significant innovations. In retracing the origins of this tradition, one might locate its source along the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Valley and trace the path of reformers from Mottama, spreading to Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lan Na, and eventually reaching Laos in the early-to-mid second millennium. Cambodia likely represents a later stage of this transmission, given that Khmer texts associated with this meditation tradition bear the imprint of subsequent Siamese influence, evident in lexical borrowings, explicit translations, and mentions of translations from Thai [64]

Recent History and Epistemological Reflections

The systematic comparative approach used by Kate Crosby leads her to take unexpected paths, some of which can be regarded as fascinating but off-topic. This is the case with her consideration of medical modernization during the colonial period, in particular her long sections dedicated to smallpox prevention and vaccination campaigns in French Indochina (pp. 162–168). Here one may find a bit far-fetched Crosby's

[64] This is the case for the *Phloew preah thamma langka* ("*The Path* [*leading*] *to the Teaching of Lanka*"), the meditation manual studied and translated by Bizot (1992: 222). As for lexical borrowings, the Khmer title for the "*Seven Books of the Abhidhamma*" (អភិធម្ម ៧ គម្ពីរ, *Aphithoam 7 kompi*) is an illustrative example, as it is phrased with the Thai numeral *chet* (เจ็ด), "seven", instead of the Khmer term ប្រាំពីរ *prampil*. In addition, formulae used in Cambodia by the *yogāvacara* for "inviting" (P., *ārādhanā*) the *pīti* and other holy entities are of Thai origin (Bernon 2000: 231). Trent Walker (2018: 403) also mentions a Khmer "poem on *kammatthana*", which explicitly acknowledges that it was translated (in 1713) from a Tai language original.

comparisons between vaccination and the making of protective amulets or *yantra*s, with the latter requiring "the implantation of a smaller dose of the dangerous enemy (or the power of the enemy), [for ex.] a smaller 'dose' of a lead bullet, both against and through whom the device offers protection" (p. 164). The intrusion of Western medicine among local populations of these colonial dominions is in itself a subject of great interest, which Crosby approaches in much detail.

On the one hand, it is true that the coming of Western medicine unavoidably caused traditional healers to fall into disfavor—not only their treatments but also related conceptions of existence and worldviews—including masters of meditation (pp. 145–147). On the other hand, supporters of modernization targeted traditional means of healing as a whole, not meditation practice *per se*, let alone a given kind of meditation. Thai, Lao and Khmer *bhikkhu*s traditionally practiced medicine because they were capable of writing and reading medical treatises. Just as with Christian monasteries in medieval Europe, before the modern system of schooling the *wat* was, in this part of Southeast Asia, the only place where men could receive an education. The banning of traditional medicine correlates to European-inspired processes of specialization and secularization. To European eyes, monks had to confine themselves to religious activities in the narrow sense of the term, while other fields such as medicine and astrology were the responsibility of dedicated institutions and professionals (Kourilsky 2008: 116).

Moreover, it is well established that the intrusion of European views in the late 19th century considerably altered the way tradition became viewed by local populations, in particular among the ruling elite. In this regard, the examination of the ways in which modernity broadly impacted vernacular forms of Buddhism is perhaps the most elaborated, as well as the more innovative, part of *Esoteric Theravada*. Crosby shows that a number of meditation related practices and notions started to be seen as different when compared with "mainstream Theravada" and therefore became problematic only relatively recently. While Bizot and his followers tend to consider that two Buddhist traditions had coexisted for centuries in Tai and Khmer cultural areas (Bizot 1976: 27f; Bizot & Gabaude 1997: 1619), Crosby convincingly asserts that the ancient form of Tai–Khmer *kammatthan* "was the dominant practice [of meditation] established and promoted by royalty and by the supreme patriarchs of the Buddhist Saṅgha in the countries that would become Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand" (pp. 173f). The author had stated this in her earlier book (2013: 14), which was more clearly directed towards the cause of the "suppression" of traditional meditation, as suggested by its title. What was said above regarding whether the question of orthodoxy also concerns meditation practices supports this hypothesis.

Crosby's main argument is based on the historical sequence during which Thai or Siamese Buddhism exerted significant influence in Sri Lanka, by the royal house of Ayutthaya, responding to a request of the Kandy court, sending three important missions of monks in the mid-18th century (p. 174). These missions first brought about the

establishment of a new ordination lineage in Sri Lanka, the Syāmanikāya, since no viable lineage existed anymore on the island, a situation that threatened the survival of the Sinhalese Saṅgha. Although these events are well-known (e.g., Jayatilaka 1916: 143–150; Malalgoda 1976; Blackburn 2001), Crosby's approach is innovative since it highlights the role these missions had on meditation practice in Sri Lanka. In this way, Crosby brings new considerations on the place the *kammatthan* tradition had in local Buddhist communities. That monks who belonged to the religious elite of Ayutthaya introduced this method of meditation in Sri Lanka shows not only that the *kammatthan* was regarded as the conventional meditation system in Siam at the time, but also that the Sinhalese Saṅgha did not regard it as deviating from their orthodoxy. On the contrary, in 1782 CE, the Sinhalese king promulgated a "disciplinary edict" (*katikāvata*) which made it compulsory for all Sinhalese monks to practice meditation by conforming to the teaching given by the Siamese monks.[65] One may add that these Siamese missions brought to the island canonical and post-canonical texts of the Mahāvihāra tradition,[66] suggesting that both Pali scriptures and traditional *kammatthan* practice did not belong to different religious schools or trends, but were, at the time, both parts of a single whole. Although the sources the author relies on must be treated with caution, Crosby suggests that the situation was not much different in Laos, where the tradition could have been known and supported by the highest-ranking monks of Vientiane as early as the 16th century (pp. 74, 85, 191). This hypothesis is entirely credible.[67]

The same can be assumed for the Lan Na kingdom, which, unfortunately, *Esoteric Theravada* does not talk about, despite its importance in the history of regional Buddhism. In contrast to Bizot's assumptions (1976: 27; 2000: 526), a number of hints indicate that certain characteristic traits of the "old" tradition were conveyed through "reformist Sinhalese" trends in 14th–15th centuries, which arguably came from lower Myanmar rather than directly from Sri Lanka (Kourilsky 2021: 114). Indeed, the aforementioned works of Vss, Vss-ṭ, and Sadd-v, which focus on distinctive features such as the apotropaic use of syllables and encrypting methods of words, were precisely written in the 15th–16th centuries by scholarly monks affiliated to the reformist "Sīhaḷagaṇa" of Wat Pa Daeng, who opposed the Wat Suan Dok lineage previously established in Chiang Mai.[68] High-ranking Lao monks who are believed to have practiced the ancient form of meditation also resided in monasteries affiliated to the Pa Daeng lineage (Chotipanno 2538: [x]; Mettanando 1999: 8, 28). Bizot is certainly right in saying that one or several "Sinhalese" trends gradually

[65] This is highlighted by Bernon 2000: 458.

[66] For a list of books sent to Sri Lanka in 1756, see Supaphan 1988.

[67] In her 2013 study, Crosby assumed that only in Myanmar was the "old *kammatthan*" not "the dominant meditation tradition among the Sangha hierarchies" (p. 132). She is less assertive in *Esoteric Theravada*. Indeed, and as we have shown above, this tradition probably has some roots in the Ayeyarwady Valley.

[68] On this narrative, see Cœdès 1925: 31–33.

imposed themselves on the Buddhist communities of mainland Southeast Asia from the 11th century onwards, competing with the older schools. But contrary to his claims, most distinctive features of the so-called *kammatthan* tradition likely result from the development of the former, rather than are remainders from the latter.

Crosby argues that the way traditional Tai–Khmer meditation was regarded did not change during the following periods in the history of Siam. There is evidence that King Taksin (r. 1767–1782), who re-established the capital in Thonburi after the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya in 1767, was familiar with this method and himself commissioned related manuscripts (pp. 178f).[69] Even the first kings of the Chakri dynasty, Crosby demonstrates, did not act against the "old *kammatthan*", although their "engagement [...] with global modernity would have later significant impact on the shape of meditation promoted as part of future reforms of Buddhism" (p. 179). She also recalls—although not always acknowledging existing sources on this topic[70]—the important role played by a meditation master from Ayutthaya known as Suk Kai Thuean (สุกไก่เถื่อน), lit. "Suk, the wild cock", from the reigns of Rama I (1782–1809) to that of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–1868), when he was appointed head of meditation instruction (Th., พระญาณสังวรเถร, Phra Nyanasangwon Thera; P., Ñāṇasaṅvarathera) and Supreme Patriarch (สมเด็จพระสังฆราช, Somdet Phra Sankharat; P., *mahāsaṅgharāja*). He was also the preceptor and meditation instructor to Rama III (r. 1824–1851) and Rama IV before they acceded to the throne. During his long career, Suk Kai Thuean mainly stayed at Wat Phlap (วัดพลับ), known today as Wat Ratchasittharam (วัดราชสิทธาราม) in Bangkok. This is one of the few monasteries left in Thailand where the "old" method is still taught and which holds an important collection of related manuscripts, some of which may come from the Ayutthaya period (pp. 85, 98, 148, 178–182).[71] King Mongkut was apparently the first monarch to have explicitly rejected the traditional meditation system for the benefits of the new Burmese Vipassanā method, allegedly more rooted in canonical scriptures (pp. 182f). His views, however—realization of this is another outcome of Crosby's study—were not unanimously shared. One of his sons, Prince Wiwitthawanpritcha (พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ กรมหมื่นวิวิธวรรณปรีชา; 1860–1932), published a book on meditation that included *kammatthan* elements. Even the members and supporters of the reformist Thammayut (Th., ธรรมยุติกนิกาย; P., *Dhammayuttikanikāya*), founded by Prince Mongkut before his reign and highly promoted after he acceded to the throne, did not systematically stand against the traditional practices; some of them, such as Somdet Sa Phussathewo (สา ปุสฺสเทโว; 1812–1899) and venerable Ubali (Chan Sirisantho, see note 28, *supra*) (pp. 184, 189), even undertook to copy and publish texts

[69] This was already assumed by Bernon (2000: 426) who relies on the Siamese chronicles according to which King Taksin practiced meditation beginning with the invocation of the five *pītis*. For a more recent study, see Potprecha 2022.

[70] For example, Taylor 1992: 116; Mettanando 1999: 15; also Bernon 2000: 441–452.

[71] See also Bernon 2000: 426, 441; and Ong 2014: 2.

related to this method. Crosby also identifies some common elements between the forest Thammayut meditation practice and that of the tradition, such as the iterative recitation of the syllables BU DDHO and the visualization of a sphere of light (p. 264, n. 40).

Similarly in Laos, Crosby shows that the "old *kammatthan*" method was considered the ordinary meditation practice in the Lao Saṅgha as late as 1974 (p. 97), that is, to the eve of the Communist Revolution. In conclusion, all of these elements indicate that what is nowadays referred to as "the old method" was neither exactly considered old nor a distinctive form of meditation. As Crosby puts it, "this practice was just *kammaṭṭhāna*, 'meditation'" (p. 23) and that was it. This is further corroborated by vernacular related texts, which systematically refer to meditation as *samathavipassanākammaṭṭhāna*. The fact that no other method of meditation is attested in premodern Southeast Asia supports this hypothesis.

Primary Sources

Written primary sources naturally provide the most consistent information for those who aim to study the nature or the history of the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition of meditation. Accordingly, Chapter 3 of *Esoteric Theravada* provides an overview of related corpora of texts originating from Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.

Therein, Crosby first identifies two main genres of *kammatthan* texts, "exoteric and esoteric narratives" and "practice manuals". This division is important, although both "genres" can be present in one and the same text, as is the case, for instance, with Tai–Lao บัวระพันธะ *Pavarabandha* (*Bualaphantha* according to northern Thai and Lao pronunciation) and สัททวิมละ *Saddavimala* (Bizot & Lagirarde 1996). One example of narrative Crosby gives is the story of a princess named Citta, which is actually a Sinhalese adaptation of the aforementioned allegory of the "Fig tree with five branches", formerly recorded in Cambodia by Bizot (1976) and in northern Thailand by Lagirarde (1994). Unfortunately, the account Crosby gives for this narrative is too terse to be fully coherent for readers unfamiliar with these allegorical figures. This brevity is surprising as she subjected the Sinhalese version, namely the *Maraṇañāṇasutta* ("*Discourse on the Understanding of Death*"), to a thorough study (Crosby, Skilton & Gunasena 2012). She then takes the *Nibbānasutta* as the second example of the "narrative" genre. This is an apocryphal *sutta* in Pali, probably of Tai origin.[72] In reality, its "narrative" nature only relates to its formal appearance as a *sutta*, beginning with *evaṁ me suttaṁ* ("Thus I have heard"). Its main content, however, is a depiction of the "City of Nibbāna", here used as a metaphor for delivering a variety of doctrinal items and practices of the Buddhist teaching. In fact, a number of texts from Thailand, Cambodia and Laos equate the "city of Nibbāna" with the meditator's own body, establishing a relationship of equivalence between bodily elements and the constituent parts of the city (Walker 2018: 531–537).

More illustrative of this "genre" would perhaps have been the "*Discourse*

[72] This text has been studied and translated by Hallisey 1993.

of Mahākāla" (*Mahākālasutta*) included in the Tai–Lao *Bualaphantha*, an apocryphal *sutta* that relates the story of a *thera* who comes to a cemetery to practice meditation on what is foul (P., *asubha*). There, the venerable sees a young woman's funeral and gives instruction to King Pasenadi on the performance of death rituals (Lagirarde 1998). The *Saddavimala*, another text from Laos and Lan Na, also includes a narrative about a meditating monk repeatedly uttering the sentence "the herons eat the fish", which is the prelude to the teaching of salvation through grammar, which forms the heart of the text (Bizot & Lagirarde 1996: 222f).

The second genre identified by Crosby is "practice manuals", basic sets of instructions for meditation masters. She correctly describes these as "technical and minimalist rather than evocative" (p. 71). She mentions different kinds of practice manuals which can take different forms, from concise to long, written in Pali or in vernacular, in verse or in prose. Crosby gives as an example the Sinhalese *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* ("*Account of the Mine of Immortality*"), composed in Pali, which is a record of 18th-century Siamese teachings. The author offers an in-depth study of this text (pp. 45–62), including an interesting comparison between listed topics of meditation contained therein and those found in Vism.[73] However, surprisingly, Crosby does not make any mention of the Cambodian ផ្លូវព្រះធម្ម លង្កា *Phloew preah thammă langka* ("*The Path* [*leading*] *to the Teaching of Lanka*"), previously studied and translated by Bizot (1992). This important text records the different somatic signs the *yogāvacara* experiences across different initiatory stages. The failure to mention this text is surprising since she already summarized it in her aforementioned "bibliographic essay" of Bizot's work (2000: 156–160). Even more perplexing is the exclusion of the "*Manual for Interpreting Signs*" (Kh., ក្បួនបកនិមិត្ត, *Kbuon bok nimit*). This text has been extensively examined and comprehensively translated into French by Bernon in his monumental doctoral dissertation (2000, 2 vols., 828 p.), a work of which Crosby evidently has knowledge, as it is referenced elsewhere in *Esoteric Theravada*.

Although a number of texts that can be labeled *kammatthan* belong to one of these two "genres", many other works could hardly be classified in either of them. Many texts are of a hybrid or composite nature and cannot be categorized solely as "manuals" or "narratives", despite their inclusion of didactic components, cosmologies, mystico-biological descriptions, mythical elements, or even short stories. We also have to keep in mind that, overall, our knowledge of vernacular Buddhist literature of the Tai and Khmer worlds is too limited to draw clear-cut classifications. In particular, a huge number of vernacular meditation treatises are waiting to be studied or, even, discovered. This is yet another reason to pay particular attention to the Thai, Lao, and Khmer texts already accessible through Bizot's and his close collaborators' analyses or translations in French. Unfortunately, Crosby refers sparingly to this extensive corpus. Only the Khmer *Mūlakammaṭṭhāna* and the

[73] This parallel between both texts is already found in Crosby 2013: 48f.

Tai–Lao *Saddavimala* are alluded to a couple of times, while *The Path* [*leading*] *to the Teaching of Lanka*, the *Ratanamala*, the *Bualaphantha*, and the *Dhammatrai*, to name just a few,[74] are not mentioned in the general index. This is all the more surprising since this scarcity of information is not due to the author's lack of knowledge of this rich corpus originally published in French. Equally surprising is the absence of reference to Donald Swearer's study and translation of a vernacular *Abhiddhamma* text of Lan Na that is clearly related to this tradition (see note 46, *supra*). *Esoteric Theravada* is also totally silent on Pali works originating from Myanmar and Lan Na that have evidently constituted textual sources for later *kammatthan* texts written in vernaculars. Besides the aforementioned Vss, Vss-ṭ, Sadd-b, Sadd-v, and so forth, mention should also be made of the *Jinapañjaragāthā* ("*Verses of the Cage of Victorious One*"), a protective *paritta*, probably composed in northern Thailand in the 15th–16th century, which links buddhas of the past—or the great disciples—with cardinal directions, bodily components, and letters of the Pali alphabet (Bernon 2000: 339; Woodward 2020: 110–111; Revire 2022: 238–244).[75]

In fact, Crosby does not rely on any primary sources from Southeast Asia at all, but only refers to secondary sources written in English or French.[76] The Sinhalese corpus is only lightly examined. Beside the *Vidarśanapota* already studied by T.W. Rhys Davids, only two other Sinhalese texts related to the *kammatthan* tradition are referred to in *Esoteric Theravada*, the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* and the *Maraṇañāṇa-sutta*.[77] Yet many other titles exist in Sri Lanka that would also be worthy of study or at least mention. A number of these texts are listed in the Hugh Nevill collection (cited in Bernon 2000: 240) such as the the *Vimuktisaṅgrahanamvūvidarśanabhāvanāsaṅgrahaya*, and so on.

Looking at these manuscripts is important for a historical perspective. In this regard, Crosby relies on a couple of Thai and Lao publications that suggest the existence of copies dating back to the 17th century, for Ayutthaya, and even as far back as the 16th century for Laos (pp. 97, 102; see also Phibul 2019: 6). Even though these records must be considered, they must not always be taken for granted, especially as we are accustomed to a certain level of fantasy for dating in Southeast Asian scholarship.[78] The most reliable method would be to scrutinize manuscript collections of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, some of which are nowadays easily accessible via digital databases.[79] Unfortunately,

[74] Walker (2018: 15–16, 110f, 490f) also provides analysis of several Khmer texts related to traditional *kammatthan*.

[75] The text is also found in modern Sri Lanka as an expanded *pirit* or *parittta* (Jackson 1994). For a recent edition and translation, see Kieffer-Pülz 2018: 233–239.

[76] Some significant works are surprisingly not mentioned by Crosby, however, such as Cousins 1997.

[77] Another Sinhalese text, entitled *Vākkapprakaraṇa*, is also referred to. However, this text is "a litany [...] to be used in conjunction with the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*" (p. 55) and thus apparently not a *kammatthan* text.

[78] In particular, the mention of 1501 CE as the date given for a Lao manuscript (pp. 97, 100) is questionable. So far, the oldest Lao manuscript—a fragment of the *Vinaya* in Pali—is known to date to 1520 CE. Only a couple of copies, among over 12,000 recorded in the DLLM, date from the 16th century.

[79] Beside the aforementioned DLLM and DLNTM databases, many digital libraries of manuscripts have been made accessible by Thai institutions or universities such as Chiang Mai University (https://library.cmu.ac.th/digital_collection/digitalheritage/), Chiang Mai

very few *kammatthan* manuscripts bear a date and, when a date does appear, few go back earlier than the 19th century. The oldest copy available so far—a fragmentary Lao version of ພະທັມສາມໄຕ *Pha tham sam tai* (Kh., *Dhammatrai*)—is dated 1077 of the Little Era, i.e., 1715 CE,[80] predating the Siamese missions to Lanka by several decades; it thus gives us a new *terminus post quem* for this tradition.

Furthermore, the epigraphic corpus of Thailand attests to the spread, not of this meditation tradition itself, but of some of its features in preceding centuries. In this connection, one short section of *Esoteric Theravada* is dedicated to inscriptions (pp. 74f). First mentioned is an inscription from Phitsanulok (upper-central Thailand), dated 1549 CE, which includes the *Dhammakāyagāthā*. These Pali verses, which are found in several related manuscript texts, equates doctrinal elements—related to supramundane knowledge and virtues—to parts of the buddha's physical attributes or monastic cloth (Cham 2504; Cœdès 1956; Bizot 1992: 293–300; Woramat 2021: 79f; Skilton & Phibul 2022). Crosby gives a brief account of this inscription, but without explaining the notion of *dhammakāya*, which renders the connection with the *kammatthan* meditation technique unclear. Mention is made of other stone inscriptions from Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, but no details are given regarding their content, except the vague statement that "they contain Pali formulae of the qualities of the Buddha and the contents of *Abhidhamma*, condensed down to representative syllables" (p. 74). For the sake of completeness, one must add to these examples the epigraphic corpus of the Lan Na kingdom, which includes not only heart-syllables but also *yantra*s dating from the 15th–16th centuries. While these inscriptions do not represent "direct evidence of [old] *kammaṭṭhāna*", the characteristic combinations of syllables or "heart-formulae" they contain, for example, NA MO BU DDHĀ YA, MA A U, NA MA BA DA, ITI PI SO, I SVĀ SU,[81] SAṂ VI DHĀ PU KA YA PA, etc.,[82] make them more than a sign "of the attitude to language as a potent force" (p. 74). Interestingly, a number of these inscriptions are written on buddha footprints (P., *buddhapāda*), an iconographic habit that is of Sinhalese origin, but which probably arrived in Sukhothai from Bagan (Lorrillard 2000: 48–53). This constitutes an additional argument in favor of a hypothetical connection of the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition of meditation with Myanmar.

Rajabhat University (http://www.culture.cmru.ac.th/manuscript_database), Mahasarakham University (www.bl.msu.ac.th/2554/bailan.htm), Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (www.sac.or.th/databases/manuscripts/), etc. In Cambodia, the *Fonds pour l'édition des manuscrits du Cambodge* (EFEO) has inventoried and microfilmed hundreds of manuscripts (http://khmermanuscripts.efeo.fr/). More recently, the Buddhist Digital Resource Center has included a significant number of Khmer manuscripts in their collection as well (http://library.bdrc.io/).

[80] Previously available online at the Digital Repository of Lao Manuscripts, PLMP Code: 01012910002_73.

[81] The first syllables of the praise to the Buddha (*Iti pi so bhagavā arahaṁ* [...]), the Dhamma (*Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo* [...]), and the Saṅgha (*Suppaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho* [...]).

[82] On these formulae, see Lorrillard 2000: 50–52; Skilling 2012: 4–7, and Skilling 2018: 162f; also Revire & Schnake 2023.

Secondary Sources

On multiple occasions, I have emphasized the significance and enduring impact of earlier French scholarship in the region, particularly Bizot's groundbreaking research on the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation. His work is also of crucial importance as it opened access to the study of texts hitherto unknown to scholars which were still encountered frequently in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge regime.

Following Bizot's lead, Bernon was able to observe complete initiation cycles in Cambodia and Thailand more recently, and which he could then compare to vernacular textual sources. Unfortunately, there are few practitioners left of the *kammatthan* meditation technique and only a small number of temples in Thailand and Cambodia have kept this tradition alive, sometimes not without adaptation. In this vein, Crosby was likewise able to make visual observations at two temples where this kind of meditation is still practiced, namely at Wat Damrei Sar (វត្តដំរីស) in Kandal province, Cambodia, and at Wat Ratchasittharam (วัดราชสิทธาราม) in Thonburi (Bangkok), Thailand. Some of her endnotes also suggest she conducted a number of interviews with practitioner masters (pp. 90, 99–100, 221, 226). However, in *Esoteric Theravada*, she does not give an extensive description of the meditation cycle or technique practiced in these monasteries (pp. 54f). It is frustrating that an entire volume dedicated to a given method of meditation gives so little information about it. For this reason, the aforementioned dissertation by Olivier de Bernon (2000), regretfully still unpublished, remains the fullest account to this day of the initiation of the *yogāvacara* transmitted in Cambodia in the late 20th century. In addition, Bernon gave a complete description of the teachings delivered at Wat Ratchasittharam of Thonburi (2000: 426), which he was among the first to identify as the place where the memory and teaching of Suk Kai Thuean has been maintained (see also Mettanando 1999). In this connection, Bernon highlighted differences with the Khmer method such as the notion of parents' legacies (Kh., គុណ, *kun*) which is absent from the Ratchasittharam instructions. It is surprising that *Esoteric Theravada* does not appropriately acknowledge its debts to this work.[83]

On a broader scale, *Esoteric Theravada* falls short in acknowledging the contributions of EFEO scholars, despite extensively relying on their previous research. While Crosby does make a general reference to Bizot's work, it is worth noting that he is inaccurately labeled as an "archaeologist" on p. 96. Moreover, she frequently appropriates his work and discoveries without due credit. Among many cases, we can mention Crosby's identification of the preeminent role assigned to the first five topics of meditation, namely the *pīti*s or "joys" as a distinctive feature of the Tai–Khmer meditation technique, which she presents as her new finding (pp. 30–31). Yet this identification was repeatedly emphasized by Bizot (1992: 47–48) and later by Bernon (2000: 246, 539f), who, moreover, clearly distinguished between the *pīti*s in the *kammatthan* tradition, considered as

[83] However, Crosby refers to a later English article by her colleagues Skilton & Phibul 2014, which merely replicates, albeit in less details, Bernon's thesis.

entities to be invoked (P., *ārādhanā*) and visualized in precise parts of the body, from those in the Sinhalese Mahāvihāra teachings which are merely seen as processes or states. The same can be said for the numerical symbolism Crosby gives (p. 33) equating the five *pīti*s, the five candles offered to the *yogāvacara*'s master, the five primordial syllables NA MO BU DDHĀ YA, the five elements, the five aggregates of individual personality, the five colors or "lights", etc. (Bernon 2000: 270). The continuous repetition of distinctive rhythmic formulae or *gāthā*s, such as A RA HAṂ, as a breathing exercise, in order for the *yogāvacara* to cease any "active thought" (P., *citta*), is presented by Crosby as a first-hand discovery (pp. 54, 243, n. 1), although it had already been described a great many times in Bizot's (e.g., 1992: 228) and Bernon's (e.g., 2000: 496) earlier works.

Comparisons between the topics of meditation in the Southeast Asian tradition and those taught in the Sinhalese Vism have also been undertaken previously by Bernon (2000: 461f). Even though Crosby does bring some new genuine findings of her own, it would have been fair to mention these as well. In the first instance, she attributes the understandings of cosmogenesis as giving a generative role to the three syllables MA A U, from which the universe arises, to a recent publication from Kitchai Urkasame (p. 32), while it was first recorded almost fifty years earlier by Bizot in *Le figuier à cinq branches* (1976: 132) and repeated in his subsequent publications, albeit only written in French (e.g., Bizot 1989: 21; Bizot & von Hinüber 1994: 39). Admittedly, Crosby makes this reference later in the book (p. 128, endnote), but in the meantime does not attribute the recognition to him, as she should, of these syllables as "an inversion of the components of the Sanskrit syllable OṀ, to which similar cosmogonic potency is attributed in Hinduism" (p 32.). Another example concerns various "somatic signs" or *nimitta*s the disciple must experience during successive meditation sessions, from simple tremors to the vision of the dismemberment of the body itself. These *nimitta*s have been enumerated and described at great length by Bizot (1992: 51–56) and Bernon (2000: 507f). Yet again, Crosby chose to only report the more recent work of Phibul Choompolpaisal (2019) who, she writes, has "provided a detailed survey of the varied types of *nimitta*" (p. 56). Further, Crosby's long section on the impact of printing on the *kammatthan* tradition (pp. 88–92), although interesting, makes no mention of Bizot's earlier reflections on this issue, especially on the related abandonment of traditional scripts such as Khom or Tham and their mystical function in modern Cambodia and Thailand (Bizot 1992: 17–21; Bizot & Bizot 2001: 149–153; also Kourilsky 2005: 45–49). Finally, the identification of the aforementioned story of the meditating monk in the *Saddavimala* with the Burmese Kacc-nidd is wrongly ascribed by Crosby to Aleix Ruiz-Falqués (p. 134, n. 47), while it was already pointed out many years earlier—and in English—by Ole Pind in Bizot and Lagirarde's study (1996: 67f).

Crosby's lack of recognition of this extensive, foundational scholarship is unexpected given that she has, in the past, acknowledged the understandings

of the Tai–Khmer Buddhist tradition she owes to Bizot and his colleagues. Moreover, she has even contributed to making them more accessible via English summaries and overviews (e.g., Crosby 2000). Admittedly, the original writings of Bizot are not always easy to grasp, even for a native speaker. In this regard, more recent studies written in English, on which Crosby preferably relies, are helpful. However, some of them must be studied with caution. This is especially the case for those produced by Thai scholars linked with the Thammakai movement based originally in a temple ground at Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Pathum Thani, north of Bangkok. This Thai sect teaches a method of meditation, called *witcha thammakai*, which claims to be in line with the "old *kammatthan*" tradition. As it happens, members of Wat Phra Dhammakaya invest much energy and resources in highlighting the alleged connection between its own meditation system and the supposed ancient *kammatthan* tradition. While there is some truth to this assertion, it is undeniable that this connection is often exaggerated and, to some extent, constructed for the purpose of legitimation.[84]

It should also be mentioned that a significant part of *Esoteric Theravada* traces the history of the Dhammakaya temple and examines the roots of its meditation lineage. As Crosby rightly recalls, Thammakai officially takes as a basis the *witcha thammakai* method developed earlier by Luang Pu Sot, the former abbot of Wat Paknam Phasicharoen (pp. 96–99). *Witcha thammakai*, is a modernized and simplified form of the traditional practice taught earlier by Suk Kai Thuean at Wat Ratchasittharam. Luang Pu Sot's method became gradually widely known in Thailand and beyond after World War II and even reached some Western Buddhist circles who participated in its promotion (pp. 230–232). *Witcha thammakai* also met with critiques from the mainstream (Mahanikai) Thai Saṅgha, as did another modern method, the *ānāpānasati*, taught in the Thammayut forest lineage of Achan Man Phuritthatto (มั่น ภูริทตฺโต; 1870–1949) (p. 229). However, a number of Luang Pu Sot's students were able to transmit his method to several temples, which then inspired the Thammakai movement.[85] While it is indeed interesting to highlight that the traditional *kammatthan* meditation practice has found its way into modern trends of Buddhism in Thailand, *Esoteric Theravada* does not expose new findings in this matter. The Thammakai movement and its meditation method have been the subject of numerous studies in recent decades (Bowers 1996; Mackenzie 2007; Newell 2008), and have generated

[84] An illustrative example of this phenomenon is found in the work of Mettanando [Mano Laohavanich] (1999), a former senior monk at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, who later disrobed and subsequently emerged as a staunch critic (2012). In addition, Phramaha Niras Ruangsan (2015) strongly relativizes the influence of the "old *kammatthan*" as taught by Suk Kai Thuean on Sot Candasaro's method.

[85] There are actually several temples claiming lineage from the original teachings of Luang Pu Sot. The primary contenders, engaged in a rivalry, are Wat Phra Dhammakaya (วัดพระธรรมกาย) located in Pathum Thani (north of Bangkok), and Wat Luang Pho Sot Thammakayaram (วัดหลวงพ่อสดธรรมกายาราม) situated in Ratchaburi province. Notably, in *Esoteric Theravada*, Crosby appears to exclusively reference the former, which exercises control over the Dhammakaya Foundation, acknowleged and thanked by the author (p. x) for their financial support.

well-informed dedicated Wikipedia webpages.[86] Comparative studies of the *witcha thammakai* method of meditation with the traditional *kammatthan* have also recently emerged (e.g., Niras 2015; Potprecha 2019: 103f).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, in *Esoteric Theravada* Crosby leans toward a historical rather than an anthropological or philological approach. The author expresses an intent to present a holistic view of the nature of the traditional meditation system and to explain how change happens and its relation to other technologies of transformation (p. 2). While the latter ambition appears to be achieved, the former is not entirely successful. Crosby's primary interest lies in how the so-called "*borān kammaṭṭhān*" (a misnomer, as discussed) was and still is perceived, and how this perception evolved over the centuries. The author might have been better served by openly focusing on this issue, rather than attempting to provide an overview of this tradition throughout the centuries in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka.

The decline of influence of the traditional form of Buddhism in Cambodia and Thailand was already the subject of Crosby's earlier book (2013). While *Esoteric Theravada* adds little more to that earlier study, it still makes a significant contribution to this subject. Bizot previously outlined historical and sociological reasons that led to the discrediting of traditional Buddhist conceptions in French colonial Cambodia in his introduction to *Le figuier à cinq branches* (1976). Crosby broadens the perspective geographically, including Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. She also reflects on broader aspects of modernization impacting worldviews and conceptions. These changes affected religious practices, such as the emergence of Western medicine, the rise of the Burmese Vipassanā method, and the rivalry between various Buddhist *nikāya*s (pp. 223f). However, some topics loosely related to the book's subject, like Buddhist reforms in 19th–20th century British Burma and Sri Lanka, are overdeveloped and not directly related to meditation (pp. 203–210).

Crosby's major breakthrough lies in arguing that the description of the traditional Tai–Khmer meditation as "non-orthodox" or "non-Theravadin" results more from a modern perception of Buddhism than from an actual peculiarity in terms of conception and practice. She provides compelling arguments, such as the similarity between the terminology related to meditation topics in the *yogāvacara* method and the *Abhidhamma*, and the historical evidence of religious elites practicing the *kammatthan* method. Crosby also highlights how *kammatthan* teachings have found their way into modern Buddhism and experienced a revival among certain practitioners, especially in Thailand. While she does not directly question the notion of orthodoxy, her arguments support the idea that this notion is not relevant for addressing meditation matters.

[86] See for example: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Phra_Dhammakaya, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhammakaya_tradition (accessed 8 October 2022).

In summary, readers' evaluation of *Esoteric Theravada* may depend on their expectations. Those wanting a descriptive in-depth overview of the Tai–Khmer tradition of meditation might be disappointed. The method is lightly described, and vernacular sources are infrequently quoted, making it challenging for uninformed readers to grasp its essence. Additionally, some hypotheses about its origins are stimulating, while others are less convincing. The book lacks consideration for regional geography and religious history before the late 18th century, and some relevant sources are not explored.

Informed readers with access to French-language scholarship may find little additional information compared to Bizot's or Bernon's earlier work. They might also be surprised by the important omissions and lack of proper attribution. However, the book's real value perhaps lies in providing information for Thai and international scholars who cannot read French at an academic level. When considered for what it is—an exploration of how Buddhist studies and scholars have come to regard a given meditation tradition through the prism of modernity—*Esoteric Theravada* offers new and fresh perspectives. While it may not unveil all the mysteries of the Tai–Khmer tradition, it provides valuable information on its late history, original interpretations, and challenging hypotheses, offering new grounds and avenues for reflection. Progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go.

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Abbreviations

Abhidh-s	*Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*
Abhidh-av-ṭ	*Abhidhammāvatāraabhinavaṭīkā*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
Kacc	*Kaccāyanavyākaraṇa*
Kacc-nidd	*Kaccāyanasuttaniddessa*
Nidd-a	*Saddhammapajjotikā* (*Mahāniddesa-aṭṭhakathā*)
Sacc	*Saccasaṅkhepa*
Sadd-b	*Saddabindu*
Sadd-v	*Saddabinduvinicchaya*
Spk	*Sāratthappakāsinī* (*Saṁyuttanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*)
Vibh-a	*Sammohavinodanī* (*Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā*)
Vism	*Visuddhimagga*
Vss	*Vajirasārathasaṅgaha*
Vss-ṭ	*Vajirasārathasaṅgaha-ṭīkā*

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