Unique spaces, unique states of mind: the Thai forest monks and the Abhidhamma method of conscious states and meditation

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Abstract

Forest monks are often venerated for skilled meditative and mystical powers while simultaneously remaining different, separate and mysterious to city dwellers and city monks. In the particular case of Thailand, forest monks are often worshipped as saints of Buddhist practice and can frequently be caught between the desire for an ascetic life and the demand for their services in the cities. Contrary to popular research on the topic, this article will not examine the forest monk tradition as an allegory of Buddha's enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree; but will, instead focus on examining the unique space and state of mind that forest monks occupy as described in the Pāli philosophical texts and commentaries surrounding the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. This article explores the attributes of forest monks as discussed in the Dhammasaṅgaṇi and Puggalapaññatti and through analysis, elucidates common textual attributes of forest monks. The research for this article decodes tensions of the inner and outer lives of monks unique to the forest tradition. This article's textual analysis of Thai forest monks contributes to a greater understanding of their place not only geographically, but also in Theravada Buddhism and larger society.

The Thai Forest Tradition

The bearers of Sinhala Pali Buddhism were forest monks that forged amicable relationships with the Thai royals and elite thus enabling them to anchor the tradition in Thailand under the rule of King Kūēnā in the 1300s.[1,2] However, not all Thai kings supported the integration of the forest tradition into institutional monasticism.[1] Under the kingship of Chulalongkorn, the Thai forest tradition was not awarded bureaucratic admission into the state's sangha act in 1902.[1] Later in the century, the tradition was recognized in the general order of the sangha but was still separate from the states institutional reach.[1] This highlights a hierarchy between approved 'high' Buddhism that is endorsed by the state and vernacular forest Buddhism that is seen as superstitious 'low' Buddhism of the peasantry. Despite unequal institutional relationships, the Thai sangha was categorized between village dwelling monks or *gāmavāsin* and forest dwelling monks or *ārañňavāsin* or *ariya*.[1,2]

The forest *bhikku's* tradition of reclusive practice is juxtaposed against the village monk's tradition of active engagement with the laity and Pāli scholarship.[1,2] The *ārañňavāsin* or forest tradition operates in solitude, away from worldly interference, focussing on conducting experiential inward training of the mind through meditation and peripateticism.[2,3] This bifurcation of inner versus outer is not unique to Thailand, as it is also evident in the early history of Buddhism. For instance, Sāriputta a disciple of Gotama, was acclaimed for his *Abhidhamma* commentaries that typified two vocations for monks, the vocation of scholarship or *ganthadhura* and the vocation of meditation or *vipassanādhura*.[1] The *ganthadhura* vocation focused on learning or *pariyatti* and the *vipassanādhura* vocation was focused on practice or *pratipatti*.[1] Throughout these commentaries, the practical, meditative school of Buddhism is associated with forest *bhikkus* or religious eremites, while the scholarly tradition is associated with the Buddhist elite.[1]

The ascetic practices or *dhūtaṅga* followed by *ārañňavāsins* are aimed towards achieving *nibānna* and becoming an *arahant* or noble *ariya*.[1,5] A by-product of adherence to *dhūtaṅga* or ascetic practices and forest dwelling is the Thai laity's perceived ability for the forest monk to dispel ghosts or malevolent spirits with magical powers, powers that are given due to the fringe element of Buddhism in which they participate.[1,6] Thai forest monks are often venerated as saints or *arahants* because of these abilities that stem from unique practices and a unique location outside of ordered society.[1,5] When compared to city monks, homeless or wandering saints are often considered hierarchically superior and enlightened[1]

The Unique Space of the Forest

Thai forest *bikkhus* most often wander or settle on the margins of society in places separate from the state controlled sangha.[3] The forest itself is perceived as antithetical to centralized and ordered civilization.[3] The physical arrangement of people relates to a hierarchy of allure and civilization that systematically decreases the more one moves away from metropolises and cities towards small villages, purlieus and finally, the forest.[3] As notions of civilization and allure trickle farther and farther away from cities, conceptions of civility, attractiveness, safety and appeal become weaker and weaker.[3] That is, the spaces farthest from cities are removed from the familiarity of city life, where everything is disordered and dangerous and the inhabitants are fearsome wild animals and immoral persons or entities.[3] The forest is associated with chaos that spoils patterns of familiarity and order, as well as wildness and danger .[3] Another contributing factor in the case of Thailand specifically is that Northern Thai forests are often linked to unlawful activities such as opium production and distribution and child trafficking and prostitution rings. These associations further contribute to greater society's general feelings of fear, apprehension and awe when regarding the forest and its inhabitants.[3]

The disorder and danger that would usually be attributed to forest dwellers manifests as magico-religious powers that allude to unconstrained potentiality in the case of the monks.[3] The forest monk is perceived as endowed with these powers precisely because he dwells in the marginal and disordered space of society.[3] The forest *bikkhu* is filled with conflict when compared to the laity, who requires occupancy within the familiarity, safety and control of ordered life.[3] In this way, forest monks operate in a unique space fraught with tension between ordered civilization and genteel sensibilities. They endure the untamed wild as they surpass worldly defilements in order to progress on

the noble path to spiritual achievement, sainthood or *arahantship*. It is due to these factors that they have been able to transcend the negative attributes of regular forest folk and maintain their aura of purity. They have sanctified the forest as a legitimate stage for spiritual development and achievement.[3]

Forest Practice

The *Visuddhimagga,* written by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century, is a treatise on Buddhist meditative practice in the *Abhidhamma* method.[1] The *Visuddhimagga* lists 13 types of ascetic practices or *dhūtaṅga*; numbers eight, nine and ten are highly relevant to the forest practice in Thailand.[1] These three *dhūtaṅgas* are described as the practice of dwelling in the forest, dwelling on a tree root and dwelling in open air.[1] The *Visuddhimagga* lists the *dhūtaṅgas* as optional, but these particular practices are symbolic of forest *bikkhus* who emphasize rigorous practice and seclusion, particularly in a natural landscape.[1] Many forest *bikkhus* understand that these *dhūtaṅgas* prescribe a better, harder and faster path to *arahantship* through a focus on seclusion and strict yet specific orthopraxy.[1,2] As this text was written centuries ago, closer to the time of the Buddha than other texts, these ideologies and applications of Buddhism are often used by forest monks to legitimise their particular tradition and to classify themselves as 'true *bikkhu*' compared to other monastic traditions that stress different scholarship and orthodoxy.[1,2]

The *Visuddhimagga's Abhidhamma* approach to meditative practice glorifies the role of solitary practice and claims that the first state of meditation or *jhāna* comes from secluded practice.[1] The text states further that psychic powers or *iddhi* are endowed upon achieving the four *jhānas* in solitude.[1] The *Visuddhimagga* does not denounce these *iddhis* as evil or sinful, but rather paints them as the occasionally dangerous fruits of concentrated meditative labour.[1] Forest *bikkhus* share many of the preferences listed in the *Visuddhimagga* as they practice several types of *dhūtaṅga*, are gifted with *iddhis* or supernatural powers and live in secluded, naturalistic habitats that have been associated with landmark achievements of the Buddha.[7] In this way, forest *bikkhus* not only operate within a unique physical space in Buddhist Thailand, but also utilise the *Abhidhamma* method of *dhūtaṅgas* or ascetic practices to legitimise the correctness of their particular interpretation and application of Buddhism.

Unique States of Mind

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* and the *Puggalapaññatti* are the second and fourth books of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* that list different states of mind and human types in a Buddhist psychology.[8] The states or frames of mind are types of conscious development that one may be in at any given time along a greater trajectory of spiritual development.[7] These texts elucidate Buddhism's focus on the mind or *citta,* and mental factors or *cetasika*, and can assist in understanding the unique state of mind forest *bikkhus* employ in their practical interpretation of Buddhism.[7,8] This analysis will start first with the *Puggalapaññatti*, as it provides a more methodical basis to describe specific types of application to Buddhism in mental states.

One state of mind in the *Puggalapaññatti* is the person who 'neither tortures himself nor others'.[8,9] A person in this state of mind finds the householders or *gāmavāsins* life tedious and restrictive, so he disregards his worldly aspirations and lifestyle for one more noble.[8,9] He enters the homeless life of scarcity and follows strict monastic rules in the forest, or in another secluded place.[8,9] The forest *bikkhu* also emphasizes the practice of meditation and absolves himself of mental defilements in a solitary milieu.[8,9] From the practice of denying the senses and increasing the capabilities of inward reflection and meditation, the *bikkhu* understands the suffering or *dukkha* of the body through the supersession of cravings and desire.[8] The forest *bikkhu* shares all the attributes of this Buddhist state of mind called 'one who neither tortures himself nor others' as he denounces the world of the *gāmavāsin*. He becomes homeless and starves his mind and body of desire and sensuousness to follow the monastic code and strict *Abhidhamm-ic* meditation in seclusion.[1,8,9,10]

The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* is the second book of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* and shares a similar psychological analysis as the *Puggalapaññatti,* as it explores the different *khandhas* or aggregates of a human being.[4,11] *Khandhas* often relate to blockages or negative behaviours that need to be passed through the application of practical Buddhism in order to spiritually progress.[4] The focus of this inquiry will be the second *khandha*, the *khandha* of feeling and mental pleasure.[11] This analysis will explore how the unique states of mind *bikkhus* use to approach Buddhism create tension within second *khandha*.

The second *khandha* of sensation is the sensing positive or negative objects.[4] Trungpa explains that the second *khandha* includesfeelings of intoxication that may entail 'jumping to conclusions'.[4] The body is always intoxicated on worldly desires, self-mortification, ideology or the solitude of the forest.[4] While the laity or city monks are more closely linked with the struggles of denouncing worldly desires, forest *bikkhus* are removed from much temptation and are instead intoxicated with the forest and solitude.[4] That is, one can become desirous of anything, be it the desire to do something bad such as stealing, or to do something good like live in the forest for mediative reasons like the forest monks. Trungpa claims that the second *khandha* is also associated with 'jumping to conclusions and attaching oneself to them'.[4] Perceptions of right or wrong ideology or practice is part of the second *khandha* and the forest *bikkhus* could be understood as having tension within the second aggregate. The forest monks have taken up extreme *dhūtaṅga* or ascetic practices and have been captured and possessed with the ideology of forest Buddhism. As described in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi,* this type of attachment is negative as it denotes grasping, which can cause increased *dukkha* or suffering. Grasping also is problematic to the cessation of *dukkha* and spiritual progression.

Key Points

Figure 1: This diagram represents the contradictions and tensions of the inner and outer lives of forest monks. They are on the path to arahantship even though they are located in disordered and wild milieus that are usually seen as evil. They are enlightened beings who adhere to the unique state of mind that does not torment, but rather exhibits behaviours that insinuate they that torment themselves over 'correct' ideology within the 2nd khandha.

The forest *bikkhu's* state of mind is unique as this *Abhidhamm-ic* method of both psychological analysis and practice is the work for only the most tough-minded monks. The forest *bikkhus* unique status can be divided into the inner and outer life. In the outer life the forest *bikkhu* is regarded positively as he is removed from worldly desire and on the path to *arahantship*, venerated by the laity (Tosa 2009, vol. 68: 240; McDaniel 2011: 24).[12] More negatively, he is located in the disordered chaos outside of civilization, camping with wild beasts, malevolent spirits and ghosts and thus is sometimes feared for his power and lifestyle.[3]

The inner life of a forest *bikkhu* is perceived positively as he is 'one who torments neither himself nor others' as per the types listed in the *Puggalapaññatti*.[8,9] However, the *bikkhu* exhibits ideological behaviours that torment themselves over 'correct' ideology within the second *khandha*. The forest bikkhu latches on and attaches to ideological conclusions about the right application of Buddhism and further, he may be devoid of worldly pleasures. Instead of being intoxicated on illicit substances however, he is intoxicated on the forest and the power it represents.[4,11] The second

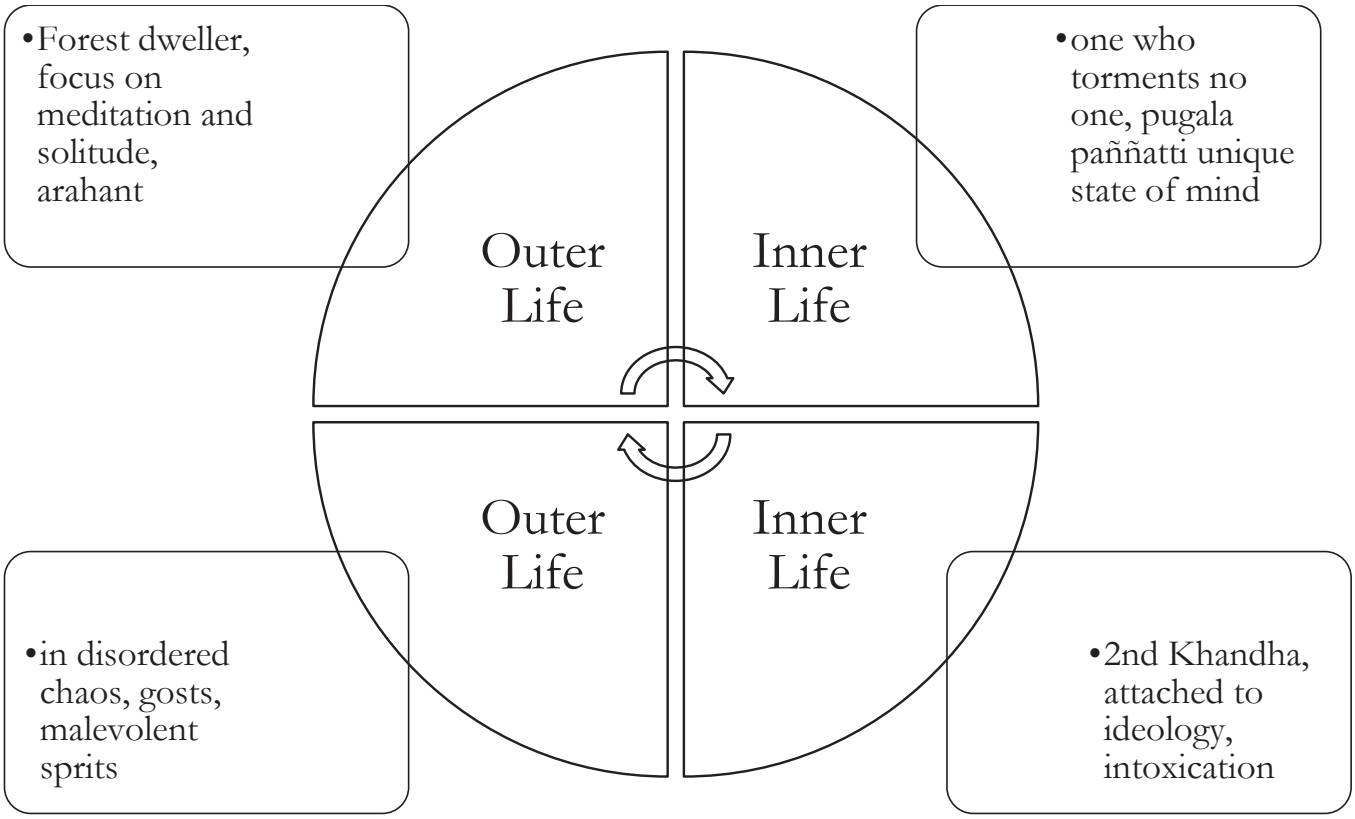

Figure 1. Key Points

khandha is of feeling and sensation and explains that a person will always be intoxicated on something, and it could be argued that at times, the forest monks show they are more intoxicated on the forest and the ideology of forest practice than on meditative concentration or salvation.[4] These factors help to highlight the unique space and state of mind forest that *bikkhus* occupy in light of city dwellers. This article has carefully weaved together the ideological threads that forest monks use to maintain a unique tradition that is undertaken within a unique state of mind in a unique space. Additionally, this article utilizes various ancient Buddhist texts that have not been previously used in this way or on this topic to create a new discourse that explores the forest monk tradition.

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