

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

It has been two years since I first began developing this project and almost a year and a half since I began spending time with my informants. I have tried to immerse myself deeply in the world of these eight *phu patibat tham* – interviewing them for hours, socializing with them, seeing their workplaces, accompanying them to visit their teachers, reading and/or listening to their teachers’ teachings, experiencing their different practice techniques, and even watching the occasional movie together. Some of these activities happened quite spontaneously. In doing all this, I did not think of it clinically as “collecting data” or logging hours “working on my thesis.” Nor did I think of my informants as “sources of information,” but teachers and friends. Frankly, it has all been immensely enjoyable and enriching.

Among the most important things I have come away with is an appreciation of how hard it really is to *patibat tham*. It requires strong commitment and sustained effort. Moreover, it is tricky to understand properly, and even trickier to put understanding into practice. Bearing this in mind, I wish to preface this chapter by saying I admire their dedication, sympathize with the difficulty of their endeavor, and mean no disrespect by any of my concluding remarks, offered here as observations rather than judgments.

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#### **A Distinctive Style of Buddhist Practice**

I had embarked on this thesis with a vague sense that there existed a certain subgroup of urban lay practitioners who engaged in a certain kind of Buddhist practice loosely referred to, respectively, as “*phu patibat tham*” and “*patibat tham*.” How distinctive they were, or what their practice really entailed, was not clear to me. Through the course of my research, I have come to a better understanding of what

these amorphous terms can signify. While there are inevitably permutations of *patibat tham* that differ from person to person, I found that there were still enough points of convergence among my eight informants, that can be considered to cohere into an identifiable form of Buddhist practice that differs from other forms practiced by the mainstream. Although there will always be exceptions to any generalization – at least one of the eight will have a different view – I will use the term “they” to loosely refer to the majority.

The broad outlines of their *patibat tham*, with its various dimensions of meaning, can be summarized in the following way. *Phu patibat tham* adopt a rationalized approach to Buddhist practice and thus de-emphasize, or even look down on, rituals and traditional merit-making acts, such as donation of material requisites to monks, participation in Buddhist festivals, or observance of Buddhist holy days by going to temples. Intent on reaching the real heart (*kaen thae*) of Buddhism, they can do without the peripherals. Their primary concern is not to accumulate merit to achieve a good rebirth, but to develop *panna* to achieve liberation from suffering. In order to deeply understand dhamma, they are interested in studying it seriously at the intellectual level and, most importantly, at the experiential level through meditation. They are particularly bent on practicing *vipassana* meditation, which they consider the unique hallmark of Buddhist practice and the cornerstone of *patibat tham*, given their conviction that it is the only way to reach the level of *panna* that truly ends suffering. The underlying crux of *patibat tham* is training of *sati*, which is the basis of *patibat tham* and indeed the foundation of all aspects of dhamma practice.

### **Spiritual Preferences of the Urban, Educated, Middle-Upper Class**

This style of practice appeals particularly to urban, educated, middle to upper class people. My informants' attraction to it suggested certain sensibilities, spiritual needs and preferences related to their background. To begin with, it seems they emphasize *panna* in their practice not only because it is the key to liberation according to the Buddhist schema, but because of their intellectual approach to all things, spirituality included. This can be seen in the way many start out exploring *patibat tham* through intellectual study. Even if their first significant exposure was

through a meditation retreat, they are eager to follow it up by reading as well. They do not stop at reading only simplified versions of Buddhist teachings either. When I went book-shopping with Thep, for example, he instantly homed in on the “academic” books on Buddhism, turning his nose down at “basic” dhamma books. Indeed, they seek out systematic and technical explanations, hence the wide popularity of Payutto’s textbook-like tome *Buddhadhamma* or Luang Pho Pramot’s neatly organized manuals on mindfulness and meditation. Nor are they afraid to tackle original suttas from the *Tripitaka* (especially the *Satipatthana Sutta* as it is directly related to meditation) or even the arcane *Visuttimaggā*. Sometimes the recourse to books can be amusingly literal, such as when Noi read the book *Patibat Tham Hai Thuk Thang* (Practicing Dhamma the Right Way) to figure out how to “*patibat tham*.” As another book title also suggests – *Chalad Tum Boon* (Making Merit the Intelligent Way) – if they are going to *patibat tham*, they want to do it intelligently.

With this intellectualism also comes a keenly critical mind, honed through years of higher academic training and programmed to rationally assess claims. They need their version of Buddhism to be “scientific.” It must make good sense for them to be convinced by it. For many, this is one reason meditation is preferable to merit-making. While there is ultimately justice and rationality to karma, its actual workings are mysterious and unobservable. When there is no evidence what ritualistic merit-making really leads to, and too much mystical “nonsense” thrown into the mix, skeptics are disinclined to take part. By contrast, there is a stronger rationale for meditation, as it can be directly tested whether meditation leads to greater calm and *panna*. One informant, Mi, spoke of devising “experiments” in her *patibat tham* to test it, and herself. Meanwhile, prayer is not highly emphasized because it is a “balm” while meditation is a “medicine” – one only makes you feel good but the other can end your suffering. Few are interested in prayer for supernatural benefits or as empty chanting. Prayers are only valuable if they are dhamma teachings that can nurture *panna*. In short, if they can find a reasonable explanation for a practice, they will be more motivated to engage in it. Yet to me this approach seems a bit too dry. Rituals and prayer can still be done meaningfully and even their not strictly rational aspects can be emotionally inspiring or calming, in ways that can bolster *panna*-oriented practice as well.

Actually, for even the staunchest intellectuals, it does take more than pure reason, or intellectual *panna* (*cinta-maya-panna* and *sutta-maya-panna*) in Buddhist parlance, to truly win them over to *patibat tham*. Even as they extol reason, they also yearn for a way of knowing that is beyond reason. Paradoxically, this is precisely because they are intellectuals, who have thought and thought and reached a dead end. While on the one hand meditation appeals because there is a solid rationale for it, on the other hand the allure of meditation, especially *vipassana*, lies in its promise of insight that transcends intellect. Moreover, they come to realize that their intellectual acumen can also be their downfall, a major obstacle in their practice. They discover that in fact meditation – no less than karma – is redolent with mystery as well, and open to doubts. But doubt is one of the five hindrances to meditation. They thus become particularly concerned with strengthening their confidence (*saddha*) and learning how to accept some things on faith.

Nonetheless, they are still at heart intellectuals, which makes for curious contradictions in the way they go about learning meditation. Even though meditation is by nature loose and free-flowing, there is an attempt to structure it into something more systematic. Hence the popularity of the standardized, pre-packaged seven to ten day retreats. There are several attractive qualities of this approach. First, it appeals to the intellectual's preference for organization and planning. They appreciate that even basic things like meals and rooms are arranged in orderly fashion. The meditation teachings themselves are given with a clearly mapped agenda for each day, with dhamma talks carefully placed in logical sequence. At the S.N. Goenka retreat, there is even a set schedule for when *samatha* meditation is done (first three days) and *vipassana* meditation begins (first "given" on the fourth day). The impression it gives of a distinct separation between *samatha* and *vipassana* meditation seems artificial and possibly misleading, given how the two are in fact closely intertwined. Meanwhile, in the Khun Mae Siri courses, walking meditation is broken down into standard steps, with a progressively more detailed choreography taught in each successive day of the retreat. Every participant is to follow the uniform steps in synchrony. All this is probably done, understandably, to help simplify meditation for beginners, but it can feel unnatural and make meditation seem more rigid than it really is.



Aside from aiding beginners, the creation of organized courses is useful in spreading teachings to be spread to a wider population, as the basic template can be easily replicated. This is how Khun Mae Siri's retreats, one of the first of its kind in Thailand, became such a mass phenomenon. The same is true of S.N. Goenka's courses, which have expanded worldwide. An example of remarkable standardization, one is able to have a uniform experience no matter where in the world one takes the course, as they are all run in exactly the same way, using the same audio and videotapes of teachings. This mass approach calls to mind industrialized production.

With the modern economic system also comes a bottom-line, market-driven, instant-gratification and customer-satisfaction culture. Despite their attempts to extricate themselves from consumerism, contemporary urbanites cannot avoid absorbing this mentality. Consequently, in doing meditation, they cannot help but want results, an end-product, something to show for their practice even as they tell themselves they are not supposed to practice with craving (*tanha*). The linear schedule of organized retreats is appealing because it suggests a sense of progression over the seven or ten days. Moreover, they desire efficiency in achieving that progress. Another reason retreats are attractive is that they are intensive, which holds the promise of quicker results, a fast track to mastering meditation. For example, Noi said she had experienced earning a master's degree in an intensive course, and so at first thought she could apply the same approach to meditation. Others, particularly Fai and Ko, initially threw themselves into back-to-back retreats with a desire to reach advanced levels as soon as possible. Only later do they realize that meditation progress takes time and rushing it only makes for stress. Yet Fai still seemed pleased at some level that she had been extreme at the outset, because she was convinced that it had helped her retrain her mind in a short time.

There is also a consumerist touch to the way they go about exploring different schools of practice. In general conversation, I have heard many people speak disapprovingly of this sort of religious "shopping," but it seems to me that it is not entirely inappropriate. The Buddha himself "shopped" too, in the sense of trying different practice methods and studying under different teachers. Testing out various techniques is necessary for finding one that suits one's temperament (*jarit*) and proves

effective in bringing insight. The important difference, however, is that nowadays people have a wider array of options readily available – books, websites, visiting teachers, and retreats nationwide and abroad, from different schools of Buddhism. Spoilt for choice – much like they are with any other product in today’s marketplace – there is a bit of thrill-seeking or craving in wanting to try this and that. There can also be less patience and a more demanding attitude. If, after one retreat (or even just a few days into a retreat), they do not get spectacular results, a practitioner may quickly move on to another of the many alternative methods rather than sticking with this particular one beyond the initial stage of discomfort or confusion to give it a good-faith trial. It is a far cry from how the Buddha spent years of dedicated effort with his various teachers. And even if a method worked well enough, they may still keep exploring anyway lest they “miss out” on something potentially better. With this reluctance to commit, due diligence in testing out different techniques can devolve into dilettantism. To be fair, some of my informants “shopped” much less than others, and even the ones who did a lot admitted it can be a waste of time to shop too much. Some still consider it helpful to combine practices from different schools, but also said it was important to have a primary technique as an anchor. Ultimately, all were agreed that a commitment must be made to advance further in one’s practice.

How then do they choose a primary method? Aside from the basic issue of temperament (*jarit*), efficiency and convenience are again major considerations for the contemporary urbanite. There is a lot of talk about which method is the “most direct way” to reaching *panna*, with many practitioners angling for the shortest cut: *nibbana* in the fewest lives possible if not in this very life. Some de-emphasize the practice of *jhanas* because they see it as a time-wasting detour. In any case, they said it is inconvenient to practice, given the hectic urban lifestyle which does not allow for hours of meditation and the noisy city environment which does not provide the atmosphere conducive to deep meditation. Much more appealing is the practice of training *sati* in everyday life and particularly the method of observing thoughts (*cittanupassana*) because it is more convenient and manageable to actually do. At some level it is of course reasonable to seek a technique that is practical – after all, the Buddhist path is fundamentally pragmatic in outlook. But is the method that is most “convenient” necessarily the most effective? Does the method that is most “efficient”

leave out potentially enriching practices? For instance, if a practitioner set aside more time to practice deeper *samatha*, it may turn out to enhance their *vipassana* significantly or lead to other worthwhile discoveries. In any case, it seems a bit preemptive to dismiss a practice simply because it is inconvenient. It could also be self-indulgent, as what is convenient can also be less rigorous, as some informants themselves suggested.

Another source of possible self-indulgence is the highly self-interpretive nature of their practice. Part of the character of the contemporary intellectual is being highly individualistic and free-thinking, believing that they have the ability – or even right – to choose what they themselves judge is best for them, based on their own personal views, needs, or predilections. In their spiritual practice, then, there is a distinct do-it-yourself and personally-customized approach. Partly because practice is no longer tied to temples which have set communal activities like morning and evening prayers, morning food offerings, sermons, and special holidays, people are free to devise their own *patibat tham* routines, doing the practices they favor and at times convenient in their own schedules. They do not always have to go at appointed times to see monks in person, but can listen to dhamma CD's on their own at home and post questions about dhamma on web-boards. Similarly, some organize their own private retreats with friends, or even if they go to temples, they conduct it independently. At a more detailed level, they even make up, often quite creatively, their own little *patibat tham* “exercises” to challenge their personal bete-noirs. One amusing example is how Mi decided to swear off croissants as a way to wear away what she considers one of her stickier defilements, enjoyment of food. Personalization is also related to the trends of “shopping” and intellectual study described earlier. As they have been exposed to a wide variety of spiritual traditions, which they feel they have studied with adequate academic sophistication, they consider themselves fit to concoct their own eclectic mixture. Thep, for instance, draws on his scholarly readings of Mahayana and Vajrayana sutras in his Theravada-based practice, saying he is able to understand how they all interconnect. As Ko put it (in the language befitting a former anthropology graduate student), this is a “post-modern” phenomenon – spiritual fragmentation, cultural assimilation, and the personal construction of meaning. Of course, monks and lay practitioners in eras past

also needed to personalize their practice to some degree, but the increased interconnected-ness and greater access to diverse traditions today amplifies the trend and provides a wider variety of customizations. And then again, as Ko sheepishly admitted, there is also the simple matter of her “not liking” imposed rules, a sentiment actually shared by other informants like Mi and Fai.

When is personalization required for efficacy of practice, and when is it self-indulgent? If dhamma was characterized by the Buddha as being provable and effective, when does wanting results become greed? Is intensive practice a form of impatience or strong determination? Is the desire for convenience pragmatic or lazy? In reality, the problem may not lie in the act of personalization, the trial of techniques, the choice of meditation method or any of the other contemporary spiritual phenomena described themselves, but in the way they are carried out by individual *phu patibat tham*. Moreover, before overstating the “contemporary” nature of these issues, it should be noted that perhaps they are simply contemporary versions of timeless dilemmas dhamma practitioners in any age grapple with. In *patibat tham*, it is always a precariously thin line between reasonable need and mental defilement (*kilesa*). And as all my informants testified, despite their best intentions, these clever *kilesa* can unconsciously creep into their practice ever so subtly.

### **Convergence Between Monk and Lay**

Timeless issues notwithstanding, one distinctly modern feature shaping the spiritual context in which *phu patibat tham* practice is the convergence between monk and lay. Having started out with this widely recognized trend in mind, I found my informants’ experiences confirmed it to a large degree and also brought out more detailed aspects of it. They provide real-life examples of laypeople who have begun engaging in vigorous practice, appropriating more of monks’ traditional religious roles and bypassing the need for monks to mediate in their spiritual life. Particularly notable was how they expressed remarkable self-confidence in their capabilities and a graver sense of duty to develop themselves spiritually. In their view, *patibat tham* is the duty of *all* humans. They really seem convinced that they can, and should, practice very seriously even as laypeople, which is why they are interested in training



hard in *sila-samadhi-panna*, just like monks. Coupled with their confidence comes higher spiritual goals. It confirmed my initial suppositions when all of my informants, who self-identified as ‘serious,’ turned out to be aiming in some sense to attain *nibbana*, admittedly with varying timeframes and ideas of what it entails. I was, however, amazed by how urgently some were pursuing it, especially the informant, Waew, who was convinced it was possible to attain in this very life.

This casts doubt on the view espoused by some observers<sup>1</sup> that in this day and age, the sacred has disappeared from public consciousness and the overwhelming majority of laypeople are concerned only with mundane happiness in this life, not only considering *nibbana* unreachable, but unappealing. Naturally, people aiming for *nibbana* will always constitute a minority, but I would argue that presently it is not as tiny a minority as some may think. While my sample size was small, the fact that my informants are intent on *nibbana* suggests that there might be a significant number of other *phu patibat tham* who also are. Focusing their discourse on liberation from suffering and their practice on meditation lends itself to concern for *nibbana*. And as my informants reflect, they mean not only the interpretation of *nibbana*-in-this-life, i.e. the state of mind of peaceful awareness, but *nibbana* in the ultimate sense. With the growing popularity of meditation, it is possible the numbers of those aiming for, or at least thinking in terms of, *nibbana* is increasing. The notion that there may be a considerable number of ordinary laypeople going about their daily lives while privately harboring thoughts of *nibbana* is peculiar indeed.

Yet, I found my informants hew to the standard party line of the pro-active lay practitioner I had heard commonly voiced when I started out on this project – the insistence that it *is* possible to combine the otherworldly and the worldly, *patibat tham* and daily lay life. In speaking of integration, many do indeed spout the rhetoric that one can *patibat tham* “anytime, anywhere, in anything” and that it is not necessary to change one’s lifestyle drastically. As such, they tend to emphasize making changes in *how* they lead their life and downplay the need to make concrete changes in *what* goes into their lives. The chief means of making this vision of rigorous lay practice realizable is defining *patibat tham* as developing mindfulness in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Natayada 2000.

every moment, which makes *patibat tham* completely internalized, portable, and independent of any monastic accoutrements.

Indeed, many of my women informants (but none of the men) equivocate on the question of whether they needed to ordain to *patibat tham* seriously. They assert that “ordination is in the heart,” redefining “ordain” as *patibat tham* assiduously in whatever context. That context need not be a temple or in the monkhood, as “conducive conditions” for practice could be created elsewhere as well.

### **Stages in Evolving *Patibat tham***

In order to evaluate to what extent this notion of *patibat tham* “anytime, anywhere, in anything” can actually be achieved in practice, it is useful to review my informants’ experiences in attempting to integrate *patibat tham* into their daily life. Rather than simply summarizing the previous chapters, here I will cross-cut the data laterally in order to demonstrate how the findings from each chapter parallel each other. For while I had initially approached my investigation of the three main aspects of lifestyle – daily routine, job, and social relations – as separate categories (and presented them in individual chapters for the purpose of clarity), I discovered that there were recurring motifs that emerged – certain stages my informants appeared to move through as they matured in their *patibat tham* that were common to all three areas. Actually this is not all that surprising, given how different aspects of *patibat tham* are interconnected and bound to develop in tandem, especially as their lives become more completely permeated by their spiritual outlook.

Providing a thematic recap that teases out such temporal patterns serves to underscore the notion that figuring out how to *patibat tham* is a continually evolving process. With deepening understanding and commitment, there is continual readjustment in the ways they choose to integrate it into their lives, and changes in the relative weight they assign to the “*what*” and the “*how*” types of life changes. Their aim is to find the quintessentially dhammic “middle path” approach, neither too stringent nor too lax. Achieving this balance is ever so complicated, and requires delicate negotiation, involving a good deal of trial-and-error and back-and-forth between extremes.

At some points, as I had initially surmised, they did indeed resort to rationalizing as a means of reconciling conflicts resulting from their *patibat tham*. Rationalizing is one important bridge between conceptualization and actualization – *phu patibat tham* can bend their conceptualization of *patibat tham* to fit what they can actually do. Sometimes this can be a form of self-indulgence. Other times, it is a way to make peace with what they cannot change in their lives, even if they may, in their heart of hearts, wish they could.

While recognizing that in reality it is not quite this neat, what follows is a simplified outline of the main stages of evolving *patibat tham*. When they first became serious about *patibat tham*, they often took an extremely zealous approach – the fervor of the novice. Having a still rather simplistic understanding of *patibat tham*, they may have overestimated its requirements and overly scrutinized their behavior, questioning themselves into more of a moral quandary than they actually needed to. They also conceived of *patibat tham* as separate from and incompatible with their daily lives, adopting an all-or-nothing attitude. All this led them to feel major conflicts with their existing lives – sometimes actually justified but sometimes simply imagined – and believe they had to make drastic “*what*” changes. They may have done so partly out of beginner’s naïvete, but also partly because they were still not skilled enough in maintaining *sati* and other aspects of *patibat tham* to change the “*how*” very much. They thus may have adopted an intense approach in their practice routine, going to retreats frequently and following a heavy daily formal meditation regimen. They may have also contemplated a career change as they agonized over whether their technically “ethical” current job in fact involves subtle tainting of the precepts. Socially, they may have felt alienated and withdrew from regular, “non-dhammic” lay society.

Such extreme changes may have caused friction with family, friends, or workmates, generated personal stress, and generally made their life feel out of balance. They came to realize it may not be necessary, and even counterproductive, to be so extreme. As they relaxed, however, they may have swung back too far in the other extreme and become too lax. Here, they may have taken the “anytime, anywhere, in anything” ethos too far and excused things that may not truly be excusable. Regressing on “*what*” type changes they may have made or considered,

they now said it was more important to change the “*how*,” that is if they weren’t regressing on this aspect as well. For instance, they may have redefined *patibat tham* such that they can ease up on their formal meditation regimen and conveniently focus only on maintaining *sati* continually, to the point of being lazy. Moral conflicts may still have nagged at them, but now they rationalized them away in order to get on with their lives. If they had been splitting ethical hairs when questioning their jobs, they came around to finding them acceptable. Even if their jobs were truly ethically problematic, they now rationalized away their misgivings if they were not yet able to change jobs. Meanwhile, they may have gone back to socializing with old friends they had initially dropped, even if they slipped back into drinking and gossiping as a result.

As they became more committed and advanced in their *patibat tham*, however, they went back to questioning if they were now being too self-indulgent. They started to admit there were untenable contradictions or at least certain limitations in their existing lay lifestyle that they now felt had to be addressed if they were to pursue *patibat tham* more seriously. In addition to changing the “*how*,” they now saw the need to also make concrete “*what*” type changes that would add overtly spiritual elements to their lives, but still without entirely jettisoning everything that was currently there. In this way, they were able to work out a greater sense of balance in their lives. At this point, they may have still considered developing continual *sati* the core part of their *patibat tham*, but they acknowledged that it was still necessary to do formal meditation and go on retreats regularly. Those in even mildly ethically questionable jobs began to feel – this time from their hearts, not just their heads – they can no longer stand doing them. Otherwise, they may have simply grown tired of jobs that do not have much of a spiritual dimension. They then tried to incorporate more “dhamma projects” in their work, such as writing dhamma books, or quit their jobs entirely to do work directly related to dhamma, such as being a dhamma teacher. As for social relations, they may have continued efforts to maintain old friendships, but also cultivated “dhamma friends” and *kalyanamitta*.

At the highest level, when a person is practicing with utmost dedication towards attaining *nibbana*, more radical changes in the “*what*” are called for – the pursuit of full-time *patibat tham*. While only two of my informants considered



themselves to possibly be near this stage, all had some conceptions about it that could be examined. As it turned out, all of them agreed that theoretically speaking full-time *patibat tham* provides the most conducive conditions for practicing seriously. The highest “right livelihood” is having no livelihood, or at least the most minimal amount. It is not enough to have “dhamma friends,” but also “*nibbana* friends,” or fellow practitioners also training hard for *nibbana*.

### ***Patibat Tham* “Anytime, Anywhere, in Anything”: An Oversimplified Rhetoric**

In tracing the trajectory of their stories, it struck me that while the stereotypical equation of *patibat tham* with seclusion in the forest may be an oversimplification, so too is the breezy “anytime, anywhere, in anything” conception. To be sure, there are certain angles of truth to the idea that one can *patibat tham* “anytime, anywhere, in anything,” and it is indeed useful for motivating laypeople to also *patibat tham* rather than writing it off as the sole purview of monks. However, the problem is that this rhetoric can become obfuscating and even misleading if it is used too loosely – which many *phu patibat tham* tend to do. They often leave things conveniently vague and neglect to mention qualifications that would highlight the real difficulties to practicing as a layperson. But I would argue these qualifications are necessary.

The idea that *patibat tham* can somehow be seamlessly integrated into daily life magically and effortlessly glosses over the reality that people attempting to *patibat tham* do have to grapple with certain conflicts between the requirements of *patibat tham* and certain aspects of their existing lives. Moreover, while many of my informants did speak of the evolutionary nature of *patibat tham*, they did not always point out that whether they did or did not experience conflicts depended on the stage of *patibat tham* in question. Perhaps in the intermediate stages, they did not experience much conflict because they had already made accommodations to achieve a balance between *patibat tham* and their daily lives, but it should not be discounted that in the early stages they actually did. Then, if they advance to the point where

their dedication to *patibat tham* becomes truly intense, they can again experience conflicts as the circumstances of their lay life begin to feel too constraining.

To a certain degree, it is true that they can reconcile conflicts by infusing a dhammic approach to *how* they lead their life. Yet, despite what they say, they do make significant changes in the *what* as well, and adopt certain lifestyle features which depart from the mainstream but are common to other *phu patibat tham*. Thus, integration really involves adjustments on both fronts. Perhaps it is inevitable that it would. Internal transformation, i.e. a higher level of mind and a different value system, naturally manifests externally in the life choices they make, including major ones like their job.

Furthermore, as this thesis has delineated, there are many facets of “*patibat tham*” and thus people ought to be clearer in specifying in which way they are using the term rather than throwing it around in a catch-all way. Yes, one can *patibat tham* in the sense of maintaining *sati* “anytime, anywhere, in anything” but in actually everyday *sati* is not a panacea. *Phu patibat tham* could emphasize more clearly that they still need to *some* of the time retreat to a secluded place to *patibat tham* in the sense of doing intensive practice. Yes, figuratively “ordination is in the heart,” but they could be more forthcoming in acknowledging that “ordination of the heart” done while literally ordained is still theoretically better, when speaking of *patibat tham* at the highest level.

### **Motivations for Equivocation**

Why, then, did they use this rhetoric in such a vague and oversimplified manner? Part of the reason seemed to be that they were intent on debunking popular stereotypes about “*phu patibat tham*” – either that they are strange, angelic, annoyingly sanctimonious, or frankly, boring. They wanted to show that they are just “regular people,” who wear regular clothes and do regular things and have regular feelings and flaws. Even if they actually did feel different in some ways from those who did not *patibat tham*, and it’s only realistic that they would, they did not want to broadcast this if it made them seem too odd or feel segregated from others. In fact, some said they did not want to act too strangely because it might give people a “bad

impression” of *patibat tham*, that it causes people to become “weird”(pian). (Yet while they want to avoid showing their *patibat tham* identity when it brings negative associations, perhaps they wouldn’t mind doing so when it brings positive ones.)

It was also extremely important for them to challenge the popular “forest” conception of *patibat tham* and the necessity of ordaining in order to empower themselves and validate the legitimacy of laypeople as serious practitioners who can reach advanced levels. The matter of ordination is particularly thorny because it pushes the issue of whether there are limits to lay practice. Sometimes they almost sounded defensive, as if they were trying to justify their choice to remain as laypersons rather than ordain.

Actually, oftentimes it is not a choice, but force of circumstance – whether personal or gender-related – that keeps them from ordaining, which makes it all the more necessary to argue this view. To some extent, doing so could be a form of rationalization. When laypeople say that it is perfectly possible to *patibat tham* by carrying out one’s life responsibilities, I wonder if some are partly trying to convince themselves, and deep down they really wish they could be freed from those responsibilities. Yet it is a social, and moral, taboo to ever confess, even to themselves, that they wish someone else would take care of their parents or children – especially for women, given that these are their traditional social roles. And again, they would not want to give *patibat tham* a “bad name” by suggesting it could make practitioners want to abandon their existing lives and duties, even if it in some real-life cases it does.

### **The Border Between Monk and Lay: Ambiguities, Contradictions, and Limits**

The crux of the problem is that active lay practitioners are living on the border between monk and lay – and all border areas are wrought with ambiguity. There are, let’s face it, inherent contradictions in trying to be almost monkish while still a layperson. Moreover, as the monk-lay convergence is a relatively new phenomenon, those in the thick of it are still feeling their way in the dark, trying to figure out how to negotiate this uncharted terrain. At times they seemed perplexed by the conundrum.

Pulled in different directions, they wind up contradicting themselves, either in what they say, or between what they say and what they do.

The informants who were the strongest advocates of doing *patibat tham* naturally in regular life turned out in fact to be the ones who changed their lives quite drastically. They neglected to point out, however, that perhaps it is precisely because they had made such changes that they are now able to *patibat tham* ever so naturally. So when they said “you don’t have to change your life,” apparently they meant, “unless you’re me.” Because, somehow, they are different – whether it is that they are more committed or more “delinquent” and thus in greater need of intense practice. Sometimes, it seemed they were being careful to avoid sounding judgmental of other practitioners, but inadvertently betrayed double-standards: “Sure, businesspeople can *patibat tham*...but there’s no way I would want to work in business!”

The issue of livelihood is particularly important because making a living is the main distinction between the lay and ordained, the last bastion of lay status. What is interesting is how some seem to be stretching their lay status to the limit by choosing a livelihood that allows them to be actively involved in spreading and practicing dhamma – which approaches the job detail of monks. But what few mentioned, unless probed, was the practical reality that they could only do this type of work part-time, or if full-time, only if they have other forms of financial support such as a well-off husband or family. They do not highlight how in actuality, for most people, the need to maintain a livelihood has the concrete and unavoidable consequence of restricting time for dedicated *patibat tham*.

As for the delicate topic of ordination, they may have made seemingly blanket statements like “ordination is not necessary” but what they really meant, if one listened more closely, was that “ordination is not necessary for me personally at the present time.” In fact, they ultimately did admit that ordination theoretically provides the most conducive conditions for serious practice. But the decision to actually ordain is highly personal. It depends on an individual’s life circumstances, particularly family duties, as well as their own emotional and spiritual readiness to cut off worldly ties and make such a major commitment. Still, a few of my informants are already seriously considering ordaining. Even those who insisted they had no desire to ordain would let slip the caveat of “who knows about the future, though.”



Thus, even though I started out investigating how laypeople integrate *patibat tham* into their lives, when I followed the trail it turned out there was eventually a limit to the lay path and a final shift towards ordination. The lay *phu patibat tham* can approximate a monk's depth of practice to a certain extent, blurring the lines between lay and ordained, but ultimately there is still a line that remains, which some are preparing to cross.

### **Enduring Roles for Monastics**

By pointing out the limits to lay *patibat tham* I do not mean to diminish the great value of having spiritually empowered laypersons who are actively pursuing their personal self-development as well as contributing to society, especially in spreading dhamma. As several of my informants pointed out, there are certain advantages to being a layperson, such as greater flexibility in the times, places, and ways they can work than monks who are bound by stricter disciplinary rules. This allows them to fill gaps left by monks in the audiences they can reach and programs they can do. At a personal level, beginning to practice seriously as laypeople can help "pre-train" them and produce better ordained persons should they decide to pursue that route.

I do, however, wish to argue that there are still vital and enduring roles for the ordained to play in religious life as well. When laypersons assert their capacity to *patibat tham*, they can also end up overly marginalizing monks. It was striking, and rather saddening, how dismissive some of my informants were of monks in general, at times bordering on condescension. For example, some informants said that laypeople's *patibat tham* can exceed the quality of practice of monks who may wear the robe but do not train their minds, including even monks who study the Pali canon assiduously and cannot be considered inactive in their duties. To them, the saffron robe no longer commanded respect, but was seen as an empty form. It was only individual monks that would earn their reverence, which was based on the monk's credentials rather than their ordained status.

One credential that was particularly important was being highly realized in meditation, for one thing *phu patibat tham* need most sorely is guidance in their

mediation practice. However, a lay teacher who is as knowledgeable in dhamma and able to offer meditation instruction would be just as acceptable. Still, as monks have more time to devote to meditation practice they can be considered better equipped to reach highly advanced levels. This does appear to be one special area of expertise most lay practitioners will still give monks credit for, one of the few remaining religious roles that laypeople acknowledge they cannot quite supplant.

Beyond this role as “meditation specialists” – and this whole notion of specialization is itself distinctly modern – the importance of monks has largely been diminished. While the monks’ other traditional function of performing rituals does survive in wider society, among *phu patibat tham* it has been undercut due to their disinterest in rituals. I would argue that this is an overly narrow view. Ordination is not only valuable in providing better conditions for meditating or studying dhamma in depth. More broadly, the ordained can provide inspiring examples of those who practice complete renunciation and most fully live out a life of dhamma. After all, the homeless life was the ideal form of practice put forth by the Buddha. While one ought not be blindly attached to ideals, I do believe it is valid and important to ensure that legitimate ideals, such as the ordained form of *patibat tham*, are not lost in the general public discourse. There has been longstanding debate on this point<sup>2</sup>, but this is my personal opinion, as well as that of several of my informants.

### **Demonstrated Need for Female Ordination**

This leads us to the controversial issue of female ordination. I honestly had not set out on this project with a feminist ax to grind – although I admit that as a female with a humanistic outlook, I will naturally have an underlying feminist viewpoint. Still, I had not envisioned addressing female ordination as the main agenda of my research. However, it emerged as an important issue. Of my female

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly among women, who cannot ordain as *bhikkunis* in Thailand or in the Tibetan tradition. For views from *bhikkunis*, see Chatsumarn 1998, 2000 and Tenzin Palmo 2002. For views from both ordained and lay women, see Batchelor 1996. There is also a tendency for many Buddhist practitioners in the West to de-emphasize ordained practice and evince a greater sense of lay empowerment as there is no native Buddhist monastic tradition and a strong Protestant tradition [in the U.S. especially] (Cadge 2005: 61-81; Phra Phaisan 2546: 353-354; Prebish and Tanaka: 159).

informants, a good two out of six declared that they would only consider ordination as a female monk (*bhikkhuni*). If their numbers could be extrapolated, it would seem there may actually exist a lot of women who are quietly nursing ambitions to ordain as *bhikkhuni*.<sup>3</sup> Until they have clearer options, even those women who have a very strong interest in ordaining will have to remain in a holding pattern, like one of my informants, Mi.

Otherwise, they simply have to satisfy themselves with the indeterminate pseudo-ordained forms that exist for women, such as a nun (*maechi*) or a lay renunciant living in a temple. Or if they do not find these options appealing, they have to keep arguing that being an active lay practitioner is sufficiently satisfying. These are the approaches taken by my four other female informants. However, no matter what form of “full-time” dhamma occupation they envisaged, they were bent on doing intensive practice and not cooking and cleaning for monks. What my research demonstrates is that there is a clear demand for opportunities for dedicated spiritual practice for women which needs to be met. Arguably, if the possibility of ordination as a female monk were more solidly established, it would become the preferred “full-time” option rather than my informants’ other solutions, and possibly attract more active female lay practitioners to “switch sides” to the ordained. The high level of spiritual resolve shown by my informants strongly suggests a groundswell of support for instigating change in the not too far future.

### **A Broader Perspective**

Having concentrated my research efforts mainly at the level of the individual, here I would like to move to a broader perspective and explore how their type of Buddhist practice may relate to the wider socio-economic context. As traditional Thai society is typically characterized, or to some extent idealized, the very way of life was

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<sup>3</sup> Further anecdotal evidence is provided by my experience at a Plum Village retreat held in Thailand in April 2005 and led by a Thai-born *bhikkhuni* ordained in France in that tradition, *Bhikkhuni Chanh Lin Ngiem* or *Bhiksuni Niramasa*, as she is called by Thais. Through the course of the retreat a handful of women publicly – and conceivably even more did privately – told *Bhiksuni Niramisa* that they seriously wanted to ordain but were waiting for it to become more accepted in Thai society. The research of Falk (2005) also gives insight into the spiritual aspirations of women who have ordained as *maechi*.

steeped in dhamma. Tight-knit communities were founded on interdependence, social relations imbued with generosity. A subsistence economy allowed people to live in harmony with nature. Simply by living their regular lives, the ordinary layperson was already in a sense practicing dhamma, without having to label it as “*patibat tham*.”

With the secularization of education and the rise of “scientism,” the spiritual dimension began to fade from public consciousness. Meanwhile, with the advent of capitalist economic development, industrialization, and urbanization, economic life became at odds with nature and society became increasingly competitive, consumerist, and atomized. Some argue that the increased suffering and spiritual void wrought by this way of life, particularly felt by urban intellectuals who most fully came under its spell, is a major reason why people began “turning back” to Buddhism.

However, if society had really changed so much, and dhammic values had really eroded considerably, it seems to me there was not much Buddhism for them to turn back to. At least not the kind of Buddhism embedded in ordinary life as in days of yore. They had to build up a new kind of Buddhism, this so-called “*patibat tham*.” It strikes me as somehow artificial, an inorganic creation. This approach was not only necessitated by the fact that society had become less dhammic. It also seems to derive from the modern yen to put everything into discrete categories. “*Patibat tham*” is thus conceived as its own entity, perhaps even a commodity, not an embedded part of regular life. The way to learn about dhamma is not by absorbing cultural values, or by going to the local temple to listen to sermons or, less commonly, to learn meditation. Rather, the *phu patibat tham* goes to the library or bookstore and independently reads books, attends lectures held outside of temples, and goes to the new-fangled organized retreats.<sup>4</sup>

This is one important factor leading my informants to initially conceive of *patibat tham* as separate from daily life, and later had to make conscious efforts to integrate the two. It is also part of the reason why they felt conflicts, because their existing lives unavoidably reflected to some degree the capitalist values of the

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<sup>4</sup> In some ways, this approach calls to mind the practice of Buddhism in the West, which is also highly individualistic and external to the mainstream culture. Further research comparing *patibat tham* and Western-style Buddhist practice would certainly be interesting.



surrounding society. But when they try to integrate *patibat tham* into their everyday life, they can only do so at the level of the individual.

To inject a spiritual dimension back into the culture at large requires a wider concerted effort, at the societal level. Already various sectors of society, such as educational institutions, NGO's, and even economic institutions riding the current wave of popularity of the sufficiency economy paradigm, are making moves in this direction. While the individual *phu patibat tham* alone obviously cannot effect such a sea change, they can contribute to this wider movement. In my opinion, they ought to, as they can bring a special perspective to the table, given their first-hand experience in spiritual practice.

Until wider society is "re-spiritualized" they cannot actually integrate *patibat tham* into their lives in a truly holistic way. It can only be pseudo-holistic – in trying to live a lifestyle that is completely permeated with *patibat tham*, they currently have to dissociate from mainstream society and its values to some extent.

And no matter how much they try to dissociate, they cannot escape being a part of the "structural suffering" or suffering generated by the problematic socio-economic system underlying contemporary society. While all of my informants had a sense of social conscience, only a few reflected an awareness of this sort of suffering. Such awareness can only come with education and exposure to the concept. For instance, all my informants were already committed to "spreading dhamma" but many only conceived of it in terms of helping individuals. But if they develop a more sophisticated social conscience that includes a concern with structural suffering they could also "spread dhamma" and engage in other forms social action at a broader societal level.

Similarly, their understanding of "Wrong Livelihood" could be further complicated to include questioning of jobs in terms of how they are entangled in, and to what extent they help perpetuate, the present socio-economic system. Conversely, in choosing "Right Livelihood," more of them could also consider to what degree the job may help ameliorate it. This includes being creative about harnessing professional skills like marketing or management to serve the social good rather than private business profits. While there is a budding movement to bring this view of professional responsibility into the public discourse, it still appears very limited,

particularly in religious quarters. Only a few of my informants' spiritual teachers seem to address this point, which could explain why more of my informants did not connect their *patibat tham* to these broader issues. More support from popular monks, nuns, and lay dhamma teachers in highlighting these concerns would be of great value given their considerable public influence.

Indeed, the meaning of *patibat tham* can still be expanded further to include this dimension as well. Perhaps *patibat tham* in the widest sense requires it.

### **Transcending “Patibat Tham”**

Then again, what is actually the widest sense? The deepest sense? After all, “dhamma,” and thus “*patibat tham*,” is said to have limitless bounds and unfathomable depths. As my informants progress on the Path, they keep reaching new levels in understanding *patibat tham*, rejecting or refining their previous notion of it. “You may have thought you understood, but you later realize you really hadn’t. The more you know, the more you realize you don’t know,” they said. “Whatever I tell you now [during this interview] could change by next month,” they warned. The best I could capture, then, was a particular version of their *patibat tham*, from a particular period of time. By the time I have managed to commit it to writing, it undoubtedly has gone through many other iterations.

That is not to say that there are not certain essential elements of *patibat tham* that do stand the test of time. While the details may be continually refined by *phu patibat tham*, enduring principles and anchoring concepts can be identified and expounded on. From the extremely hazy picture I began with, I do feel I have reached greater clarity as to its various possible dimensions.

Yet, because *patibat tham* is so subtle and ever-shifting, it would be impossible to pin down exactly what it means, and pointless to try. Actually, it may be better not to define it too precisely, in order to respect its complexity and recognize the doubtless possibility for further exploration.

As I reach the demarcation point of this particular phase of exploration, I wish to remark on the imprudence of being too fixated on the term “*patibat tham*.” Not only is it simply an artificial label, the very act of imposing that label can create a

narrow view of spiritual practice. Just as maturing practitioners move beyond thinking in terms of “Buddhist practice” but more broadly in terms of “dhamma practice” (“*patibat tham*”), at a higher stage they seek to shed the term altogether. Spiritual practice is understood in a truly universal way: *patibat tham* to let go of “*patibat tham*.”