

Chapter 1



Introduction

Dhammakaya meditation has played and will continue to play an important role in three Buddhist movements in Thailand. These are the movements at Wat Paknam at Phasi Charoen, Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Phatum Thani, and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram in Rajburi. There has been growing attention paid to the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya recently,¹ but these works have paid very little attention, if any, to the Dhammakaya meditation technique from which the temple takes its name, as well as the Dhammakaya Foundation's beginnings at Wat Paknam, and reactions to Wat Phra Dhammakaya's activities. Its importance to these three movements necessitates a sound understanding of the technique, and its place in the three movements, which allows for a more complete understanding of the movements thereby allowing a more complete understanding of the situation of Thai Buddhism. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to explain the Dhammakaya meditation, its history, its similarities and dissimilarities with other

¹ Jackson, Peter, *Buddhism, Legitimation and Conflict, The Political Functions of Urban Thai Buddhism*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982., Zehner, Edwin, "Reform Symbolism of a Thai Middle-Class Sect: The Growth and Appeal of the Thammakai Movement," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, September 1990. Taylor, Jim L., "Buddhist Revitalization, Modernization, and Social Change in Contemporary Thailand," *Sojourn*, Volume 8, Number 1., "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: An Individualistic Revolution, Reform and Political Dissonance," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, March 1990, Keyes, Charles F., "Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand", *International Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1989, Apinya Fuengfusakul, "Empire of Crystal and Utopian Commune: Two Types of Contemporary Theravada Reform in Thailand," *Sojourn*, Volume 8, Number 1, Suwanna Satha-Anand, "Buddhist Struggles for Modern Relevance," *Asian Survey*, vol. XXX, no. 4, April 1990.

meditation systems, as well as the movements teaching and using it, and the significance to Thai Buddhism and Thai society.

Studying Dhammakaya Meditation, Sources and Methods

As stated earlier, there was very little information on the Dhammakaya meditation technique contained in existing articles on Wat Phra Dhammakaya. Often the information was over-simplified, and in some cases wrong. The technique was labeled novel and unique, while at the same time, similar to Tantric systems, and influenced by Mahayana beliefs.² What is also significant is that these descriptions of Tantric similarities and Mahayana influences were never explained in any of the articles. Zehner begins his description of the technique by saying "It dispensed with the breathing awareness and mental discipline exercises commonly found in introductory stages of other meditation systems."³ This is incorrect. Dhammakaya meditation incorporates breathing awareness as a way to help develop concentration.⁴ The articles describing the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya appear to have been written after having spent very little time, if any, at the temple, and rarely, if ever, participating in a meditation session. Descriptions of the technique seem to have come from second hand sources, primarily those critical of the movement and the technique.⁵ Zehner claims to be the first among Jackson, Keyes, and Taylor to write an article about Wat Phra Dhammakaya and participate in a major temple observance, and make intermittent visits between October 1987

²Jackson, pp 201-3, Taylor, 1990, pp 141-2, Zehner, pp 407-8.

³Zehner, p. 407.

⁴Phra Ajahn Maha Sermchai Jayamanggalo, *The Heart of Dhammakaya Meditation*, Bangkok: Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation, Sala Karn-prien, Wat Saket, 1991, p 47.

⁵Specifically, Praves Vasi, *Suan Mokh, Thammakai, Santi Asoke* (Suan Mokh, Thammakai, Santi Asoke), Bangkok: Folk Doctor Magazine Press, 1987, and Sathianphong Wannapok, *Suan Thang Nipphun* (Running Opposite from Nirvana), Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group, 1987.

and April 1988.⁶ He does not say how many visits he actually made, and expresses frustration at never being able to meet with the movement's leaders, rather being forced to collect data from people he calls "core participants skilled at dealing with inquisitive outsiders."⁷ This works to make the temple appear wary of inquisitive outsiders, as if they were hiding something, activities more commonly associated with a secretive cult.

My trips to the temple revealed a very different situation. My first trip was made without prior notification of any temple personnel, the day following the first day of the Magha Puja ceremonies in February 1994. At this major observance several hundred monks from Taiwan were visiting to celebrate the "Twin-temple" agreement Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the Fo Kuang Shan temple in Taiwan recently signed. The temple had cast a solid gold statue of Luang Phor Sodh the evening before, and the cast was still cooling in the middle of a field. In the midst of all this I approached an information booth to see if I might visit with someone in charge. I was put in touch with a foreign layman from the United Kingdom, who apologized for not being able to meet with me that day, and set up a meeting the following week with one of the temples top monks, Mettanando Bhikku. Following this initial meeting, we met a number of times. I also had several meetings with the Assistant Abbot, Phra Bhavanaviriyakuhn (Phadet Pongsawat) more commonly know as Phra Dhattachivo, and as with Mettanado Bhikku, he was generous with his time and I never felt as if he were trying to hide anything from me. I never met with the Abbot, Phra Sudharmayana Thera, (Chaiyaboon Sittiporn) more commonly know as Phra Dhammachaiyo, who normally resides at a Dhammakaya meditation

⁶ Zehner, pp 403-4.

⁷ Ibid., p 404.

center near Chiang Mai, and seldom visits the temple.* I was invited to participate in all temple events, including special meditation sessions in Chiang Mai, designed for foreigners interested in Dhammakaya meditation. The point I would like to establish here is that I found the both leaders and followers at the temple very open, helpful and willing to talk about any subjects, as opposed to untrusting and skilled in dealing with inquisitive outsiders.

Aims and Organization

As I felt there was a dearth of information explaining the meditation technique, as well as its importance to the movements, a concerted effort was made to gather information on the system, and how it is being taught and used at the different temples. This was started by meeting with Phra Ajahn Maha Sermchai Jayamangalo, (Sermchai Polpathanaridhi), referred to in this thesis as Phra Ajahn Sermchai. He was very helpful in providing me with any information I requested, as well as conducting meditation training in English for my benefit during regular meditation sessions at Wat Saket. This type of first-hand participation in the movements and with movement leaders appears largely absent from the works previously mentioned. It is significant, however, in better understanding the Dhammakaya movements, not only at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, but also at Wat Paknam and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram.

In addition to personal visits with personnel from all three temples, interviews and a lengthy questionnaire were also conducted in order to learn as much as possible about the meditation technique, what it offers to followers, and how they view the movement in which they are participating. Temple publications were col-

* When I inquired about this fact, I was told that he is deeply involved with performing high-level Dhammakaya meditation in order to ensure the Dhammakaya chedi project is a success.

lected, including books, periodicals, and special pamphlets, which shed a great deal of light on areas otherwise obscured. All of this was done in order to obtain the best possible understanding of the Dhammakaya meditation technique, and thereby present the most complete description of the technique, the movements utilizing it and the relevance of the information to Thai Buddhism and Thai society today.

This thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, explaining sources, previous articles and pieces written about Dhammakaya meditation or Dhammakaya movements, and providing an overview of the chapters.

Chapter two begins with a brief biographical section on the founder, or re-discoverer, of Dhammakaya meditation Luang Phor Sodh,* followed by an in depth explanation of the Dhammakaya meditation system. The explanation of the system is done first by providing an overview of the technique which describes the two-tiered nature of the system. Following this, a more technical explanation of the system is provided, in which the Dhammakaya concept is looked at from different Buddhist viewpoints. The high-level meditation system is then described to complete the explanation of the technique. As this system represents a departure from more traditional Theravada meditation techniques, a comparison is made to illustrate this fact. Although the technique represents a shift away from Theravadin meditation practices, it shares many striking similarities with Tantric meditation systems. The final sections of the chapter are spent explaining these similarities.

Chapter three explains the movements utilizing Dhammakaya meditation today. It begins with an explanation of the situation at Wat Paknam during Luang Phor Sodh's abbotship, then addresses the question of "heir to the teaching." As this chapter introduces the movements utilizing Dhammakaya meditation chrono-

* Sodh Chandassaro, who is commonly known, and referred to throughout most of this thesis as Luang Phor Sodh. He is also known as Phra Mongkol-Thepmuni, the title given to him two years before his death in 1959. He previously held the titles of Phra Mongkol Rajmuni, and Phra Bhavana-Kosolthera. Phra Ajahn Sermchai, p 10.

logically, the next movement explained is the Dhammakaya Foundation at Wat Phra Dhammakaya. As this movement has been the one most studied and written about in the past, a slightly different view is taken, and the movement is analyzed by comparing its characteristics with those of one of its major projects. In this case, the project explained is the Dhammakaya chedi. The emergence of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram is then described, followed by a section on the spreading of Dhammakaya meditation and a brief explanation of how one movement spawned two other movements, and the significance of the meditation technique to all three movements.

The final chapter provides information on the importance of understanding Dhammakaya meditation. It starts by describing briefly the followers of the different movements, beginning with Wat Paknam, and continuing chronologically to Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram. Next, the three movements are analyzed to a better understand their similarities and differences, and their directions in relation to one another, and Thai Buddhism. Finally the importance of understanding Dhammakaya meditation in Thai society is explained.