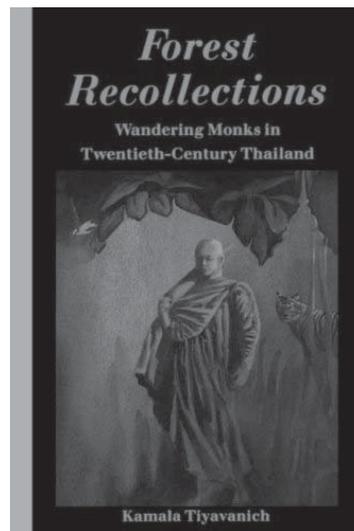


A Book Review:  
 ‘Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in  
 Twentieth - Century Thailand’



*Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand.*  
 By Kamala Tiyavanich. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997.

This book, published fourteen years ago, explains the life of Thai *tudong* or forest monks in the twentieth century. In general it is an accomplished account of forest monasticism in the North-East, explaining well the lifestyle of the monks, and the many physical and psychological problems they faced while living deep in the jungle. Important aspects of the forest life covered include how the forest tradition came into existence in Thailand (Chapter 1), how Thai monks take up the forest lifestyle and deal with problems of fear, bodily suffering, sexual desire, hardships of wandering and so on (Chapters 2-6), the monks' relationship with Sangha officials and villagers, and the conflicts they had with the Sangha administration (Chapter 10).

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The book begins with some background information, based especially on the work of previous scholars (especially J.L.Taylor)<sup>1</sup>. Each chapter is arranged in a straightforward manner, with lucid explanations devoid of academic jargon, but with Thai or Laotian words in parentheses to help the general reader with local names. More problematic are the sections dealing with King Rama IV (King Mongkut, or former Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu) and Prince Vajirañāṇavarorasa, his royal son. These sections lack sufficient detail, and it seems that the author has relied almost entirely on secondary sources, without considering the various writings of these two important figures. It follows from this that some of the author's claims regarding Mongkut and Prince Vajirañāṇavarorasa must be reconsidered.

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Tiyavanich assumes that Mongkut, founder of the Dhammayuttika Order, was concerned mainly with the study of Pāli texts, and was not very interested in meditation or local forms of Buddhism. She writes that:

Outside the influence of the modern state, people lived in a world that presumed plurality. They moved around enough – or knew kinsmen or traders who did – to understand that the land held many people whose language and customs differed from their own. They expected that the religious practices of monks would also differ. Indeed, before this century there was no standard doctrine or monastic practice. Each temple had its own customs, and each ajan (abbot or teacher) followed the disciplinary rules and monastic practices of his nikai (sect or lineage), which had its own history. Naturally the people living in the regions beyond Bangkok did not share the Siamese elite's view that the Buddhism of the Bangkok court was superior to their own. Long before the modern Thai state began to pressure them to accept its official Buddhism – this was at the turn of the century – villagers and local monks continued to follow their own centuries-old Buddhist traditions. Geographical and linguistic isolation shielded them from Bangkok's influence. (p.2-3)

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993.

Mongkut also placed greater emphasis on the study of the Pāli Canon and commentaries than on the practice of meditation, which he considered mystical. He was convinced that true religion was a matter of rational doctrine and belief. Mongkut disdained all traditions in which folk stories and parables were used to teach the dhamma and local culture was integrated with Buddhism. From his perspectives, local stories full of demons, gods, miracles, magic, rituals, and exorcism were folklore; they had nothing to do with Buddhism. (p. 6-7).

These statements ignore the complex monastic situations which prompted to found the Dhammayuttika Order, and indicate that Tiyanich has underestimated the important role played by Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu (King Mongkut) in the *tudong* tradition.<sup>2</sup> To correctly understand all this, the historical events background to King Mongkut's life must be reconsidered.

After the capital of Ayutthaya was lost to Burma in 1767, the Thai Sangha was unstable, and – especially in central Siam – monks and novices received little education in Pāli, and as a consequence were unable to follow the monastic rules of *Vinaya* properly. Even before this, Buddhism had been profoundly influenced by brahmanical elements, probably since at least the beginning of Ayutthaya period (1350-1767). This was because the first King of Ayutthaya, Uthong, was influenced by several other kingdoms in South-East Asia, especially Cambodia, in which brahmanical rites were practised. He therefore invited eight brahmins<sup>3</sup> from Varanasi of India to lead his *Abhiṣeka* Rite of the Coronation ceremony, to guide him in the organisation of brahmanical rituals, and even to introduce several brahmanical ceremonies at his Royal Court.

Given this brahmanical background, it is not surprising that several kings are supposed to have been learned in the brahmanical tradition. King Narai, for example, is said to have studied the the R̥g, Yajur, Sāma and Atharva Vedas,<sup>4</sup> and to have introduced Hindu ceremonies which

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<sup>2</sup> In my research work, produced in 2006, and funded by College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, entitled: *Prawattisat Phraphutthasatsana Nai Pratedthai Tangtae Samai Sukhotyai thueng Ratchakarn Thi Ha* (The History of Buddhism in Thailand: From Sukhothai Period up to King Chulalongkorn's Period), I explained this in detail. Unfortunately, I wrote it in Thai, as it was meant to be a handbook for undergraduates of the College.

<sup>3</sup> Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2006, pp. 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2006, p.62.

are still held today, e.g. the *Triyampa*, which marks the Brahmanical new year, and the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, as part of his royal annual ceremonies. The monks of this period who studied these ritual arts were highly respected: the personal teacher of King Narai himself – Phra Acharn Phrom (Brahmā) – was a senior monk skilled in brahmanic spells and incantations.<sup>5</sup>

Several Buddhist monks of Ayutthaya were also famous for their knowledge of spells and incantations, and many neglected the study of Buddhist texts and ignored the monastic rules. Even before Ayutthaya's defeat by the Burmese, it was recorded that King Narai defrocked thousands of monks for not being learned enough,<sup>6</sup> and probably because of improper behaviour. Although there was a mixture of Buddhism and Hinduism in South-East Asia even before the rise of the Thai kingdoms, Hindu elements were further promoted under the first King of Ayutthaya (1350-1370), who inaugurated several Brahmanical rites – such as the *Samskāra* ceremony – into the Royal Court<sup>7</sup>.

The sacking of Ayutthaya by the Burmese led to a further decline in orthodox Buddhist standards: many texts were burnt, monks and novices went without proper Pāli schooling, and ecclesiastic administration within the monasteries was weak. Since Pāli texts – then transmitted mainly in Khom or Tham scripts – were not studied seriously, monastic standards declined. Even after King Taksin (1734-1782) established a new Capital in Krung Thonburi, the country was not peaceful enough to provide suitable Pāli education for monks and novices. Before these problems could be tackled, Taksin had to install well-disciplined monks in the city, defrock those monks who had behaved improperly, and preserve the Pāli texts, many of which had been destroyed by the Burmese.

By this time, then, most monks across the country simply followed the traditions they had learned from their masters, who, in turn, had often learned neither the Pāli texts nor the proper monastic rules. The *Kod Mhai Trā Sām Duang* (Three-Sealed Law), compiled during the life of King Buddhayodfa – or King Rama I (1736-1809, ruled 1782-

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<sup>5</sup> Bodhiprashiddhinand, 2006, p.72.

<sup>6</sup> Simon de La Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p.114.

<sup>7</sup> Among the very few scholarship on influences of Hinduism-Brahmanism in the Royal Court of Thailand, see Priyawat Kuanpoonpol's article, Court Brahmins of Thailand and the celebration of the Brahmanic New Year, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 33, November 1, 21-51.

1809), the first King of the current Chakri Dynasty – contains many instances of monastic malpractice<sup>8</sup> by fake monks. Monastic impurity at this time was so widespread that the King even issued several articles in the Law to defrock these Buddhist monks. Since King Buddhayodfa was engaged in at least nine major wars, the administration of the saṅgha was extremely weak, and monastic malpractice continued into the reign of King Rama III or King Nangklao (1824-1851). In order to rectify this deterioration, Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu, before becoming King, Mongkut, established the Dhammayuttika Order.

Although Mongkut's primary purpose was to restore monastic standards, as far as I can tell from the work there is no evidence to prove that he was prejudiced against local forms of Buddhism. It would seem, in fact, that he tolerated local Buddhist forms in the North-East of Thailand as long as they did not violate the *Vinaya* rules, and had not seriously deviated from the Pāli canon. But this was difficult: even in Bangkok – the centre of Pāli studies in Thailand - there were not many monasteries which could teach Pāli to a very high standard, and so few monks had an advanced knowledge of either the Pāli texts and the *Vinaya*. Indeed, in his Pāli writings Mongkut often expresses his concern about the many 'corrupt' monks across the country, in comparison to which his group was a minority that lacked real power.<sup>9</sup> Mongkut saw that the study of Pāli texts was desperately required in order to preserve and transmit the true teaching of the Buddha.

Apart from emphasising the study of the Pāli, Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu trained several disciples to be meditation masters. Those include the famous Somdet Phra Wannarat (Thab Buddhasiri), who was skilled in *Vipassanā* and *tudong* practices, and later became Lord abbot of Wat Sommanas Vihāra. Among his *tudong* student monks were the famous monks Ven. Bandhulo and Devadhammī, both of whom played a key role in promoting Mongkut's practices in the North-East. Furthermore, having moved from Wat Samorai (Wat Rājādhivāsa) to Wat Bovoranives Vihāra, Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu established the tradition of practising

<sup>8</sup> Bodhiprasiddhinand, 2006, pp. 97-98.

<sup>9</sup> Megh Ampaicarit (ed.), *Prachum Phrarāṭchaniphon Phāsā Bāli Nai Ratchakārn Thī Sī* (A Collection of the Pāli Writings of King Mongkut), published for the Cremation Ceremony for His Holiness Somdet Phra Sangharat (Juan Uṭṭhāyi). Bangkok: Mahamakūṭa Rajavidyalaya Foundation, 1972, p. 360 (in Thai).

The Pāli text says: 'esāhi tesam laddhi amhādisānaṃ satenapi sahassenapi dubbimocanīyā, tasmā tunhī homa, yathā buddhasāsanikā kismiñ ci dese bahūhi abuddhasāsanikehi saddhiṃ dubbalā hutvā vasamānā itare saññāpetuṃ na vāyamanti upposukkā viharanti, evaṃ mayam imesamantare tītā aṭṭhakathādīsū āgatesu paccakkhesu kāraṇesu satipi itare saññāpetuṃ avāyamitvā kevalam attānaṃ sodhetvā sakapakkheya viharāma.' See p. 360.

meditation regularly, at least after the daily Pāli evening chanting. While staying there, he also developed the nearby Wat Boromnivās as a meditation centre for both monks and the laity. The two monasteries are sometimes called differently according to their location: Wat Bovoranives Vihāra was sometimes called *Wat Nai* (Inside<sup>10</sup> [the Grand Palace] Monastery), where the study of Buddhist Texts was highly emphasised, while Wat Boromnivāsa was called *Wat Nok* (Outside [the grand palace] Monastery), where meditation was more highlighted.

If Tiyanich had read the biography of King Mongkut in more detail, she would not have failed to note that Wat Bovornives Vihāra – where former Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu stayed as Abbot and spread Dhammayuttika practices – was, from the very beginning, closely related with the *tudong* monk tradition of the North-East. Indeed, perhaps the most famous *tudong* monk in Thailand was Luang Pu Mun (otherwise spelt Man) Bhūridatto – a close disciple of Luang Pu Sao Kantasīlo, a native of Ubonratchathani province – occasionally visited Wat Boromnivās in order to consult Phra Ubaligunupamacharn (Chandra Siricando). More importantly, while staying at Wat Rājādhivāsa before moving to Wat Bovornives Vihāra (where the Dhammayuttika Order was firmly established), Vajirañāṇo’s disciple Bandhulo Bhikkhu (Dee, or Nāthanbandhula: ญาณท่านพันธุละ), also a native of Ubonratchathani, was well-known for his meditative expertise and *tudong* practice, and brought his nephew, Maw, to be ordained monk as a disciple of Vajirañāṇo at Wat Bovoranives Vihāra. His nephew was given a Buddhist Pāli name as Devadhammī (in Thai he is called ญาณท่านม้าว เทวธัมม), who was also famous for his *tudong* practices, following his uncle monk.<sup>11</sup>

After Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu disrobed and became king, he asked his two former students, Ven Bandhulo and Ven Devadhammī, to return to Ubonrathchathani in order to establish a Dhammayuttika monastery (later named Wat Supaṭanārām) and to train local monks in the Dhammayuttika’s tradition. Under the guidance of both Bandhulo and Devadhammī, monks of the *laotian* (*īsān*) tradition in the North-East started to be trained in the forest tradition, as taught earlier by Vajirañāṇo Bhikkhu, i.e. by observing the *Vinaya* rules strictly, by

<sup>10</sup> ‘Inside’ and ‘outside’ here means ‘inside and outside the wall of the Royal Palace’.

<sup>11</sup> See Thidawan-Pisit Saisombat, *Tām Roy Phra Acharn Sao Kantasīlo (Following the Footsteps of Phra Acharn Sao Kantasīlo)*, Bangkok: Tender Touch, 2006, pp. 33-34; *Sanghamaggā* (The Path of the Buddhist Order), p.7 (No information about the author and date); The Buddhist Club of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, *Phra Acharn Sao Kantasīlo*, Bangkok: no date, pp. 15-16.

following the *tudong* practices after the Rains Retreat ends, and by practising meditation intensely.

Impressed by the *tudong* practices of the two Theras, Venerable Sao, who had been ordained within the Mahānikāya Order, made the decision to join the Dhammayuttika Order under the preceptorship of Phra Karu Tha Jotipālo at Wat Sri Ubon Ratanārām (Wat Sri Thong), the second Dhammayuttika monastery of Ubonratchathani. Although he was apparently convinced that only following the Dhammayuttika Order could lead him to the end of suffering, this decision was also influenced by his dissatisfaction with the Mahānikāya monks of the former local Laotian tradition at Ubonratchathani. After becoming a Dhammayuttika monk, he was trained to observe the *Vinaya* rules strictly, and achieved great fame for his *tudong* practices. One of his lay disciples was Mun, who, later, became the most famous *tudong* monk in the North-East.

Both Luang Pu Sao Kantasīlo and Luang Pu Mun Bhūridatto were the true successors of most Venerables Bandhulo and Devadhammī, who were, in turn, the successors of King Mongkut. Given these facts, Tiyavanich's belief that Mongkut considered meditation 'mystical' and less important than Pali studies is somewhat surprising.

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Despite its many virtues, then, this book creates the misleading impression of hostility between the Bangkok-based high ranking monks of the Dhammayuttika Order, and the *tudong* monks of the North-East, such as Acharn Mun Bhuridatto. As Tiyavanich states:

Throughout the first half of this century, sangha authorities considered the *thudong* practice to be inferior to Pāli studies. Thammayut Pariyat monks certainly shared this attitude. Man's experience as acting abbot of Wat Jediluang in Chiang Mai during a rains retreat in the early 1930s confirmed this prejudice. Man recalled that the Thammayut monks and novices at the wat had little desire to meditate, and were not especially taken with his teaching. (p. 265)

She also quoted Acharn Mun Bhuridatto as saying that:

No matter how hard I tried to teach them, nobody took the practice seriously. I don't understand their attitude. Even though I explained it in sermons and demonstrated it, nobody thought practising meditation was important. I kept thinking that it was a waste of time to stay here. (p. 265)

It is generally understood that monks have two 'burdens' (*dhura*): that of studying the scripture (*gantha-dhura*) and that of developing insight (*vipassanā-dhura*). Both have been equally important for Buddhism since early times, and can be likened to two wings of the same bird: studying the scriptures is essential for Buddhist monks, in order to preserve the Buddha's teachings, whereas developing insight is the aim of these teachings, this being the way for a person to finally rid himself of the most subtle mental defilements (*anusayakilesa*).

Although monks should ideally pursue both 'burdens', in practice the only essential requirement for a monk is to follow the *Vinaya* rules, and monks are free to choose their own vocation. It is not surprising that some Dhammayuttika monasteries emphasize the study of Pāli texts, and that other 'forest' monasteries are more inclined towards meditation and the *tudong* practices. That Luang Pu Mun encountered exactly this situation does not mean that there was an institutional Dhammayuttika bias against meditation.

Tiyavanich's *Forest Recollections*, therefore, presents a one-sided view of forest monasticism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand. To balance the record, more consideration must be given to the writings of both King Mongkut and Prince Monk Vajirañāṇvarorasa. It is vitally important that modern scholars consult not only the secondary sources on these of these two important figures in modern Thai Buddhism, but make full use of the primary sources. King Mongkut, in particular, produced many writings in Pāli, mostly during his monkhood, which have been published in two volumes with Thai translations by various scholars.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The two books are *Mahāmakūṭarājānussaraṇīya* (A Commemorative Volume) published in memory of King Mahāmakūṭa by the Dhammayut Community in cooperation with Mahamakūṭa Rajavidyalaya (Henceforth MR for short) in 1978 and *Prachum Phra Rājñiphon Phāsā Bālī Nai Rajkarn Thi Si* (Collections of Pāli Composition of King Rama IV, MR, Bangkok, 1972. Passages for Pāli Chanting, however, are included and published in various standard chanting books such as H.H. the Late Supreme Patriarch (Sā Pussadeva), *Suad Mon Chabab Luang*, (Thai), (*Pāli Chanting Book of Royal Edition*), MR, Bangkok, 1972; (No author), *Suad Mon Chabab Luang*, (Thai), (*Pāli Chanting Book of Royal Edition*), MR, first edition, 1880, rpr, 16th edition, 1995; Phra Nāṇavarotama

King Mongkut's works follow the Tipiṭaka closely, and show his effort to reinterpret popular non-Buddhist beliefs, as for example in the case of the court ceremonies which formely were dominantly influenced by Hinduism: details of this subject can be found in a work composed by King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V), his royal son, entitled '*Phra Rāj Phithī Sib Song Duan*' (Royal Court Ceremonies in Twelve Months), which describes monthly ceremonies in the Royal Court. A good example of Mongkut's efforts can be seen in a verse composition, the *Namokāraṭṭhakagāthā* (Eight Verses for Paying Homage to the Triple Gem), which reinterprets the sacred syllable AUM (>Om). This compound of three letters (a, u, m), believed to represent the Hindu triad of three gods (Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā respectively) was reinterpreted by Prince Mongkut as follows: *a* stands for *arahantasammāsambuddha*, *u* for *Uttamadhamma* (Supreme Dharma) and *m* for *Mahāsaṅgha* or Great Community of Noble disciples. As he puts it: *namo omātyāraddhassa ratanattyassa sādhukaṃ* (Good is the homage to the Triple gem, beginning with a short syllable 'Om').

As a consequence of King Mongkut's efforts, many Hindū practices within Thailand have declined in significance and even disappeared from his Royal court. Though the Pāli works produced by him and his contemporaries did not match up to the literary works which made Lanna the golden age of Thailand's Pāli literature, he took important steps back towards literary and scholarly excellence. The *Tipiṭaka* which, in part, perished in flames and was lost during the sack of Ayutthaya, was earnestly sought and compiled again by him with additional corrections.<sup>13</sup> Equally important was his revival of Pāli and thoughts behind his writing, which deserves more serious attention from Pāli scholars who take a keen interest in Buddhism in South-East Asia, especially the movements to reform Buddhism during his time. On this ground, his works should be re-evaluated and need a scholarly edition.

Even if editions of king Mongkut's Pāli works were published in Thai many years back, it is unfortunate that a critical edition of his complete works has not yet been made, although the *Sīmāvicaraṇa* (Explanation of the Boundary) has been carefully edited by Petra

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(Sondh Kiccakāro), *Ekathes Suad Mon* (Pāli Chanting for Specific Ceremonies), MR, first published (no date), 14th edition, MR, 1993. etc.

<sup>13</sup> Prince Damrongrajanubhab, *Kwam Song Cham (Memoirs)*, Bangkok: Samnak Nagarn Ho Samud Klang (Office of the Central Library), 1970, p.93.

Kieffer-Pultz.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps we need to wait until all the Pāli writings of Mongkut are properly edited and widely available before being able to properly appreciate his efforts to reform the Thai sangha.

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<sup>14</sup> Petra Kieffer-Pulz, (ed.), *Sīmāvicaraṇa: A Pali Letter on Monastic Boundaries*. Bangkok and Lumbini: Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation, Lumbini International Research Institute, 2011.