Chapter 13

Religious Encounters in Thailand: International Meditation Centers within Transnational Settings

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Starting in the 1990s, a small portion of the mass lay meditation movement in Thailand began to offer retreats in English for non-Thais.1 Traditionally, meditation had been taught almost exclusively within monastic institutions through close teacher-disciple relationships.2 Within its modern history, the practice has spread to Buddhist laity with the relatively new institution of the lay meditation center,3 where replicable methods of meditation allow for a large number of students to practice together at the same time. Beginning in the mid-20th century, Buddhist meditation has become a global religious practice, expanding to reach an international audience of non-Buddhists, of which the majority are Westerners. Through modern Buddhist discourses of meditation’s universalism, not only Buddhist laity but also foreign non-Buddhists could be included in the meditation retreat program. Because the practice was available for Buddhist laity and because of the global appeal and popularity of Buddhism and its meditation technique, foreign visitors also wished to participate in retreats in Thailand. When meditation teachers saw this interest from abroad, international meditation centers developed where English-speaking teachers and translators were available.

With these international meditation centers as my subject, this chapter interrogates the ways religious encounters within transnational settings both enhance and resist the circulation of religious ideas. In order to do this, this chapter will bring together ethnographic data collected from travelers, and foreign residents in Thailand who have participated in a retreat at one of Thailand’s international meditation centers. This data also includes interviews

1 The material for this chapter is based on parts of Chapters Three, Four, and Six my book on this topic, Schedneck (2015).
2 For more information on the history of the international meditation center see Chapter 2 of Schedneck (2015).
3 For a discussion of the emergence of the meditation center as an institution see Ingrid Jordt (2007).
with Thai and foreign, monastic and lay teachers, and facilitators of foreign engagement with Thai Buddhism. The chapter highlights the various ways international visitors engage with the meditation retreat, how the meditation teachers translate the retreat for this audience and what these exchanges tell us about the possibilities and limitations of circulation of religious ideas between East and West. I argue that international meditation center teachers, in some cases, attempt to cohere with the discourses of modern Buddhism and particular imaginaries of meditation. However, because of the separation and limited interaction between Thai and international meditators, it is only the meditation teachers who are circulating particular discourses of meditation back to the same group. In this way Western ideas about meditation do not reach the wider Thai Buddhist society.

Thailand’s International Meditation Centers

There are many meditation centers in Thailand with varying meditation methods, types of teachers, and diversity of physical space. Although it is difficult to estimate, Fuengfusakul approximates the number to be close to two hundred centers (Fuengfusakul 2012, 221). Only about five percent of these centers are able to host international meditators with consistent instruction in English. Although the relative numbers are small, Thailand’s international meditation centers teach us about religious encounters in this global context and help us to understand the circulation of ideas between East and West. This chapter refers to some of the most well-known and longest-standing international meditation centers in Thailand, which have hosted thousands of foreign meditators since the beginning of this trend in the 1990s.

Meditation centers in Thailand are diverse in their physical layout as well as format of the retreat process, with different sizes, types of accommodation, number of people, techniques, teachers, styles of management, course lengths and environments. Meditation centers are sometimes located within a city, while others encompass a large area in a natural environment. Some meditation centers house hundreds of lay meditators at once with little space to sleep. Others have room for a smaller number of participants who have their own houses as accommodation. Some retreat centers follow a group schedule where retreat participants arrive and depart at the same time. Yet other centers have more flexibility, allowing meditators to come and go

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4 In my research, I conducted extensive fieldwork in thirteen of the most well known of these sites for thirteen months between 2009–2010 consisting of participant-observation and interviews with over sixty meditation teachers and meditators.