Theravada Tantra - Kammathana: Escoteric Meditation in Cambodian Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism of Laos and Cambodia is a different “flavor” that the scholarly, orthodox Theravada than most westerners are familiar with. The Buddhists of Cambodia and Laos, and the Mekong-valley seem to be interested in “magic” and “superstition.”

Francois Bizot, scholar of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), described the particular form of Theravada Buddhism as practiced in the Mekong-valley, as “Tantric Theravada”.

The Cambodian tradition of Buddhism seems to have been highly influenced by the heterodox Abhayagiri monastery of Sri Lanka. This tradition had established a center of Sihalarama in Java by the eighth century, and it is from this center that monk missionaries transmitted the old tradition into Angkor. The Vimuttigama, a text from the Abhayagiri monastery, was presented by a 6th century Cambodian monk of Funanese (Mekong Delta region) in an embassy to the Emperor of china.

Buddhagosa himself, who, according to tradition passed away in Angkor, refers to secret (gulha) texts on three separate occasions in his writing. These “secret traditions” were considered orthodox, in the Mahavihara lineage. Visudimaga 115-116 for example. Buddhaghosa’s Dhammapala connects those secret texts with three basic teachings of “emptiness…taking rebirth, and the law of conditionality.”

“This initiatory and highly ritualized strand of Cambodian Theravada, with its strong emphasis on interiority, represents the defining feature of the regions religiosity, although…the impact of the dominant modernist paradigm was to relegate, marginalize, and render ‘unorthodox’ these traditional teachings and practices.” [Cambodian Buddhism, Ian Harris, p 104]

Cambodian Buddhism

Tambian describes the “tantric” mystic of Mekong-basin as a “purist virtuoso” who “brings a cosmic love for people at large” and wants to extend to them “some part of his mystic experience and psychic consequents.”

Kamala Tiyavanich speaks of keji ajans, or “magician monks”, in the Mekong River basin areas (Cambodia, Isan, and Laos) who helped people cope with spirits and manage their fears. “Many of these revered teachers followed ascetic practices, carved amulets by hand, possessed healing powers, and thus were able to persuade people to live out the dhamma. These monks were very different from present-day (magician monks) who routinely bless factory-made amulets.”

I have encountered some of these old traditions, which are still alive, and heard these monks referred to as “Hindu monks” in Cambodia, although they were obviously Theravada Buddhist monks.

Tantra, or vajrayana, moves from speculative thought to enactment of Buddhist ideas in individual life. Though the words “tantra” and “vajrayana” are unknown in Cambodian sphere, the esoteric tradition exists. Vajra
signifies absolute reality and indestructible reality in man, as opposed to the illusory. The mantra prevents the mind from going astray into fictions and verbiage, remaining aware of reality. In Cambodian Theravada Buddhism this is the synthesis of yogacara discipline, which emphasized the ultimate of mind, and madyamika, which resists any relative principle as absolute. Dealing with the inner experience, esoteric Buddhism uses highly symbolic texts to recapture the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. These traditions were found in Java, Cham, Cambodia, Issan, Sri Dhammarat.

“Francois Bizot describes the eclectic nature of Buddhism in pre-modern Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia as a congruence of Vedic Brahmanism, tantrism, and a pre-Aryan Austro-Asiatic cult of guardian spirits and protective divinities, interacting with Mon Theravada beliefs and practices, and possibly influenced by the Mulavaravastivadin, it resulted in what Bizot has characterized as “Tantric Theravada,” identified with a mystical tradition known as Yogavacara (practitioner of the spiritual discipline). The features of this tantric Theravada, at odds with the stereotypical view of classical Theravada include identifying one’s body with the qualities of the Buddha; the use of esoteric syllables and words (Dharani, mantra, yantra) to represent the identity of microcosm and macrocosm; the dharmic potency of sounds and letters; and esoteric initiation for the realization of both soteriological and mundane ends.”

The Thai ascendency in the fourteenth century introduced the Theravada reforms of Sri Lanka and the Mahavihara school of strict orthodox Buddhism. But there is a lack of uniformity in the Theravada. “Syncretism continues to define many Thai religious practices. Temple festivals begin by invoking the guardian deities of the four quarters, zenith, and nadir. Monastic ordinations are often preceded by an elaborate spirit calling (riak khwan) ceremony. Yantric tattoos and magical amulets are worn by the devout to ward of danger. Offerings are made at the shrines of deities protecting mountains passes, and elaborate altars to the Hindu god Brahma occupy a prominent place at the entrance to hotels….” [Donald Swearer, “Thailand”, Encyclopedia of Buddhism.]

Francois Bizot’s studies “contest received narratives of Theravada history in Cambodia. Bizot argues that Buddhist practice and knowledge in Cambodia before the mid-nineteenth century did not necessarily conform to the reified scholarly construction of the Theravada in terms of Pali canonical sources known as the Tripitika. His scholarship calls into question the distinctive developments of Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric form of Buddhism…Bizot links the development of contemporary Buddhism with the importation of the Dhammayute order from Siam in the mid nineteenth century. Although this expression of Buddhism eventually came to represent ‘mainstream’ Buddhist thought and indeed even ‘Khmerness’ in post-colonial Cambodia, it had simultaneous to its own rise suppressed other aspects, traditions and lineages of Buddhism, particularly those most associated with Tantric practice and esoteric forms of teacher-student transmission.” [How to Behave, Anne Hansen]

Francios Bizot wrote, in The Gate, “In the countryside one comes across strange beliefs and customs that are totally inconsistent with the Sinhalese texts. Now, all the official Buddhist literature taught in Phnom Penh is taken from the Sinhalese canon. It’s as if one Buddhism were practiced in the city capital and another in the villages. So I began to wonder about these peasant traditions and to begin with, I had to draw up a detailed list of the most unusual customs.”

“Francios Bizot, Olivier de Bernon documented a significant body of Buddhist texts that has been preserved in monastic libraries…These texts and associated Buddhist practices are apparently the remnants of non-Theravada forms of Buddhism popular throughout the region before the Theravada became dominant. The fact that the fact the texts and practices have survived well into the twentieth century suggests that it is impossible to understand the practice of Cambodian Buddhism without recognizing ‘the presence of two factions: one orthodox, coming from the official Buddhism of Sri Lanka, the other heterodox, coming from ancient traditions in India, already in place at Angkor.” [Bizot 1976; History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia, J. Marston and E. Guthrie.]

Bizot, and other scholars following his lead, refer to this as “Theravada Tantra.”

Ian Harris said, “Buddhist tantricism, consisting of highly ritualized and esoteric religious practices with a strong emphasis on activating potentialities within the practitioners’ own body, had a significant purchase on the state religion of the Angkorian period….and represents a sort of Tantric Theravada…”
Kammathana: Escoteric Meditation in Cambodian Buddhism

The yogi or yogavacara of Cambodia practiced the “hidden” (lak) or “interior way” (phluv knong). The yogavacara (esoteric or initiatory tradition of Cambodia) is a practitioner of yoga who becomes an adept of mula khammatthana (neak mula kammathana).

The modern monk-scholar practices the “exterior way” (pluv krau).

In mainstream Theravada Buddhism, the term khammatthana refers to the 40 meditation subjects authorized by the Buddha. In Cambodian tradition, however, the term “khammatthana” has a special meaning, the mastery of pluv knong. Khmer tantra operated with a theory of correspondences, letters, sounds, numbers, presented in a ritual context.

The term “mula” means the skill of using Khmer alphabet to denote Buddha’s teaching. Mula Kammatthan can be practiced in two ways: (A) the “right hand path” (phluv sdam) which leads to nibbana; (B) the “left hand path” (phluv chveng) which leads to attainment of worldly ends, such as gaining power over others.

“The work of the brah khammatthana refer to the Tripitaka in ways different from the manner employed by the modernists. The traditionalists explain nothing. They hide (what they know) and teach how to practice the spiritual life…The modernists transmit their knowledge but only speak of fruits and flowers. Of roots and stumps they say nothing.” Acher Trok Din [Harris p.96]

When Acher Trok Din speaks of the “fruits and flowers, roots and stumps” he is referring to a Cambodian esoteric meditation tradition. Maha Ghosananda also spoke of “The Bodhi Tree” of the body. The Cambodian yogavacara tradition draws correspondences between the embryo and a “fig tree with five branches.”

The human body is the “tree” of transformation, the cosmos, and the Buddha’s teaching (Dhamma) is crystallized/expressed in sound.

- Trunk = torso
- Branches = arms and legs
- Leaves = two ears
- Flower = umbilicus
- Fruit = embryo
- Roots = penis and testicles (which give rise to future generations)

The fig tree has five branches, with its roots in the infernal regions, its branches reaching into the deva-realm. The tree also represents the Dhamma: Fruits are the Tripitaka; Leaves, the ten perfections…etc…

Francois Bizot referred to this tradition in his writing. This allegorical symbol represents the human body as the physical locus of transformation the cosmos, and it expresses and crystallizes the Buddha’s teachings (Dhamma) in the form of sound. “As the human body, its trunk is the torso, its branches are the arms and legs, its leaves the two ears, its flower the umbilicus, its fruit the embryo, and its threefold root is the penis and testicles, which give rise to future generations. The fig tree with five branches is also the world tree, stretching as high as the divine deva world, and its roots in the infernal regions. The system, then, homologizes the macrocosmos to the human body. The tree is the world axis, or Mt. Sumeru, but ‘in the five aggregates of our bodily form, our head is Mt. Sumeru, our chest Mount Giri Parabat, our pelvis Mount Gijjhakuta Parabat (Vulture Peak), and two knees, the two ankles, and the two soles, the seven levels of Mount Sattaparibhand, the enclosure of Mt Sumeru. The four lakes situated at the foot of Mt Sumeru are the four elements of our bodily form.” [Bizot 1976.]

“The tree also occurs in another allegory of the spiritual path. The twins Nan Cittakumara and Nor Cittakumari
represent the spirit of *yogavacara*. [Nan Cittakumara and Nan Cittakumari represent respectively the mind (*citta*) and mental factors (*cetasika*). As such they also denote the psycho-physical being in the intermediate states between two existences.] They take leave of Yama, the god of death, to seek birth in the rose-apple land (*Jambudvipa*, India), but they get lost on the way. While they lament their predicament, a god in the form of a man encourages them to search for a jewel collected the birth globe (*tuong kamnot*), or a crystal globe (*tuonhg kaev*), hidden in a fig tree with five branches. The two children make supplication to the deity and begin their quest. The crystal globe is guarded by Indriy birds (sense faculties), but its possession will confer great happiness, for it is in essence the three letters “ma,” “a,” and “u” which make up the sacred syllable “Om.” These three letters are also the “noble triple dhamma” (*preah dhammatrai*); they correspond to the three sections of Tripitaka. In other words, the twins must create a new body out of the elements of Buddha’s teaching. This new dhamma body (*dharmakaya*) is the key to Nibbana.

In some of his later writing Bizot sees parallels between this initiatory body and the Mahayana doctrine of the Tathagata (*tathatatagarbha*).

**Kasina**

Kasina meditation are part of the meditation tradition. The word *kasina* means “total field.” And includes the ten meditation on earth, water, wind, fire, blue, yellow, red, white, space (*akasha*) and consciousness (*vijnana*). In this process, the mind is exclusively, and with complete clarity, filled with the object and finally becomes one with it (Samadhi).

Samadhi is “unified mind” collected in a single object through gradual calming of mental activity. The consciousness of the subject becomes one with the object.

This state of consciousness is often called “one pointed concentration”; “this expression is misleading however, because it calls up the image of the mind “directed” at one point.

Samadhi is neither a straining concentration on one point, nor is the mind directed from here (subject) to there (object), which would be a dualistic experience. The ability to attain Samadhi is a precondition for absorption/jhana.

[Vipassana: the three super mundane types of Samadhi are distinguished that have as their goal emptiness, the state of no characteristics, and freedom from attachment to the object, and the attainment of Nibbana. Any other Samadhi, even in the highest stages of jhana, are considered worldly.]

Kasina meditations are associated with magical powers (*iddhi*) in Theravada Buddhism of Cambodia. Cambodian Buddhism sees meditation practice in cosmological terms. Stanley Tambia describes the correlation/matrix of Buddhist cosmology and the meditation states. These are outlined in *Visuddhimagga* chapters 13 and 14. These practices develop the three-knowledges of “divine eye” and “passing and reappearance of things” to the periodic creation and dissolution of the cosmos and the world cycles of the eons of time.

Meditation ascends from *rupa* (material) to *arupa* (immaterial) states of consciousness: From access to neighborhood concentration, to absorption concentration, the first *jhana*.

Then the *arupa*/formless begins at fifth *jhana* of empty space. Iddhi-powers can come only after the 4th *jhana*. The meditator develops a spiritual potency, charismatic quality, or “magical power” known as *saksit*.

The forest monk, or traveling masters (*lok thudong*) attained potency (*saksit*) and knowledge (*vijja*), and were able to influence and benefit others. The adept must have not only rational knowledge, but be *attained*, i.e. be transformed by that knowledge, be virtuous by observing the Buddhist precepts. The adept maintains balance between mind and external objects (equanimity, equilibrium). He is able to embody, incarnate, Enlightenment.