

Aspects of Esoteric Southern Buddhism

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This paper is concerned with a relatively little known form of Buddhism, now found mainly in South-East Asia. There is a surprisingly widespread notion that Theravāda Buddhism is, at least doctrinally, a rather uniform, if not monolithic, type of Buddhism. This is certainly a mistaken impression; so in the first part of this paper I shall begin by attempting to outline briefly some aspects of the historical diversity of this type of Buddhism and then go on to survey the various trends of twentieth century and contemporary Theravāda Buddhism as different scholars have described them. Having established something of the nature of this in fact rather varied history, I shall then discuss the historical origins of the specific tradition which I shall call Esoteric Buddhism and which some other scholars refer to as Tantric Theravāda. In the second part of the paper I survey certain of the particular ideas of this type of Buddhism, giving passages from texts which adopt this approach.

Part One

Historical roots

The name Theravāda strictly refers to a branch of the Buddhist *saṅgha* which adheres to a version of the monastic rules deriving from the second century after the Buddha's *parinibbāna* and claiming to be the original teaching (*theravāda*), later understood as 'doctrine of the Elders'. Since the alternative (more conservative) version of the Mahāsaṅghikas ceased to be used in the late mediæval period (probably in Nepal), the monastic traditions deriving from Tibet and China are properly speaking also Theravādin, or at least belong to traditions which were once Theravādin. This usage is quite comparable to such terms as 'Catholic' or 'Orthodox' in the history of Christianity. (Both parties would of course claim to be both

orthodox and catholic.) So for the most part I shall use the more satisfactory (and neutral) geographical designation of Southern Buddhism.

This reminder of the historical origins of Southern Buddhism serves to recall the considerable extension of this tradition in both space and time. It is the religious tradition of the majority in the present-day countries of Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Laos and Thailand (Siam) with smaller populations in geographically contiguous areas of Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia and Vietnam. In total numbers the Buddhist population amounts to over 120 million people in this homeland area, not counting a few millions in the recent missionary outreach, mainly in India and Indonesia and among Chinese diaspora populations but also in smaller numbers in Europe, the Americas and Australasia.

In much of this homeland area Buddhism has quite ancient roots. This is most obviously the case with Ceylon which archæological data suggests was colonized from northern India around the sixth century BC, probably as part of a more general process in which urban settlements were extended southwards from the Gangetic area by colonisation.¹ The recent discovery at Anurādhapura of Brahmi inscriptions which appear to date from a century or two before the reign of the Emperor Asoka in the third century BC indicates close contact with cultural developments in the north.² We may then suspect that Buddhism had already reached the island and made some headway before its official introduction in the third century. Normally this kind of royal acceptance is likely to follow after a degree of prior penetration among the general population has already taken place. At a slightly later date the widespread nature of the Buddhist presence is well-evidenced by the archæological discovery of some hundreds of cave sites for monastic practice, scattered over a large part of the island.

Buddhism also has ancient roots in other areas of its present geographical outreach. Tradition in fact attributes to the Emperor Asoka missions to Suvāṇṇabhūmi 'the Gold Country' – this must be either a particular location in Southeast Asia or a general term for the whole area. Scholarship has generally rejected the historicity of these accounts, perhaps rightly; however, given the level of sea-born trade and other contacts they cannot be wholly ruled out. Future archæological research may yet provide evidence of them. Indeed it is clear from the archæological discoveries at Beikthano and elsewhere that the up-country Pyu people had obtained technical innovations directly or indirectly from Mauryan India. At present there is little firm evidence of cultural importations in the period from around the third century BC to the second century AD. Caution must be exercised here, however, since it is possible that Mauryan-style Buddhism would in any case have left little in the way of material remains.

In any case it is probable that forms of Buddhism using some kind of Middle Indian (Pali or closely related) were present among the Pyu and Mon peoples of present-day Burma and Thailand by the second century

AD and even perhaps somewhat earlier.³ Most probably Buddhist traditions were introduced there from Ceylon or South India together with a form of Brahmī writing in the early centuries AD. It is likely that this would have been a form or forms of the Vibhajjavādin tradition current in Ceylon and the Tamil country. This would be a pre-Buddhaghosa form and not necessarily exclusively of the orthodox Mahāvihāra school.

Indeed it is clear from both literature and archæology that throughout the first millennium AD. other schools and traditions of Buddhism were present in Ceylon itself. In particular the important and at times numerically stronger⁴ Abhayagiri school, while preserving a slightly divergent recension of the Pali scriptures, seems to have also studied North Indian Sanskrit literature, especially that of the Mahāyāna and later also that of the Mantrayāna. Archæological discoveries of Sanskrit texts, statues of *bodhisattvas* and various cult objects make this reasonably certain. Indeed some Mahāyānist practices continued until relatively recent times with a few remnants still current today.⁵

A similar picture emerges for Lower Burma in the mid-first millennium. Hence the presence of Sanskrit materials and Mahāyāna cult objects does not necessarily indicate the presence of Sarvāstivādin or other schools. It could equally be accounted for by the presence of a branch of the Abhayagiri tradition or some similar Pali-based school open to developments on the Indian subcontinent. In either case we could expect traditions and practices from diverse sources to be handed down to posterity. In fact even the orthodox Mahāvihāra school incorporates a good deal of material of North Indian origin in its little-studied later commentarial literature.⁶ However, at a later period, as the evidence from Pagán clearly shows, distinct influences from the predominantly tantric and Sarvāstivādin Pāla Buddhism of Eastern India were certainly present in Burma.⁷

Looking more widely, there is no doubt of the presence of Sanskrit-based schools of Buddhism in Indo-China, and in some parts of present-day Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. We can then be sure that South-East Asia received a rich and varied heritage of Buddhist traditions from its own ancient beginnings, from later developments in India and equally from a plural situation in Ceylon.

Varieties of Southern Buddhism

There has in fact been considerable discussion among scholars of differing trends and tendencies in the Southern Buddhist countries. We cannot summarize the whole literature here, but some key points must be mentioned. First of all, the distinction between traditional and innovative, modernizing forms of Buddhism was already known to scholarship in the late nineteenth century. In 1962 Heinz Bechert adopted the term 'Buddhist

modernism' to describe the latter, offering (in 1964) a (non-exhaustive) list of twelve main characteristics. In 1970 Gananath Obeyesekere coined the memorable expression 'Protestant Buddhism'. This has been preferred by some scholars, but I must confess to finding it slightly tacky.

It is of course clear that there is no such thing as a monolithic movement of Buddhist modernism. Some of the tendencies classified under this heading have clearly been endemic in Buddhist history. For this reason, writing in 1984, I preferred to speak of three important trends, variously combined with traditionalism: modernism, reformism and ultimatism. By modernism I meant to indicate both institutional change to accommodate new social and economic circumstances and the adoption of concepts and practices influential in the modern world. Reformism on the other hand is the attempt rather to restore an earlier, ideal state of Buddhism in general and the *saṅgha* in particular. This is hardly something new – indeed it is probably as old as the formation of the Theravāda itself. A new element is, however, introduced through awareness of modern historical criticism, which differentiates more sharply the various strata of the tradition. The third trend, ultimatism, is the tendency to focus on the higher aspects of Buddhist practice and neglect traditional preliminary practices and outward forms. It too is a perennial in the history of Buddhism.

More recently still George Bond has distinguished three new developments alongside and partly stemming from Protestant Buddhism. The first of these and certainly the most important is Neotraditionalism, understood as a return to traditional ways with a minimal accommodation to the needs of the modern situation. The other two are the Insight meditation movement and moves towards an emphasis on social action.

The pace of change has, however, accelerated greatly in the last few decades with the result that scholars are now beginning to speak of Post-Protestant Buddhism (and perhaps even Post-modernist Buddhism?). The former term has been adopted by Obeyesekere and Gombrich to describe what they see as radical changes in recent decades in Sri Lanka. They characterise these as an infiltration of devotional religiosity and magical practices.⁸

In a recent paper Bechert has surveyed ten major new trends in contemporary Buddhism. I list them briefly in slightly amended form:

1. The Buddhist contribution to the world-wide so-called 'green' movement;
2. A reaction against Buddhist nationalism;
3. Reassertion of the teachings and values of traditional Buddhism;
4. Radical return to the roots of Buddhism (e.g. Santi Asoke);
5. Renewal of the ideals of the 'forest-dwelling' monks;
6. Revival of *samatha* meditation;
7. Revival of ritualism;

8. Syncretism with various other Buddhist traditions;
9. A tendency towards 'remythologization';
10. Reassertion of women's rights.⁹

The fourth of these is a form of what I call ultimatism. The majority of the others could be classified as either Neotraditionalism (3;7;9) or as a further development of tendencies long present in Buddhist modernism (1;8;10). Some contain elements of both these (5;6).

One other important cause of change is the movement of ideas and practices around the different Southern Buddhist countries. This is clearly very old and can sometimes be circular. Note the way in which the monastic ordination was restored to Ceylon from Burma under Vijayabāhu at the end of the eleventh century, only to be exported to both Burma and Thailand on various subsequent occasions, restored again from Thailand in the eighteenth century and imported several times from Burma in the nineteenth century. There could easily have been other occasions which we do not know about. Similar movements have clearly occurred both with texts and with ritual and meditation practices. We must then bear in mind that the study of individual Buddhist countries in isolation could be misleading.

Nor is this the only problem that could arise from the process of study itself. Some of the perception of change is clearly a result of the greatly increased numbers of scholars studying various aspects of Southern Buddhism. Many of these tendencies have probably been present, especially in South-East Asia, for a very long time, simply coming into fashion and going out of fashion at intervals. Ceylon on the other hand may be something of a special case, as Buddhism on the island appears to have passed through a kind of genetic bottleneck under Hindu and Christian rule in the late mediæval and early modern period, particularly as regards the Buddhism of the élite.

The origins of Esotericism

The above discussion has directed our attention away from the background practices of traditional Buddhism. In fact even this shows a great deal of variety, incorporating and preserving elements from many different sources. Given the long historical background mentioned above this should not be surprising. It is clear too that an elaborate and varied interface with popular deity cults has been the norm for almost all forms of Buddhism, since at least the time of Asoka and quite probably earlier.

Moreover, in traditional Southern Buddhism a rich ceremonial and elaborate ritualism has also been the norm for a very long time. Much of it goes back to the last centuries of the Anurādhapura kingdom in Ceylon and no doubt to a similar date elsewhere. Some at least is pre-Buddhaghosa,

with apotropaic elements deriving from the Canon itself.¹⁰ This ritualism is sometimes attributed to Mahāyāna influences, but may equally be derived from those elements of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism which underlie the development of Mahāyāna. Similar problems arise if it is attributed to Hindu influences – it may equally have its source in the cult of the deities which was certainly a normal part of the life of lay supporters of the Buddhist *saṅgha* since the very beginnings of Buddhism. Of course, this is not to dispute the existence of many elements imported from Mahāyāna and Hinduism at a later date. Rather, it is to suggest that they could be introduced precisely because they fitted well with practices already current.

What I am concerned with here is a specific form of Southern Buddhism which I call Esoteric Buddhism. Let me first make clear that this is not the same as the more general practices of a magical kind which are as endemic in the Southern Buddhist countries as they were in Europe until quite recent times – in their local form involving the use of *yantra* or *mantra* and/or ritual for purposes of protection, healing, harming, empowering and general assistance. Nor is it the same as the equally endemic trance-based ecstatic and mediumistic practices used for similar purposes.

These are phenomena which are widespread in agricultural societies the world over. Gombrich and Obeyesekere draw attention to the way in which they have recently invaded the urban milieu in Sri Lanka. Similar phenomena can be seen in Bangkok. It should be noted, however, that this can itself be seen as an aspect of Buddhist modernism, a tendency which often in practice amounts to Europeanisation. I have myself seen European spiritualist literature displayed at centres for spirit-mediumship in Bangkok. More generally the last thirty years has seen produced in both Europe and North America a large body of occult literature of various kinds. Inevitably such works have an influence in Asia; it is precisely the urban middle class which is most exposed to them. Equally, young people studying abroad have met such ideas and practices.

Returning to esoteric Buddhism, what I am referring to is a type of Southern Buddhism which links magical and ritual practices to a theoretical systematisation of the Buddhist path itself. Of course the distinction I have made is in part an artificial one. Popular magic and ritual is on the one hand the raw material of esoteric Buddhism, while on the other we see rituals and mantras derived from esoteric Buddhism widely used at a popular level. A growing tendency since the mid-nineteenth century has been pressure from reformist groups (often supported by modernizing governments) to remove elements identified with esoteric Buddhism from monastic practice, but there is some evidence to suggest that it was a widely accepted part of normative Southern Buddhism before the nineteenth century.

Research in this area has been spearheaded by the work of F. Bizot, based originally on contacts with the still living form of this tradition in

Cambodia. He has collected a number of manuscript works of this kind and translated some of this material into French. It is not yet entirely clear where this literature fits in the overall history of Southern Buddhism, but Bizot has, as John Strong puts it:

... managed to show that, where many had once seen only "corruptions" or "popular aberrations", there may in fact be found a genuine tradition, complete with its own history, ideology, ritual and soteriological endeavours.¹¹

At present there is no agreed terminology to designate this material. Bizot tended originally to speak of the unreformed Mahānikāya tradition and more recently of non-Mahāvihāravāsin currents. Bechert seems to prefer to speak of 'tantric Theravāda', a term also sometimes used by Bizot.

Bizot sees the origins of this tradition in the ancient Buddhism of the Mon. This may well be correct, but still leaves the problem of the ultimate source. There are at least five possibilities. It is perhaps useful to look at these:

1. *The Mantrayāna Buddhism of the later Indian Mahāyāna.*

This could be either a direct import from Bengal or via the Mantrayāna traditions which were at some points influential in, for example, Indochina and Java. The objection to this is well-indicated by Bechert:

There is not the slightest hint at the influence of any Mahayanistic thought nor are there any traces of the terminology of those forms of tantric Buddhism which are known to have existed in India. In terms of its doctrinal background, this "tantric Theravāda" is based on the scriptures of Theravāda in Pali exclusively. The followers of this tantric Theravāda, however, discover a deeper meaning behind the obvious one in the doctrines and texts of the Theravādins.¹²

2. *Influences from Śaivite traditions formerly current in Cambodia and elsewhere.*

The objection to this is similar. There are a few concepts which perhaps derive from brahmanical tantric traditions. Notably the terms for some of the inner channels within the body seem to be Pali versions of those used in various Hindu traditions. Overall, however, the resemblances do not seem very great.

3. *A home-grown product which developed in Southeast Asia.*

Bechert has recently put forward this view:

It seems that the esoteric teaching of tantric Theravāda originated when new methods of concentration and psychic cultivation which became known under the name of "tantra" in India spread over the whole world of Indian religion... . At that time Buddhism in mainland India was predominantly Mahāyāna, and thus tantric Buddhism arose on the basis of Mahayanism there. The Theravāda communities of Southeast Asia, however, have largely

remained Hinayanistic. Thus, the new methods were adapted to Hinayanistic Theravāda and the terminology of Mahayanistic Tantrism including the use of the word tantra was avoided.¹³

This hypothesis would certainly account for the emergence of esotericism in Southern Buddhism and even possibly imply a fairly ancient date for this. There are other possibilities:

4. *A product of the Abhayagiri school in Ceylon.*

A similar process to the above might have taken place among the non-Mahāvihāra schools in Ceylon or among the followers of that school in mainland India. Unfortunately it has not so far proven possible to identify material which is clearly of this origin.¹⁴ Moreover, the Abhayagiri school in Ceylon seems to have adopted Mahāyāna teachings and their Sanskrit literature without inhibition.

5. *A product of the Mahāvihāra tradition.*

We cannot as yet rule out the possibility of a development within the bounds of the orthodox tradition itself. Certainly of all schools this was the one most attached to the Pali language and the use of Pali terms to derive *mantras* is a strong feature of these Esoteric Southern Buddhist texts. Such a development could have occurred at various points in the history of the Mahāvihāra tradition. Indeed it might do much to explain that tradition's successful resistance to the trends which led to the demise of most other forms of Indian Buddhism.

Buddhaghosa mentions secret texts (*gūḥhagantham*) in three of his works, in the context of teachings which will not be received from a teacher if one does not pay proper respect.¹⁵ The author of the *Abhidhamma* commentary and Upasena (c. 500 AD) refer to such secret texts, while discussing stinginess as to teaching (*dhamma-macchariya*).¹⁶ There are also references to various texts prefixed by the appellation 'secret', but these were certainly considered heterodox.¹⁷ The word *gūḥha* can hardly admit of any interpretation other than secret.¹⁸ (*Gantha* of course does not necessarily refer to written texts.) So it is likely that trends towards esotericism were already developing before the fifth century AD. There is obviously no way of knowing for certain the content of Buddhaghosa's secret texts, but it is highly significant that the idea of such works was present and the very existence of the term could easily have been sufficient to open the door to an esoteric interpretation.

We may speculate that the content of these is likely to be similar to the meditation manual which was found in Central Asia and subsequently translated into German by Dieter Schlingloff.¹⁹ Although this is presumably of (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin origin, it is very much based upon the application of visualization techniques to the traditional topics for meditation. It is not Mahāyānist, although it could be seen as tending towards the Mahāyāna.

Alexander Soper drew attention to various works preserved in Chinese with a similar orientation towards visualization.²⁰ For our present purposes it is significant that the *Apadāna*, a late canonical Pali work, already contains a marked tendency towards visualization.

Dhammapāla, closely followed by Sāriputta, the twelfth century commentator, explains Buddhaghosa's secret texts as: "Secret texts expound emptiness [and] are connected with the truths, the taking rebirth (*paṭisandhu*) of beings and [the law of] conditionality".²¹ The mention of the taking rebirth of beings is interesting; in the *mahāṭīkā* to the *Visuddhimagga*, also attributed to Dhammapāla, we find reference to the other items but not to this. Instead Dhammapāla refers there to the item of *kammaṭṭhānaganthaṃ*.²² Since the *ṭīkā* writers normally stay rather close to one another, this is likely to be a deliberate change. It may imply that he considered the notions of *kammaṭṭhāna* and taking rebirth of beings as equivalent in the context of 'secret texts'. It is tempting to suggest that he knew of an esoteric tradition of the *kammaṭṭhāna* (spiritual path,²³ in this context) concerned especially with the process of rebirth. The material discovered by Bizot could certainly be so described.²⁴

If this tradition was known to Dhammapāla it perhaps tells us a little about its origins. Clearly it was accepted by him as orthodox, since he is prepared to connect it with the by then long-established notion of the 'secret texts' to be taught to the meditation pupil. Unfortunately the date and even the number of Dhammapālas is somewhat debatable.²⁵ Lily de Silva has, however, established that by the twelfth century a single Dhammapāla was believed to be the author of most of the works traditionally attributed to him.²⁶ H. Saddhātissa has advanced arguments which go far to identify the *Dāṭhānāga* mentioned in the introduction to the *mahāṭīkā* to the *Visuddhimagga* with a tenth century figure.²⁷ It is likely then that we are here dealing with a writer or writers of the late tenth century, probably based in South India rather than Ceylon, but in close contact with the Mahāvihāra tradition.

If such an interpretation did develop in Ceylon or South India, this would most probably have occurred as part of the general growth of tantric tendencies in Indian religion, as Bechert has suggested. Perhaps the most likely period for such a development in Ceylon would be between the sixth and the ninth centuries. At present this is definitely a possibility, but it is certainly not yet conclusively established.

Which of these five alternatives is correct? I do not think this question can be answered at the present time. Indeed they are far from mutually exclusive. It is quite possible that present-day esoteric Buddhism contains ideas and practices deriving from more than one of these sources. Nevertheless it is certainly premature to assume that it has its origins in unorthodox circles.

Part Two

Nature of Esoteric Buddhism

In the second part of this paper I shall present some of the principal ideas of esoteric Buddhism as accessible at the present time. Let me begin with a quotation to set the tone.

The tree grows as high as is *nibbāna*.
 Its roots of crystal
 number twenty six.
 Set with diamonds is the precious trunk
 which unfolds beyond
 the four continents.
 The first branches,
 like six marvellous stars,
 subdivide into nine smaller branches
 whose thick foliage
 very rarely
 withers.
 The upper branches,
 which number sixteen,
 with leaves that are
 close-set and evergreen,
 carry fruit that
 last long before they fall.
 The succeeding branches
 — there are nine most beautiful —
 are very thick [with foliage]
 of leaves, some old, some new,
 which, when their time has come,
 fall one by one.
 From the midst of the branching
 which separates many times
 in countless forkings
 come forth four healing branches,
 a permanent refuge
 which protects all beings.
 These are the four requisites (*paccaya*)
 of man today,
 the constant source of protection
 which spreads good fortune,
 happiness and success.
 They bear leaves, flowers and fruit
 which ripen and fall

in the network of the world,
and transform [on reaching] the ground
to bring about the birth of figtrees
which possess five branches.
An *indriya* [bird] keeps guard
upon each of these five branches
so as to devour human beings.

Such is the search for the crystal spheres, the fruits and flowers of the figtree.²⁸

Here we meet already the search for the crystal sphere to be found in the figtree with five branches, i.e. our body with its five senses. This is somehow connected with a cosmic tree which extends beyond the four continents and reaches to *nibbāna*.

Perhaps this is enough to show already that this kind of Buddhist esotericism is about mapping worlds, both visible and invisible ones.²⁹ Indeed the wider context of which it reminds one is a type of mysticism which I shall call *tantra-kabbalistic* for the purposes of this article. By this I mean a form of mysticism which utilizes a rather elaborate map of correspondences between the human body, the cosmos and some kind of higher reality or knowledge. In the process it draws on the full resources of the widely-dispersed traditions of magic and the occult – letter, sound and number symbolism together with the use of structured patterns of shape or gesture. Often these are applied in ritual. Typically too this is linked with the spiritual practice of one of the higher religions in a manner which integrates the system of correspondences with a model of the spiritual path and with various modes of spiritual practice. I do not mean to imply that this form of mysticism is only to be found in the Jewish Kabbalah or in Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. Similar traditions are certainly to be found within Taoism and Islam, for example. I simply wish to take Tantra and the Classical Kabbalah as loosely paradigmatic. Needless to say, each such tradition has its own unique features.

Let me now try to illustrate some of the above features by means of quotations, mainly but not entirely, translated from the French of François Bizot.

1. *Correspondences with the body*

1. The fig-tree is first of all the trunk.
2. Its branches are the two arms and the two legs.
3. Its leaves are the two ears.
4. The flower of the fig-tree is the umbilical cord.
5. Its fruit is the child established in the womb.
6. Its roots are the three [parts]³⁰ of the male sex organ which contain the generations to come – that is to say, the precious water which flows and gives birth in the realm with seven crystal walls. Hide so that no one may see.³¹

2. *Correspondence with the cosmos*

Herewith some passages taken from another text (with omissions):

The land of the Rose-apple tree

It is located to the south of holy Mount Sumeru. Around Mount Sumeru is situated first Mount Giri, then Mount Vulture Peak and lastly the seven ramparts of Mount Sevenfold Ring.

Mount Sumeru

In the five aggregates of our bodily form, our head is Mount Sumeru; our chest Mount Giri; our pelvis Mount Vulture Peak; the two knees, the two ankles and the two soles, the seven stages of Mount Sevenfold Ring, the ramparts of Mount Meru. The four lakes situated at the foot of Mount Sumeru are the four elements in our bodily form.

The figtree

The five aggregates of our form are called the figtree. That which grows up in the land of the Rose-apple tree is the two Children of the Heart³² who are reborn in the maternal womb.³³

Here we see the traditional geography centred on Mount Meru now linked to the system of correspondences. The form of the figtree, here and elsewhere associated with the five aggregates and the four (or five) elements, is used for this purpose.

Another passage:

“O Children of the Heart! In that place there is a fig tree with each of its fruits concealing a precious crystal sphere. It casts a delicious scent over countless world spheres. This is the holy³⁴ Dhamma. The crystal sphere placed in the flowers of the fig tree – magnificent and glorious – this is the holy Buddha. The fig tree has four long branches, which extend in the four directions beyond the limits of the world sphere. Its roots extend downwards as far as the lightless Unending (*avīci*) hell. Its topmost spike reaches to the Great Brahma realm of the Eldest *devas*.³⁵

In this second case the vertical cosmology of the heaven realms and hell worlds is made use of in a similar way.

3. *Correspondence with higher knowledge*

A PĀ MA CU PA — this is the quintessence of the five books of the holy *Vinaya*.

DI MAM SAM AM U³⁶ — this is the quintessence of the five books of the holy *Suttanta*.

SAM VI DHĀ PU KA YA PA — this is the quintessence of the seven books of the holy *Abhidhamma*.

A is the holy *Ādikamma*; PĀ is the holy *Pācittiya*; MA is the holy *Mahāvagga*; CU is the holy *Cūlavagga*; PA is the holy *Parivāra*. These are the names of the holy *Vinaya*.

DI is the holy *Dīghanikāya*; MAM is the holy *Majjhimanikāya*; SAM is the holy *Samyuttanikāya*; AM is the holy *Aṅguttaranikāya*; U is the holy *Khuddakanikāya*. These are the names of the five books of the holy *Suttanta*.

SAM is the holy *Saṅgaṇī*; VI is the holy *Vibhaṅga*; DHĀ is the holy *Dhātukathā*; PU is the holy *Puggalapaññatti*; KA is the holy *Kathāvatthu*; YA is the holy *Yamaka*; PA is the holy *Mahāpaṭṭhāna*. These are the names of the seven books of the holy *Abhidhamma*.

MA — i.e. *passāsa*, breathing expels and draws in, first *jhāna*;³⁷

A — i.e. *assāsa*, absence of breathing, second *jhāna*;

U — i.e. *nissāsa*, breathing expels, third *jhāna*.³⁸

The connexion made now is with the constituent parts of the Pali Canon — the vehicle of the Buddha word itself. This can be, and is, linked to the idea of developing a *dhammakāya* or body of Dhamma.³⁹

In the *Vimuttimaggadassana*, a Pali text preserved in Ceylon,⁴⁰ we have the syllables of *arahaṃ* linked with the three treasures (*ratana*) as follows:

A — Buddha RA — Saṅgha HAM — Dhamma.⁴¹

The same passage then goes on to relate *assāsa* to *Sutta-piṭaka*, *passāsa* to *Vinaya* and *nissāsa* to *Abhidhamma*.⁴²

4. Letter and number symbolism

9. Add together the virtues of the mother and father, which makes thirty-three. This then is called the thirty-three letters which create all human beings.
10. Add the thirty-three letters to the five aggregates, and one obtains the thirty-eight virtues of the holy Dhamma. This is the holy Dhamma in person.
11. Take NA MO BU DDHĀ YA —
 NA, the twelve virtues of the mother;
 MO, the twenty-one virtues of the father;
 BU, the six virtues of the king;
 DDHĀ, the seven virtues of the family;
 YA, the ten virtues of the teacher.

These are the five aggregates which give the fifty-six virtues of the holy Buddha. This is the holy Buddha in person.

12. Combine the three: *passāsa*, *assāsa* and *missāsa*, with SAM VI DDHĀ PU KA YA PA and with the four elements NA MA A U. One obtains the fourteen virtues of the holy *saṅgha*. This is the holy *saṅgha* in person.
13. Adding all of these together gives 108.
14. This is found in our body.
15. This is that which all noble sons, all people, all men, must seek to find and understand completely clearly.⁴³

Obviously this passage could be discussed at great length. For present purposes it suffices to note two aspects. Firstly the use of the number thirty-three seems to be deliberately intended to reinforce correspondences. It is of course the number of the deities in the second heaven (cp. also the Burmese thirty-seven Nats⁴⁴) and seems to have led to the expansion of the traditional number for the parts of the body from thirty-two to thirty-three.⁴⁵ This is also connected to a version of the Pali alphabet with thirty-three letters. It could also be related to the thirty-two marks of a great man (*mahāpurisalakkhaṇa*).

Secondly the overall aim of the passage is to link the figtree to the virtues (*guṇa*) of the Triple Gem. To illustrate, fifty-six is the number of the syllables of the *itipiso*, often in fact referred to as the *Buddhaguṇa* – an extremely widely used formula in ritual, protective and meditative contexts. The overall figure of 108 is the commonest number of beads in a rosary as used in Southern Buddhism and indeed elsewhere. It may also have astrological links as it is the number of *pādas* in the yearly cycle.⁴⁶

5. *Ritual*

It is difficult to select a short passage to convey adequately the ritual aspects of Southern Buddhist esotericism, since ritual texts tend not to be very readable as coherent pieces. Suffice it to say that chants and practices which derive from this tradition seem to be widespread at a popular level in Thailand and Cambodia and probably elsewhere. Elaborate forms of ritual are of course typical of traditional forms of Southern Buddhism. In the past they seem to have contained a strong esoteric element, although some of this has been removed as a result of recent reforms. Bizot has made a substantial study of the texts associated with one form of ritual performed for various purposes including the prolonging of life.⁴⁷

6. *Application in daily life*

Whenever it is necessary to undertake a journey of some kind, take three strides. Crouch down on the heels and recite:

“MA is the holy *Vinaya*; A is the holy *Abhidhamma*; U is the holy *Suttanta*.

MA *dukkhaṃ* — *sivaṃ nibbānaṃ*.

A *aniccaṃ* — *sotabbaṃ nibbānaṃ*.

U *anattā* — *nirodhaṃ nibbānaṃ*.”⁴⁸

Concentrate upon that. Fasten *nissāsa* in the heart. When *nissāsa* penetrates, one obtains cessation.⁴⁹

This extract usefully demonstrates the thin line in this kind of religious tradition between spirituality and superstition. Note the use of syllables together with attributions to the *tipiṭaka*. The three syllables, although obviously related to the Vedic AUM = OM, are commonly derived in Thailand from a Pali stanza⁵⁰:

Arahaṃ sammāsambuddho / Uttamadharmamajjhagū //

Mahāsaṅghaṃ pabodheti / icc eva ratanattayaṃ //

Yet we have here direct reference to the three signs (*anicca*, etc.) of insight meditation as well as to the embryonic breathing (*nissāsa*) of the esoteric tradition. This brings us to:

7. *Spiritual practice : meditation methods*

The meditation methods of Buddhist esotericism have a strongly *mantric* component, although breathing techniques and visualisation also have an important role. There has been a tendency in scholarship to regard the repetition of syllables and devotional phrases as something distinct from meditation: a kind of prayer or mechanical repetition. In fact it plays an enormous part in traditional Buddhist circles in all the Southern Buddhist countries, even in Burma where it would originally have been regarded as a type of *samatha* or calm meditation based upon concentration.⁵¹

This kind of meditation is found quite widely in use among lay devotees. Often it is no doubt rather minimalist, although in other cases it is something more serious. It is quite long-standing. As an illustration we can quote Robert Percival (in Ceylon from 1796–1800), who describes Buddhist monks: “To their girdles they wear suspended strings of beads made of a brownish or black wood; and mutter prayers as they go along”.⁵² (They are described as wearing the robe with the shoulder bare and carrying a painted cane in one hand with a palmleaf umbrella in the other.) Later on he describes the Ceylonese as wearing beads and muttering prayers “as they count them and go along the road”.⁵³ He understands these as preventives against “the evil spirits which surround them”.

One who enters the order and honours the three robes, must apply himself to recollection of repugnance, to the ugly and the beautiful and perceive a

noble altar within as without. One who enters the order and honours virtue, must know the interior objects and observe the bodily postures (*iriyāpatha*) as the Lord has taught in his holy word. Within and without are entirely alike. If one receives *dāna* from a *dāyaka*, let there be enough requisites to correspond with the [different elements in the] womb of the holy mother. Then one will have followed the rules of the holy *Vinaya*.

All of you, brothers, pay heed. Let us reveal [what it is like] when one is in the place of the embryo, that is in the belly of the mother, for ten months – clinging to the umbilical cord of the holy mother, seated with the knees drawn up, the eyes closed, the mouth practising the holy syllables: NA KA AM. When one is expelled at birth, one is dazed, distraught, lost, unconscious. One seeks in vain to remember the three holy syllables. This is why the Lord has urged that one should prostrate oneself in order to practise the exterior holy syllables: A RA HAM. Those are the exterior things.

Prostrate oneself in order to practise as if residing in the womb. The Lord has one to fold the legs, set the right hand in the left hand and pronounce the syllables of the holy A RA HAM. If, for example, one prepares oneself to receive an offering, one must conform to the posture in the womb. If one receives the eight requisites,⁵⁴ the robes must conform to the objects of the noble altar as in the place of the embryo in the belly of the mother. Then one is in correspondance with the noble teaching. When one is established in the place of the embryo in the belly of the mother, one possesses all the objects. They are the colour of blood, red like a ball of gum resin (*gamboge*). One possesses all the objects in full. If in the place of the embryo in the belly of the mother, these objects are incomplete, our bodily form deteriorates and cannot grow.

All of you, brothers, pay heed. If, having entered the order in order to pay honour to *sīla* and to the precepts, you do not possess the seven pieces in full, the *sīla* and the virtues which you honour will deteriorate and then disappear.

Let us continue to reveal what exists within: the under-robe, the waist band, the cloaking robe (*cīvara*), the breast band, the inner robe (*sanghātī*), the sash, the stole. These are the seven elements. Know that they are the elements within. The waist band is the cord at the umbilicus. The breast band is the end which is attached [to the placenta]. The sash is the part which remains with the holy mother. The stole is the bag of waters which contains a little blood. The cloaking robe is the amnion (innermost membrane). The inner robe is the placental envelope. The under-robe is the pocket for excrement.

When the body is established in the womb of the excellent holy mother, the waters are above our head and flow continually drop by drop upon our bodily form. If this water does not irrigate our body, we cannot live. That is

why one must know the within and the without alike and must observe bodily postures in accordance with the laws of the within and the without. It must not have any colour there except red like a ball of blood. If another colour is mixed with it, the form cannot be born. If *sīla* and the precepts are not observed correctly, one decomposes like the body.⁵⁵

Now we see a rather fuller exposition of some aspects of the assimilation of the process of gestation to the experiences of meditation. At the same time the environment of the embryo in the womb is compared to the seven items of the traditional dress of the Indo-Chinese Buddhist monk (now widely replaced by a simpler form of monastic clothing considered closer to the canonical model).

8. *Spiritual practice: the path*

The wind descends from the nose down to the neck. This then is called the holy *Vinaya* in five books. This is the path of the stream-enterer. The wind descends from the neck down to the chest.⁵⁶ This is the path of the once-returner. The wind descends from the chest down to the navel. This is the path of the never-returner. The wind descends from the navel down to the coccyx, without leaving or entering. This is the wind of the path of *arahatship*.

He attains cessation. Concentrate your attention correctly and you find yourself as you were when you were inside your mother's womb. Do not let the wind leave or enter. Following these instructions is to invite the eightfold *ariya-saṅgha* [in order to enter the way to the attainment of cessation, by the four paths].

The wind descends from the nose down to the neck. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the holy light that is like a firefly. This is called obtaining the fruit of stream-entry.

The wind descends from the neck down to the chest. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the holy light that is like the morning star. This is called obtaining the fruit of the once-returner.

The wind descends from the chest down to the navel. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the holy radiance that is like the full moon. This is called obtaining the fruit of the never-returner.

The wind descends from the navel down to the coccyx. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the holy radiance that is like the rising sun. This is called obtaining the fruit of *arahatship*.

One attains cessation. Leave cessation.

The breath leaves the coccyx and rises to the navel.

Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate [the holy shimmering radiance that is like the splendour of the sun and moon].

The breath leaves the navel and rises to the chest. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the moon and the stars.

The breath leaves the chest and rises to the neck. Practise correctly and you will be able to contemplate the holy radiance that is like the combined splendour of the sun, the moon and the stars.

There appears a shining light which sparkles. One contemplates the ten gates. One contemplates truly the realm of *nibbāna*.

The breath leaves the neck and rises up towards the fontanelle. Practise correctly and you will see the holy light that opens the gate to *nibbāna*.

The mind, balanced and concentrated, should be kept like a hair belonging to an inhabitant of the continent of Western Goyāna. Then the mind will be able to enter into *nibbāna*, the peaceful and glorious realm of the highest happiness.⁵⁷

This final passage should probably be considered as exemplifying another general feature of Tantric religious forms. It is quite typical of such traditions to utilize practices based upon the imitation of the higher spiritual states which are sought. In the Buddhist context this has often involved an attempt to mimic the *yuganaddha* quality of the transcendent (*lokuttara*) path i.e. the manner in which the experience of awakening (*bodhi*) unites and somehow harmonizes both the peaceful (*samatha*) and the insightful (*vipassanā*) aspects of Buddhist practice. The idea no doubt is that imitation can ultimately induce the relevant mental states. Similarly in visualisation practices the body of a Buddha is imitated by visualising the marks of the Great Man.

In the present context the aim is to imitate the various stages of the transcendent path (path of stream-entry and so on). By doing so, in a form of meditative ritual enactment, conditions are created which can lead the advanced meditator towards his goal.

Notes

1. Allchin, 1989, pp. 1-16; 1990, pp. 163-73.
2. Coningham and Allchin, 1992, p. 166; Deraniyagala, 1990, pp. 149-68.
3. Lucet, 1974; Janice Stargardt, 1990, (reviewed by K. R. Norman in *JRAS* (1992) pp. 114-17); Smith and Watson, 1979; Wales, 1969, p. 10f.; Allchin, 1989, pp. 1-16; Allchin, 1990, pp. 163-73.
4. This at least is the implication of the account by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien. However, his contacts were with the Abhayagiri school and may therefore exaggerate its importance. In particular the strongholds of the supporters of the Mahāvihāra seem to have been in the south of the island and Fa-hsien may have been unaware of them or uninterested in up-country Buddhism. Similar considerations may apply to the seventh century account of Hsüan-tsang who does not seem to be aware of the existence of non-Mahāyānist Theravādins, except in Bengal and the Tamil country!

5. Holt, 1991. On the Mahāyāna in Ceylon, see also: Paranavitane, 1928, pp. 35–71; Mudiyanse 1967; Bechert, 1977, pp. 361–8; Dohanian, 1977; Ruelius, 1978, pp. 89–99; Norman, 1978, pp. 28–47; Schopen, 1982, pp. 100–108; Smith, 1987, pp. 257–78, and citing: Donanian, “Prolegomena to the Study of the Mahāyāna in Ancient Ceylon,” in *India's Contribution to World Thought and Culture (Vivekananda Commemoration Volume)*.
6. e.g. Cp-a 276–332.
7. Guillon, 1985; Strong, 1992.
8. Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988.
9. Bechert, 1995.
10. Mostly in later portions of the *tipiṭaka*, but we should note that there is a tendency to date material as late precisely because of the presence of such elements. There is an obvious danger of circularity here.
11. Strong, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
12. Preface to Bizot, 1988, p. 9.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–2.
14. There is one passage related to the *Vimuttimaggā* of Upatissa, but it is uncertain whether this was a work of the Abhayagiri school or not. Indeed, even if it was, it may have been written at a date before there was significant doctrinal divergence from the Mahāvihāra.
15. Ps II 264 = Mp V 97; Vism 115. Dhammapāla's *Mahāṭṭhā* explains the *Visuddhimagga* reference as: “*kammaṭṭhāna* texts which are profound and concerned with such [teachings as] the truths and conditioned arising or those which are connected with emptiness” (C^e 1928: *gūḷhaṃ ganthan ti kammaṭṭhānaganthiṃ saccaṭṭhānasamuppāḍāṣahitaṃ gambhīraṃ, suññatāṭṭhānaṃ suññatāṭṭhānaṃ vā;* (B^e 1977: ... ca). Vism-sn is slightly different. Compare also Paṭi-a 674 which links several of these expressions: The ‘secret meaning’ (*attha*) or ‘hidden goal’ is the transcendent (*lokuttara*) ‘because it is completely outside’ (cf. Paṭi-gp).
16. Dhs-a 374 (mṭ; *gantha ti pāli*); Nidd-a I 112.
17. *The Secret Vessantara, the Secret Vinaya, the Secret Ummagga*, etc. These and others constitute the ‘counterfeit *saddhamma*’. The reference is probably to the early Mahāyāna in view of Spk-pt II (B^e 1961) 171. See Sp I 232; IV 742; Sv II 566 (pt); Spk II 201; Mp III 160. According to Sāriputta's *ṭīkā* to the Vinaya (to Sp I 232), these are “*suttas* of the dwellers in the Mahāsaṅghika-nikāya”.
18. So Adikaram, 1953 [1946], p. 97ff. and Bechert (cited in note 12 above), p. 11. A different view: Collins, 1990, p. 116f. n. 55. Collins correctly points out that *gūḷhattha*, ‘hidden meaning’, used at a much later date in the title of certain works (and at Paṭi ii 195), need not imply esotericism. However, Buddhaghosa refers to texts (*gantha*) as hidden or secret, not their meaning (*attha*).
19. Schlingloff, 1964.
20. Soper, 1959, Chapter III *Iconography*; cp. Kloppenborg and Poelmeyer, 1987, pp. 83–95; Beyer, 1977, pp. 329–40; Harrison, 1990.
21. Ps-pt II (B^e) 168 ≠ Mp-ṭ (B^e 1977) 369: *Dhammakathābandhan ti paveni-āgataṃ paṇṇāsa-dhammakathāmaggaṃ. Saccasattapaṭiṣandhiṭṭhāpaccayākārappaṭiṣaṃyuttaṃ suññatāṭṭhānaṃ guḷhaganthāṃ*. Some editions of Ps and Ps-pt read *guyhaganthāṃ*, but this probably does not affect the sense.
22. Vism-sn has *kammasthāna(-sattva-*
23. See my note on this topic in Hinnells, 1984, p. 179. The two senses of *kammaṭṭhāna* are distinguished clearly in Abhidh-s-rmḥṭ (N^e 1965: 236); cp. mṭ to Vibh-a 263.
24. Bizot, 1976.
25. See Cousins, 1972; Pieris, 1978; Jackson, 1990. As I have pointed out in the introduction to Nāṇamoli, *Dispeller of Delusion*, Vol. I, p. x, n. 3, Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Udāna* appears to cite the *anuṭṭhā* to the *Katthāvatthu* commentary. This poses difficulties for the theory of two Dhammapālas, unless they are contemporaries in the tenth century (suggestion of P. Jackson in a letter dated 31.1.92). If there is an earlier Dhammapāla, author of various *aṭṭhakathās* to the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, he cannot be before the sixth century at the earliest.
26. Sv-pt I Introduction pp. li–lv.
27. Hammalawa Saddhātissa, 1965, p. 29.
28. Bizot, 1976, p. 117f.
29. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference of the Traditional Cosmology Society (Lampeter, 1992) on the theme of “Mapping Invisible Worlds.”
30. The two testicles and the penis.

31. Bizot, 1980, p. 250.
32. Cittakumāra and Cittakumāri.
33. Bizot, 1976, p. 119f.
34. Here and below the honorific is rendered by 'holy'. This no doubt overstates the case, but is intended as a corrective to the common practice of not rendering honorifics in South-East Asian languages which underplays the reverential element in some forms of traditional Buddhism.
35. Bizot, 1976, p. 83. This was the first text translated from the Khmer by Bizot. A version of the same text in the northern Thai dialect of Lanna was discovered in 1983 with the title *Pavarabandha*. Other versions have subsequently been found. See the comparison in Lagirarde, 1994.
36. As Bizot points out, this should be KHU. He suggests that this occurs frequently because of the similarity of the writing of the two syllables. However, it may also have been due to a wish at some point to make the five syllables for *Vinaya* begin with A and the five for *Suttanta* end in U i.e. two of the three parts of MA A U.
37. Bizot points out that the normal rendering would be: *paśāsa*, (i.e. *paśāt*) breathes in; *asāsa* breathes out; *nisāsa*, absence of breathing.
38. Bizot, 1976, p. 101.
39. For bibliographic references, see: Reynolds, 1977.
40. On this text, see now: Bechert, 1989.
41. The beginning of T. W. Rhys Davids, *Yogāvacara's Manual*, London, 1896, p. 2 identifies the syllables of *arahaṃ* with the three *ratana* as follows:
- A — Dhamma RA — Buddha HAM — Saṃgha.
- This section is, however, missing in the Sinhalese edition given at the end of the *Vimuttimaggo* referred to above. Both the *Yogāvacara's Manual* and the *Vimuttimaggadassana* are texts of the same (still extant) South-East Asian meditation tradition which is now treated in some detail in Bizot, 1992.
42. 66b *A-kāro Buddha-ratanaṃ ra-kāro Dhammam uttamaṃ |*
 66c *haṃ Saṃghatthan ti yojetvā jānitabbaṃ viṣuṃ viṣuṃ. ||*
 67a *Assāso Suttapīṭakaṃ paśāso Vinayaṃ tathā |*
 67b *nisāso Abhidhammo ti jānitabbaṃ viṣuṃ viṣuṃ. ||*
 (Ratanajoti and Ratanapāla, 1963, p. 114.) (uncorrected)
43. Bizot, 1980, p. 252.
44. There are of course thirty-seven chief deities present in the *sabhā* of the second heaven, as the Four Kings are present as guardians of the directions. See the important series of articles on this topic by Shorto, 1963, pp. 572–91; Shorto, 1967, pp. 127–41; Shorto, 1978, pp. 152–64.
45. The thirty second item of the later canonical sources – “the brain in the skull” – becomes two items, brain and skull.
46. Conveniently there are four *pādas* in a lunar mansion and nine in a sign of the zodiac; so the *pādas* could function to link the solar and lunar lists ($4 \times 27 = 108$; $9 \times 12 = 108$).
47. Bizot, 1981.
48. Perhaps translate: MA is suffering, but nibbāna is happy. A is impermanence, but nibbāna must be heeded. U is no-self, and nibbāna is cessation.
49. Bizot, 1976, p. 102.
50. A version of this stanza is the first two lines of the *Ratanattayappabhāvābhīyācanagāthā* (“Verses invoking the Power of the Triple Gem”), now attributed to King Mongkut. However, even if the attribution is correct, they could be older as this kind of Pali composition sometimes incorporates earlier stanzas of special importance. See e.g.: Anon, 1975, p. 121.
51. See Houtman, 1990.
52. Percival, 1975 [1805], p. 143.
53. *Ibid.* p. 150.
54. According to Bizot these are the seven items of monastic dress together with the bowl.
55. Bizot, 1980, pp. 244–47.
56. Lit. the xiphoid appendage.
57. Bizot, 1980, p. 248f.

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