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Kamala/Forest Recollections

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Introduction

Although the tradition of wandering meditation ascetics has become a victim of Thailand’s relentless modernization and rampant deforestation, during the first half of this century the forests of Thailand, or Siam as it used to be called, were home to numerous ascetic monks. The Thai term for such monks is *phra thudong* (ascetic wandering monk) or *phra thudong kammathān* (wandering ascetic meditator monk). A thudong monk is one who observes at least some of the thirteen ascetic practices mentioned in the Buddha’s discourses, in particular the practice of eating only one meal per day, sleeping outdoors in a forest or a cemetery, and being content with the very fewest possessions.

My aim in this book is to document the lives of some of these monks in the historical context of local Buddhist traditions as well as modern state Buddhism. I also seek to explain why the thudong tradition, initially little known, has become so popular in Thailand today. I focus on ten monks of the lineage that starts with Ajan Man Phurithatto (1870–1949): Man himself, Waen Sujinno (1888–1985), Dun Atulo (1888–1985), Fan Ajaro (1898–1977), Thet Thetrangsi (1902–1994), Li Thammatharo (1907–1961), La Khempatato (1911–1996), Cha Suphattho (1918–1992), Juan Kulachettho (1920–1980), and Wan Uttamo (1922–1980). Although these monks were born and raised in farming communities
and followed a two-millennia-old religious calling, their teachings are relevant to present-day societies.

Much of the local knowledge and wisdom the monks offered can no longer be discovered or recovered. Their teachings came from personal experiences or directly from their teachers. They were Buddhists, of course, but their brand of Buddhism was not a copy of the norms or practices preserved in doctrinal texts. Their Buddhism found expression in the acts of daily life: walking for days in the wilderness; meeting with villagers who were sometimes supportive, sometimes suspicious; spending the nights in an umbrella tent beneath a tree, in a crude shelter, or in a cave; and contending with all sorts of mental and physical challenges. Their lives are worth knowing about and worth hearing as directly as possible, with as much detail as we need to understand them. For it was in their attention to details, no less than in their high purposes, that these monks’ lives were exemplary.

This is not the way observers—either Western or Thai—tend to study them, however. Rather than beginning with the details and particularities of these monks’ individual lives, scholars more often begin with generalities about institutions and traditions, with sets of assumptions about “Thai” Buddhism or about the Theravada tradition. Having accepted a stereotype of “Thai” Buddhism—as a centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchical religion emphasizing *vinaya* (discipline)³—they see wandering monks as anomalous, unconventional, heretical, or (sometimes) saintly.

These scholars maintain that Buddhism in Thailand should be understood in terms of its center—both its geographical and political center, Bangkok, and its doctrinal center, the Pali canon as interpreted by monastic authorities in Bangkok. This Bangkok-Theravada perspective is an urban, literate, middle- and upper-class view of Buddhism. It favors texts, doctrines, and orthodoxy, and it ignores or devalues local Buddhist traditions, even though monks of these traditions have always formed a numerical majority in the *sangha* (monastic community). Indeed, the Bangkok-centered view of Buddhism in Thailand amounts to a form of ethnocentrism, one that many Western scholars, entering Thailand as they do through Bangkok and its institutions and culture, have accepted in some measure.
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 languages 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 after the modern Thai state began to pressure them to accept its official Buddhism—that 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.

**Birth of Modern State Buddhism**

How did the Buddhism of the Bangkok court come to be Thailand’s official Buddhism? Historically Buddhism has flourished by accommodating the native beliefs of the cultures with which it came into contact. During the centuries since it spread to Southeast Asia, Theravada Buddhism has displayed an extraordinary ability to adapt to local customs, languages, and cultures. The Buddhism practiced in the area that is now called Thailand was as varied as Buddhism in Tibet and just as much colored and enriched by its interactions with different indigenous cultural traditions.

In the early nineteenth century, Thailand had not yet become a centralized state with the defined borders shown on a modern map (see figure 1). In those days, the region consisted of several kingdoms or petty states, each ruled by a hereditary local lord. Although these kingdoms or meuang considered themselves autonomous, they sent tribute to the more powerful kingdom. Bangkok allowed the outlying meuang to remain more or less indepen-
Figure 1. Map of Thailand showing provinces. Dotted lines indicate provincial boundaries; solid lines indicate boundaries between regions (phak).
dent, so long as there was no war between any of the lords of the region. Its control over the meuangs did not extend beyond collecting taxes from the lords. Bangkok had no control over the courts, administrative patterns, currencies, or writing systems established in the meuangs.8

Furthermore, Bangkok could not control the meuangs’ religious customs and practices. The kingdoms had different histories, literatures, languages, and religious customs. Substantially different forms of Buddhism existed among the Siamese in the Central Plains, the Lao in the Northeast, the Yuan in the North, the Shan along the western border with the Shan states, the Khmer in the southern tier of the northeastern region along the Cambodian border,9 and the Mon scattered in the Central Plains and the northern region.10 Even within one principality, religious customs varied from one meuang to the next and from one village to the next. For example, in the Lan Na kingdom11 there were as many as eighteen nikais or lineages of Buddhist monks in Chiang Mai alone.12 (The term “nikai” as used in Lan Na in those days referred to a community of monks adhering to common beliefs and disciplinary practices.) In the Lao tradition in the Northeast, Buddhist customs varied among the Phuan, Lawa, Song, Phu Thai, and Yau (or Yo). Or again, in the Mon tradition the religious practices of the Mon in Lamphun differed from the customs followed by the Mon in Ratchaburi, Kanchanaburi, Pak Klet, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, or Samut Prakan. Similarly, in the Yuan tradition, the Buddhist customs in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Lamphun, Lampang, Nan, and Phrae all differed. Each of these Buddhist traditions was differently influenced by the many different forms of indigenous spirit worship and by the Mahayana and Tantric traditions that flourished prior to the fourteenth century.13

In addition to these older traditions, another form of Buddhism emerged in Bangkok in the third decade of the nineteenth century. This late development, creating a new nikai of monks, is generally considered to be a reform movement.14 The founder of this sect was the thirty-three-year-old Siamese prince named Mongkut, a son of King Rama II. Mongkut had been ordained earlier in a Siamese Buddhist tradition. His ordination coincided with the accession to the throne of a half-brother, later to be known as
Rama III (1824–1851). Mongkut remained in the robes for twenty-seven years until this half-brother died, since leaving the monkhood would have thrust him into the “dangerous maelstrom of dynastic politics.” In 1830, after he had been a monk for six years, Mongkut met the abbot of a Mon monastery located across the river from Bangkok. Impressed with the strict discipline observed by the Mon, Mongkut established a new sect in which this discipline was observed. It was called “Thammayut,” meaning the order adhering to the dhamma (Buddhist teachings and doctrines). In his monastic order Mongkut emphasized Pali studies, especially the mastery of the vinaya. In order to make monastic discipline more strict, Mongkut insisted that laypeople ought to perform such necessary tasks as distributing monks’ food, cleaning their living quarters, washing their robes, and caring for their communal property. The majority of the monks in this new nikai were from upper- and middle-class families. To distinguish his nikai from the Siamese tradition observed in Bangkok’s monasteries, Mongkut changed some monastic practices. He introduced a new style of wearing robes (covering both shoulders, a Mon practice), new ordination rituals, a new pronunciation of the Pali scriptural language, new routines (including daily chanting), and new religious days to observe. All these changes, Mongkut asserted, made the Thammayut sect more authentic.

As Craig Reynolds points out, the new nikai actually “caused resentment and created dissension rather than unity.” Without royal patronage the Thammayut nikai would not have survived, because it arose in opposition to the Siamese traditions of Bangkok monasteries. Mongkut disparagingly referred to monks who followed other traditions as “Mahanikai.” He considered the Mahanikai an “order of long-standing habit”—implying that these monks and laypeople blindly followed the Buddhism of their fathers and grandfathers. Since it is misleading to consider all non-Thammayut traditions as belonging to a single sect, I use the term “Mahanikai” only to refer to non-Thammayut administrative monks appointed by Bangkok sangha authorities.

Mongkut also placed greater emphasis on the study of the Pali 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
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all traditions in which folk stories and parables were used to teach
the dhamma and local culture was integrated with Buddhism.
From his perspective, local stories full of demons, gods, miracles,
magic, rituals, and exorcism were folklore; they had nothing to do
with Buddhism.

This conviction of Mongkut’s may have been shaped by West-
ern and Christian influences. Like many Christian missionaries,
Mongkut (who left the monastic life and became king in 1851)
had an intellectual image of religion. He and the Siamese elite of
his generation accepted the Christian missionaries’ judgment that
traditional Buddhism was too superstitious. They sought to prove
to Western missionaies that Buddhism was compatible with
science and could support intellectual study and learning. They
started their own printing presses, published books on Buddhism,
and adopted a rationalist mode of discourse for theological
debates with Christians.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, Siam’s neighbors
fell under the control of Western colonial powers. A few decades
before the end of the nineteenth century, the Siamese King Chula-
longkorn (1868–1910) began to form a centralized state of Siam
with a fixed boundary. To this end, the Siamese court began to
restrict the autonomy of the principalities in the northern, north-
eastern, and the southern regions. The aim was to strip the local
ruling families of their powers and transfer their authority to offi-
cials appointed by the Siamese court.

One of the major obstacles the court encountered was linguistic
diversity among the various Tai peoples. At the time the Siamese
authorities began to consolidate these tributary states and princi-
palities, at least eighty languages were spoken within Siam’s polit-
ical boundaries. (The major languages of the four regions are
presently Thai Klang in the Central Plains, Tai Yuan or Kham
Meuang in the North, Lao in the Northeast, and Pak Tai in the
South.) To consolidate these diverse peoples, the Bangkok regime
made the Bangkok Thai spoken by the educated elite in Bangkok
(and before that in Ayuthaya) the official and national language.
This dialect—Bangkok Thai (known today as standard Thai)—
became a symbol or focus of identification for the modern Thai
state. It was to be taught to local people by teachers, govern-
ment officials, and monks trained in Bangkok. One result is that
both Thai and English speakers now use the word “Thai” to refer to the state religion (as in “Thai Buddhism”) as well as to the national language. To prevent confusion, the phrase “modern state Buddhism” will replace the loose and misleading “Thai Buddhism.” Similarly, when speaking of languages, “Bangkok Thai” is preferable to the vaguer “Thai.”

Although it is impossible to know how many native speakers of Bangkok Thai there were when Siam started to centralize, Bangkok Thai was certainly not the native language for most people. More probably had Lao as their mother tongue. Native speakers of other languages considered Bangkok Thai the language of outsiders. Even in the Central Plains people had to learn Bangkok Thai the way the rest of the country did: primarily through Bangkok’s educational system.

In creating a modern Thai state the Bangkok authorities needed not only a common language but a common religion. The Siamese rulers’ preoccupation with order, harmony, national unity, and modernization led them to believe that monks as well as laypeople—regardless of their ethnic identities—should have a common religious outlook. They assumed that a rationalized form of Buddhism would provide the most unity and harmony. The architect of modern state Buddhism was a son of Mongkut’s, Prince Wachirayan, a half-brother of King Chulalongkorn and the abbot of Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok. Wachirayan was a Pali scholar eager to strengthen Buddhism, which he considered to be in decline. In his opinion, the scholar and vinaya-oriented Thammayut nikai was superior to nikais devoted to other Buddhist practices and customs. Like Mongkut, Wachirayan called them Mahanikai. Consequently, the Thammayut nikai, based mainly in the royal monasteries in Bangkok, became closely integrated with the newly centralized bureaucratic government. It became the model for modern state Buddhism.

The 1902 Act created a sangha bureaucracy with a Siamese supreme patriarch (appointed by Bangkok authorities) at the top. With the act’s passage, a modern nation-state with a centralized, urban-based bureaucracy began to control local communities distinguished by diverse ethnic traditions. Formerly autonomous Buddhist monks belonging to diverse lineages became part of the Siamese religious hierarchy with its standard texts and practices, whereas previously no single tradition had predominated. This
modern ecclesiastical system brought the hitherto unorganized sangha into line with the civilian government hierarchy. Sangha and state now had parallel hierarchies (see figure 2).

Wachirayan also created a monastic education system based on his interpretation of Pali canonical works, commentaries, and vinaya texts. Modern state Buddhism treated Wachirayan’s printed texts as authoritative. The system—still in use today—rests on degrees, examinations, and ranks in the sangha hierarchy. It defines the ideal Buddhist monk as one who observes strict monastic rules, has mastered Wachirayan’s texts, teaches in Bangkok Thai, carries out administrative duties, observes holy days, and performs religious rituals based on Bangkok customs.

The central government’s authority began to be felt in remote parts of Thailand only in the second half of this century when the military regime sought to consolidate the nation-state by imposing martial law on the country. As we shall see, wandering meditation monks were generally uninterested in wider political events. Periods during which broad social changes occurred in Thai society, and which scholars commonly regard as turning points, were not necessarily significant for forest monks. Eventually, however, they were greatly affected by events beyond their horizons: the spread of paved roads and rail links, jungle warfare, and deforestation. The study of forest monks must take into account these economic and political impacts on the environment. One chronology I have found helpful divides the last one hundred years into these three historical periods: (1) the “Forest-Community Period” (yuk muban pa) prior to 1957; (2) the “Forest-Invasion Period” (yuk bukboek) from 1957 to 1988; and (3) the “Forest-Closure Period” (yuk pit pa) from 1989 to the present.

We shall be concerned mainly with the Forest-Community Period. For our purposes, this period spans the late nineteenth century, when Siam became a centralized state, and the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, there were thousands of small frontier communities (muban pa) throughout Thailand. These settlements consisted of scattered households living off farmland and forests. For most of this period the population was low and urban areas were undeveloped. Most villages and even many district centers were remote from urban centers. Toward the end of this period, however, urban centers rapidly expanded and forested areas dwindled under increasing deforestation.
Two major works about forest monks have been written by social scientists. Stanley Tambiah’s *Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* is an important work on amulets and the politics of the two major Buddhist orders in Thailand. It contains several
chapters devoted to Ajan Man, a Lao forest monk acknowledged as a highly influential teacher, and Maha Bua, Man’s disciple-biographer. For the most part, Tambiah is interested in developing theories about these two monks and their lives. He wants to know whether Man was a paradigmatic arahat (liberated person or “saint”), whether Bua’s biography is hagiographic, whether Man’s teachings or Bua’s monastery conform to the canon, and so forth. Though we learn much from his discussion, the forest monks’ meditation tradition is not his main focus. Relying mainly on Bua’s biography of Ajan Man and on a short article about the life of Luang Pu Waen, he concludes that monastic biographies of “saints” are modeled upon a paradigm—the life of the Buddha.

In my research I have drawn on a large corpus of published memoirs and biographical material that Tambiah left unexamined. In addition to Bua’s biography of Man, I have used fourteen other narratives. These texts are diverse; they do not follow the paradigm of the Buddha’s life and in fact appear to have no common denominator—which suggests that Bua’s version of Ajan Man’s life is an exception rather than a typical example.

In Forest Monks and the Nation-State, James Taylor offers an analysis of the formation and transformation of the lineage of Ajan Man and his disciples. Casting his discussion in terms of the environment and ecology of the Northeast, Taylor traces the forest monks’ gradual “domestication” and accommodation to social conditions in present-day Thailand. His information about connections, networks, and factions among Man’s disciples and laypeople are of much interest. But Taylor, like Tambiah, studies the forest monks mainly to examine institutional changes in the relations between “religion” and “polity.”

Tambiah’s and Taylor’s works lack a strong historical grounding in regional traditions, and they do not explore the practices of Ajan Man and his disciples. My particular interest complements Tambiah’s and Taylor’s. This book does not focus on the forest tradition as an institutional process; it examines the lives of the wandering monks and their styles of practicing and teaching. I am interested in where they came from, what their local traditions were like, what their teachers taught them, how they trained, what they taught, what their religion meant to them and to local people, and why they thought it was worth preserving.
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My approach is both historical and anthropological. In my view local histories provide useful and reliable access to an understanding of Thailand’s regions.\textsuperscript{32} The wandering meditation monks from Thailand’s Northeast constitute a distinct type that emerged out of the peculiarities of Lao Buddhist traditions. Hence, they are best understood through the study of their local contexts. Here history merges with anthropology, since the monks’ narratives supply textual evidence of their religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, as A. Thomas Kirsch asserts, people’s lives are “texts” in their own right, which others can read and comprehend.\textsuperscript{33}

The aim of this book is to introduce the reader to the thudong master Man and his disciples through their writings, dictation, and recorded conversations—in short, through their own recollections along with those of others. But the word “recollection” in my title has another intended meaning. It is the English equivalent of a Buddhist term in the Pali language (\textit{anussati}) that refers to the act of remembering, contemplating, or meditating upon an important religious theme: the Buddha, his teachings, the monkhood, the ethical life, and the like. Anussati and the related term \textit{sati} (mindfulness) were integral parts of the forest monks’ religious practice and the subject of many of their recorded recollections.\textsuperscript{34}

Thousands of monks have wandered through the modern Thai state in this century, and their experiences have been manifold. Surely there is no better way to understand these monks’ Buddhism than through their own narratives, especially when these are rich in local color and texture. These texts open a window onto the monks’ lives, a window that is absent from the commentaries and analyses of outsiders. Looking through this window, we see monks go about their lives, we hear them speak, we learn their thoughts.

Previously, the few scholars who have had access to these life stories did not quite know what to do with them. Perhaps they did not find anything particularly noteworthy in them. The monks talk about their daily life and its concerns: getting food on the almsround,\textsuperscript{35} finding lodging and robes, coping with illness and pain, climbing a mountain, searching for a suitable cave, walking through a dense forest to reach a village, encountering a wild animal, contending with a ghost or spirit. To the modern mind, these accounts may seem like notes from another world. Recently, how-
ever, the life stories of forest monks have become very popular among urban people. The reason may be that the world in which these monks lived has disappeared. Today in Thailand one buys packaged food, ready-made clothes, and over-the-counter medicine. Small villages are now towns with roads, cars, and buses, and the forests have yielded to plantations, highways, and hydroelectric dams. Tigers, having lost their forests, are in zoos. Only in the imagination, and with the help of stories such as those related by forest monks, are present-day urbanites able to dwell in an isolated forest hamlet, spend a night or a fortnight in some dark cave, or roam a forest and come face to face with a tiger. If only for that reason, the forest monks’ daily concerns hold our attention.

For the historian, too, the details that fill the wandering monks’ life stories hold much interest. To ignore them is to risk misunderstanding the monks; life stories hold contextual information that the historian needs. When a certain monk has a vision in which a deity or arahat appears, for example, it helps to know that this monk had spent long months in solitary meditation, often going without food, preparing for this encounter. Otherwise we may conclude he was just dreaming. When a monk travels alone across a forest, wet and cold and hungry, maybe sick or lonely, he tells us. When he feels overwhelmed or uplifted by events and encounters, he reports it. He does so not self-indulgently or sentimentally but in a plain, matter-of-fact, and unforgettable voice—a voice that we do not hear in any administrative or scholar monk’s biography.

Although the monks relate their stories in a frank and direct manner, they often avoid specific reference to themselves. They often narrate their stories without using first-person pronouns. It is as if in telling or writing their experiences, a monk’s own identity were unessential, as if life were simply a stream of memories and events. Given this reticence, we may wonder why forest monks disclosed their life stories in the first place. As might be guessed, it was often not the monk’s idea. One of them wrote his life story as a personal memoir. When his lay devotees asked him to publish his account for distribution on his sixtieth birthday, in 1974, he consented. A second dictated his life story to a lay disciple while in the hospital in 1959, a year before his death. A third
was pressured by his disciples into writing his life story on his own; he wrote in an informal style as if talking to a friend, unimpeded by social norms of politeness and free (or so it appears) of either an internal censor or an outside editor. A fourth, also unable to say no to his followers, dictated his stories into a tape recorder, but under the condition that they be published only after his death—which happened not long afterward in an airplane crash. A fifth monk’s memoirs were issued—printed in his own handwriting—on the occasion of his cremation, as were the recollections of four other monks. The life stories of another five monks are the work of their disciples, who refer to their teachers as than ajan (venerable or respected teacher), luang phau (venerable father), or luang pu (venerable grandfather).

Most of these life stories take considerable liberty with chronology, as if the temporal order of events did not matter much. Although wandering monks seem to remember events vividly, they often do not record the year when they occurred. Also characteristic of the stories is the absence of reference to the world at large. Either events in the wider world did not affect the monks or they were so isolated in their forests and caves that they really did not know what was going on.

From the historian’s point of view, the problem with these life stories is the abundance of information they contain and the number of questions they raise. When we read that a thudong monk journeys on foot to Laos or Burma in search of meditation teachers, his goal is understandable. But what are we to make of the meditative experiences he has along the way? How are we to understand Man’s visions of saints, deities, and spirits? The biographies and memoirs tease us with their glimpses of a monk’s personal life, resisting our efforts to decode them. Maybe the reason is that no one can tell the whole story about himself. The incidents thudong monks remember and relate are invariably those they consider most important. They give detailed descriptions of their wandering lives and of the various ethnic groups they encountered; they say much less about their lives in Bangkok; and they report hardly anything at all about their last years when, unable to wander, they were confined to life in a monastery—almost as if then there were no more stories left to tell.

On the positive side, the monks’ narratives are unaffected by
any concern with what a “proper” life story should include. The monks make no attempt to hide their personal failings. Sexual desire, for example, is not too vulgar or embarrassing to reveal. True, they are cautious in voicing criticism of sangha authorities, fearing to offend senior monks who became supporters. Nevertheless, innuendoes here and there provide clues to matters not recorded explicitly or in depth.

Since a memoir is the record of one monk’s experiences—how he remembered his own life—the general picture emerges only after comparing several. But how do we know whether the comparative picture is a true one? After all, not all wandering monks have left life stories. The majority of Buddhist monks in Siam/Thailand have left no written records. Those who did leave accounts either knew sufficient Thai to describe their experiences firsthand or had disciples who could do so. They also had lay devotees able to defray the printing costs. Not surprisingly, many of the monks whose lives have been published are from the royalty-supported Thammayut order, which comprises a minority of monks in Thailand. No historian will ever know how different our picture of the sangha in Thailand would be had village monks and wandering monks of other lineages left as many printed pages as the Thammayut thudong monks have.

The stories of many wandering meditation monks without affluent lay followers are published in cheap popular magazines. Historians of Buddhism have largely ignored these publications, although they contain otherwise unavailable information. These popular magazines began to appear in the early 1980s, several years after the forest monks and their teachings became popular. Today, forest monks’ narratives are increasingly reprinted and distributed as gifts at laypeople’s funerals. Among the popular monthly magazines about meditation monks are Lokthip and Phra Aphinya. Lokthip, the more useful of the two, aims to satisfy the layperson’s desire to know everything about a meditation monk. Between its covers one can find detailed descriptions of monks’ family backgrounds, accounts of their wanderings, and their opinions about the local people whom they met in their travels. Articles based on interviews with monks—or, after their deaths, with elderly villagers who knew them—may have much value for a historian.
These magazines have their weaknesses. For example Lokthip often takes monks’ stories from cremation volumes or from printed memoirs or biographies and fails to credit the original sources. In addition, the magazine tends to portray many meditation monks as arahats or nearly so (as an anāgāmi, “nonreturner”), pointing to demonstrations of supernormal power and the appearance of crystalline crematory remains. Nonetheless, these articles contain vital information about wandering meditation monks: where the monks came from, what their occupations were before ordination, where they were ordained, who their preceptors were, why they converted to the Thammayut order if they did, and the like.

I know of no hard and fast rules about how to use these popular magazines. Can a historian or anyone else tell which interviews are verbatim and which are heavily edited? It comes down to experience and judgment. After reading hundreds of issues of such magazines, one acquires a sense of authenticity. Descriptions of events that the monks actually saw are likely to be reliable. One learns to identify passages where the editor or writer has interpolated his own views. When the language waxes didactic, utters sweeping condemnation or praise, and makes stirring appeals to the reader, it is a good bet that this is the voice of the writer or editor, not the monk. Wandering meditation monks usually express themselves in common, ordinary speech, often in the vernacular and using local expressions. When a passage is written in a down-to-earth and straightforward style by an apparently unsophisticated writer, it is almost certainly the monk who is talking or writing. Because so much of the information contained in these sources turns out to be unreliable, I have used them with discretion. I regard them as occasionally useful supplements to the memoirs and biographies in which the monks speak directly.41

My final remark is directed to those Buddhologists or philologists who might take exception to some of my translations of Thai or Pali dhamma terms. I have tried to convey the meanings these terms appear to have for the forest monks, even where they depart from doctrinally correct definitions. Monks may depart from doctrinal meanings, in Panyawattho’s words, “to preserve the Forest Dhamma quality of this teaching, and though some terms may not
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correspond to direct scriptural interpretations, they are used as a
guide to develop meditation in a most practical sense." It is, of
course, beyond the scope of this book to go deeply into the thu-
dong monks' dhamma teachings and meditation methods. But I
do hope to convey something of their nature and style.