

Book review

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Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life.

By Joanna Cook. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 224 pages, ISBN 9780521119382 (hardcover) \$95.00; ISBN 9780511773358 (Mobipocket eBook) \$76.00; ISBN 9780511771170 (Adobe eBook) \$76.00.

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B O O K R E V I E W

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A book of this nature has not come out of the field of Thai Buddhist studies in quite some time. The only recent work comparable to the depth of Joanna Cook's study, its contemporary relevance, and the many themes and topics it draws from, is Ingrid Jordt's *Burma's Mass Meditation Movement* (Ohio University Press, 2007). Thus this is a rare book for scholars and the general public interested in modern meditation and how it relates to contemporary Thai monasticism. *Meditation in Modern Buddhism* is an in-depth ethnographic account that draws freely and appropriately from other ethnographies as well as from religious and Buddhist studies scholarship. The highlights of the book, however, are Cook's personal tales of her experiences as a *mae chee* (white-robed Thai Buddhist nun adhering to eight precepts) for over a year at Wat Bonamron in Northern Thailand. This book makes significant contributions to scholarship on Buddhism and the ethical formation of the self, the ideals of monastic renunciation, and the nature of Buddhist asceticism, but the most important theme addressed here is the analysis of modern meditation and its effect on the status of the *mae chee* within Thai monasticism.

In the introduction, Cook reveals her personal history with meditation and her relationship with the temple under study. Throughout her fieldwork period, using participant-observation, socialization, and formal and informal interviews, she came to understand deeply the nature of monastic renunciation. Through her position as a *mae chee* in this meditation temple, Cook had access to a group of women seldom available to researchers because they focus primarily on meditation and detachment. She describes her participation in temple life, in solitary intensive retreats, and in her training to embody the role of a *mae chee*. Thus the reader is presented with portrait of daily life at this thriving temple through the eyes of a novice *mae chee*.

Chapter one opens with a discussion of the prevalence of meditation in Thailand since the 1950s and its importance for Thailand's self-presentation as a modernizing nation-state that maintains its traditions. Cook offers the context and historical background in which some monasteries of Thailand became meditation centers primarily serving the laity and locates this within Thailand's modern, hybrid, and plural trends of Buddhist reform.

Chapter two locates Wat Bonamron within the history of Thai Buddhism and its vipassana meditation movement. Cook uses Wat Bonamron as her window onto the process of renunciation from the perspective of the Buddhist renunciant. Cook thus places her fieldwork

within the historical context of the rise of lay meditation in Thailand and within Southeast Asia. One of Cook's most important arguments qualifies the idea of laicization popular in scholarly analyses of modern Buddhism. Cook astutely contends that an equally valid interpretation to understand the nature of new dynamics of lay meditation is the monasticization of popular Buddhism. She makes clear that, even though there are many lay students, the propagation of vipassana is done in monasteries by monastics. She locates this as a trend among the plurality of practices within contemporary Thai Buddhism and finds that monastics are still the ideal of moral perfection even if lay religious practice is becoming more monasticized.

In the beginning of chapter three and sprinkled throughout the book are stories of Cook's fieldwork experiences. These add a richness and vividness to the portrait of this temple and also show the experience of the ethnographer in a way not often seen in scholarship. Cook narrates her arrival at the Chiang Mai airport, her greeting by the monks and nuns of Wat Bonamron, her first night at the monastery, her ordination as a *mae chee*, and relates anecdotes of conversations with other *mae chee* and monks. These moments are interesting in themselves, but Cook uses her descriptions to illustrate larger points. Besides these narrations, Cook describes the physical environment of Wat Bonamron and its history. Additionally, she reviews the structural bureaucracy of this temple, which is also a meditation center, and the daily schedule of practice for lay and ordained residents.

Wat Bonamron is well-suited to illustrate contemporary meditation and its effect on the status of *mae chee* as it holds the largest number of these white-robed, eight-precept nuns in northern Thailand but also accommodates a large number of lay meditators everyday. Cook argues that the presence of lay meditators has been crucial in the development of monastic identity for *mae chee*. Cook asserts that this monasticization of popular Buddhism is enabling *mae chee* to define themselves and be seen in new ways by Buddhist laity and monks. Because *mae chee* have no formal status to compare with monks, it is the *performance* of monasticism that allows them to be seen as renunciators. The vipassana meditation practice taught at Wat Bonamron allows them to enact their monastic duties in significant ways through both teaching meditation and practicing the technique. So it is the performance of their monastic duty that creates a monastic identity positioned somewhere between monks and laity. Cook argues *mae chee* are thus playing a decisive mediating role in contemporary Thai Buddhism.

In chapter four Cook interprets meditation as a social learning process and an ethical project. She argues that the practice of vipassana is intended to bring about a change in perception in the meditator consistent with Buddhist ethical principles. In order to show this, she describes the typical meditation retreat experienced at this monastery by taking the reader through the journey of the novice meditator. Being taken through the steps of the retreat by someone who has experienced it many times herself is an especially useful background for the upcoming chapters as well as a window into the experience of lay and monastic meditators' experiences.

Chapter five examines in more detail the cognitive impact of meditative and ritual experiences. Here Cook analyzes Wat Bonamron's use of the Pali language. She focuses on the structure of the advanced retreat. Different Pali phrases are used during each day of the retreat and these stimulate particular responses. Cook's evidence suggests these words have

power in and of themselves and have an impact whether or not they are understood. Cook finds that these effects show that beliefs may not always be primary in religious experience.

Chapter six grapples with the paradoxes of the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and how monastics are expected to behave appropriately within the social hierarchy of the monastery while detaching from a sense of self. In order to demonstrate the tensions within this Buddhist doctrine, Cook uses scholarship from Buddhist studies, classic commentaries on the Pali canon, and stories of her experiences as a *mae chee*. She investigates the control of emotion as an example of appropriate behavior, relating stories of controlled and uncontrolled emotions of monastics and relating how these displays were perceived by other ordained members of the temple and the performance of monastic duty express the level of wisdom attained in meditation practice and provide an example of the religious ideal for the laity. In this analysis Cook uses the enactment of contemporary monasticism to illuminate fundamental Buddhist concepts like non-self, showing that ethnographies can contribute to understanding principles of Buddhism as well as modern developments.

In the next chapter Cook explores the nature of monasticism in contemporary Thailand, illustrating the ambiguous role of *mae chees* and alms donation—they accept alms as renunciators and give alms as lay women. Cook argues that, by handling money, *mae chee* mediate a relationship of reciprocity between the monastic community and lay society. Through donating alms they reaffirm their status of only partial ordination, but by receiving alms they are recognized as monastics. Cook contextualizes this practice using Marcel Mauss's work on the gift. She relates the gift in alms donation to the process of renunciation in the performance of monastic identity. Thus it is through the *mae chee's* embodiment of detachment and cultivation of non-self through giving and receiving alms that their social position of *mae chee* continues to become more significant in Thai society.

Chapter eight reconsiders the gendered practices of the modern Thai monastic community. Cook asks how monastics relate to each other within a gendered hierarchy, given the Buddhist concept of non-self. She considers the representations of *mae chee* in literature, scholarship, and ethnographies, and compares these with *mae chee* life stories collected during fieldwork. She finds *mae chee* have been portrayed negatively as disadvantaged, but these accounts are in stark contrast to the ways *mae chee* understand their monastic duties and the institutional organization of Buddhist monasticism. This contrast leads Cook to find alternative ways to understand the lives of religious women in Buddhism. She calls for a scholarly perspective on religious women that considers religious women's humility and virtuous behavior as religiously significant. Thus what may be seen as passivity and submission to patriarchy Cook reinterprets as agency by which the religious subject is formed.

In chapter nine Cook continues to investigate Buddhist ideas of non-self in relation to both individuality and social relationships. Here Cook employs Mauss's concepts of the individuality of the person (*moi*) and the person as a member of society (*personne*). In connection with the practice of meditation, Cook finds that although this is a solitary activity it has important social dimensions. Because the practice is collectively taught and understood, the individuality of ascetic practice cannot be understood in isolation from the monastic as a member of a social order. She asserts that the Buddhist meditator cannot be

defined or typified as either *moi* or *personne* alone but must incorporate both. Building on Louis Dumont's theory of renunciation and individuality, Cook argues that to discuss the renouncer only as individual would be to miss the complex layers of social organization and hierarchy in which each monastic is embedded.

My one quarrel with this book grows from one of its positive attributes. There are many themes in this ethnographic account—gender and the role of *mae chee*, the effect of meditation on the ethical self, the role of language and emotion in the monastic context, gift and exchange—each one highly developed. Some themes, such as the discussion of non-self and its relation to solitary meditation and communal monastic environments, recur. The themes, however, are not closely tied together and so each successive chapter does not build on the previous chapters and the book does not present a tightly constructed argument. Despite this, it is clear that in her first book Cook has already contributed much to the fields of anthropology and Buddhist studies.

In my view, this book will become required reading for those interested in gender studies, meditation, monasticism, Buddhist studies, and anthropology. It moves forward specific conversations on modern Buddhism and meditation's role in society, but it also importantly furthers anthropological and religious studies questioning of the formation of the religious self and the constructions of religion in this global era.