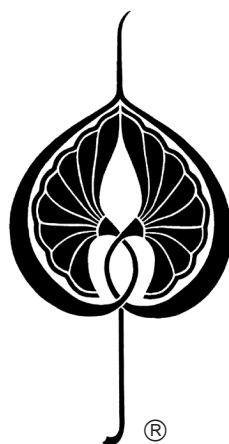


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## **Forest as Challenge, Forest as Healer: Reinterpretations and Hybridity within the Forest Tradition of Thailand**

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The forest has held an ambiguous and ambivalent place in Buddhist history. It is featured prominently in major moments of the Buddha's life story as the place of his birth, enlightenment, and death. It is also perceived as a place of fear, resistance, escape, sickness, spirits, danger, and temptation. In contrast to these negative attributes, the forest has been described as a place to encounter nature free from distractions; it embodies solitude, peace, and tranquility. How can one resolve these differing notions? Why does this ambivalence exist? How have all of these meanings changed over time?

This essay looks at the rhetoric of the forest in Buddhist thought by tracing the ambivalent attitudes of the forest within the Pāli canon, to meanings of the forest as described in popular Thai forest biographies, and finally to contemporary Buddhist writings, both from Thailand and Western countries. The Pāli canon suggests the best place to practice is the natural world; it is isolating and challenging at first but soon can help transform the mind. The forest tradition of Thailand depicts the forest as more than just isolating, but rather dangerous and fearful. In contemporary times there is hardly any trace of the forest as a fearful place because it is instead depicted as sacred, and there is a feeling of merging with the natural world that aids awakening. In his recent book, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David McMahan points to a change in the meaning of the forest as Buddhism developed. He states that the reverence for nature is not apparent in the Pāli canon, which he finds ambivalent toward the wilderness. There is no appreciation of nature for nature's sake, no sense that nature is sacred.<sup>1</sup> This paper shows how this change, from ambivalence toward nature to nature as sacred, occurred within the forest tradition of Thailand.

The change seen in these conceptions of the forest can be explained by cultural and religious hybridities. Hybridities studies explore the global context in terms of flows of ideas, people, and economies through all forms of media. Marwan Kraidy in her book uses case studies of hybrid cultures to show the wide applicability of hybridities.<sup>2</sup> Kraidy finds that hybridity in modern times is not homogenizing but also does not produce complete heterogeneity. In the forest tradition this kind of hybrid formation is apparent where there is a mixing of ideas of the forest as challenging and also peaceful. Both of these ideas are established in the Pāli canon, as this article details, but find more overt expressions when connected with other social discourses. I use hybridity in this broad sense in order to capture the spectrum of mixing that occurs over time during different moments of encounter and exchange.

McMahan also uses hybridity to describe Buddhism in North America. He argues that this consists of a hybrid of indigenous Buddhist concepts with discourses of psychology, Romanticism, and science. The result is something neither dominated by Buddhist ideas nor by discourses of modernity. Indigenous Buddhist concepts, appropriated in a modern context, reveal a hybrid process drawing on Western ideas and concepts.<sup>3</sup> Within the modern-day forest tradition of Thailand modern romanticist ideas of nature are mixed with early Buddhist conceptions that advocate practice in the forest. I conceive of the modern transformation of the forest as a hybrid, bringing together the ambivalence of the early tradition with discourses of modernity. This paper presents how particular manifestations of modernity have created a hybrid understanding of the forest in the Buddhist tradition.

#### FOREST MONK, VILLAGE MONK

In early Theravāda Buddhist history there emerged a distinction between monks who practiced in the forest and those who settled in villages and towns. Reginald Ray labels the Buddha and his earliest disciples as saints of the forest and uses their significance to argue that forest renunciants should be represented in a separate category within Buddhist studies, alongside settled monastics and laity. Ray argues that forest renunciants were the earliest paradigm for normative Buddhism, and the only paradigm before the tradition became institutionalized.<sup>4</sup> After monasteries became established near villages, the paradigm of town monk emerged. As an ideal type, the forest dweller corresponds

to the vocation of meditation and the village dweller to study of the Buddhist teachings and interaction with the laity. Taylor writes of the history of the forest tradition and how after meeting his teacher, Ajahn Man, Ajahn Mahā Boowa (var. Mahabua) “turned away from scholastic or book pursuits (*kanthathura*) to kammathaan [practices of the forest monk] practices. This narration of ‘turning away’ from scholastic worldly pursuits is symbolically important in the charisma building of a forest monk.”<sup>5</sup> However, these two vocations are not mutually exclusive since forest monks may study and village monks may practice meditation and monastics can move between these two roles. Indeed, in response to Ray’s creation of the separate category for the early forest renunciants, Kapstein argues that instead early Buddhist monks could have spent time in both the monastery and the forest.<sup>6</sup>

Tambiah discusses the differences between village and forest temples in his book, *Forest Saints and the Cult of Amulets*. He concludes that the forest temple has more monks than novices, that all are expected to practice meditation, and that the community is seen as a group of professionals, which includes laity not only on ritual days but also during meditation retreats.<sup>7</sup> The village monastery, in contrast, is more closely connected to the sangha hierarchy, and in most temples, young monks and novices are expected to seek education while also fulfilling their duties of participating in chanting and merit-making ceremonies for the laity. Settled village monasteries developed alongside the forest movement so that today there is still a distinction between these two types.

The developments of new movements and interactions of both types with the state have featured prominently in the history of Theravāda Buddhism in general and Thai Buddhism specifically. Thailand received this bifurcated classification of monasteries from Sri Lanka. King Lithai of the Ayutthaya era established a sangha organization based on the division of town and forest monasteries, as can be found in the Thai chronicles from this period.<sup>8</sup> The periods of ascendancy between town and forest monasteries waxed and waned until the monk Ajahn Mun initiated a revival for the forest tradition beginning in the 1920s. Because of the popularity of this lineage, forest monks today are treated as exemplary followers of the Buddha’s path and have become famous nationally and internationally for their teachings.

Originally comprised of individual wandering monks, forest practices eventually became institutionalized as well. Yet forest monasteries

still maintain their distance from the center by not participating in larger community activities. This contrasts with village monks who must be more attuned to annual community rituals.<sup>9</sup> Taylor also quotes Ajahn Mahā Boowa as saying that forest monks “should continue to live in the forests and hills so as to find quiet places to do the work of a recluse (*Samana-Dhamma*) without being too involved in other duties not considered really necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

Parnwell and Seeger find that some monks practicing in Thai forest monasteries today continue to distance themselves from ritual communities. They interviewed a forest monk who agreed that forest and village monasteries are distinct. This monk interpreted village monasteries to be a place where one must perform rituals and where the abbot acts as an exorcist. He sees this as a contrast to the forest monastery where it is easy to organize meditation teachings and dhamma talks. This monk was happy not to have to comply with villagers’ needs, and he refuses to perform folk festivals in his monastery.<sup>11</sup> Ajahn Mahā Boowa, in reference to the awkwardness of forest monks who are invited to take part in ceremonial functions writes that they “are not used to the ways of society and all the formalities of these functions. For they have never had much occasion to get involved in society and their ceremonies.”<sup>12</sup> He finds that they also rarely go to these functions because they are not the kind of events forest monks find interesting.<sup>13</sup> With this background in mind, the next section discusses the meanings of the forest as seen in the Pāli canon, Thai forest monk biographies, and in modern reinterpretations.

#### THE FOREST IN THE PĀLI CANON

Since the Pāli canon literature is vast it is difficult to make a definitive statement about meanings of the forest in these texts. Yet in general the forest is depicted as a tool for awareness development that contributes to peaceful and contented attitudes of monks. Swearer writes that the textual record “testifies to the importance of forests, as a preferred environment for spiritual practices such as meditation as well as a place where laity sought instruction.”<sup>14</sup>

Specific examples can also be found in *Vakkali’s Verses* (*Theragāthā* 350–354) and *Dantika’s Verses* (*Therīgāthā* 39–62), as well as the *Gaṇaka-Mogallāna-sutta*, in which living in a remote spot is recommended.<sup>15</sup> In these verses the forest is seen as a place to develop awakening, to train one’s mind to remain firm in one’s effort, and to begin to overcome

mental hindrances. In the *Mahā-samaya-sutta*, the forest is a functional and sacred place for meetings among monks which *devas* of all kinds also seek to attend.<sup>16</sup> Harrison points out that in the “Forest Suttas” section of the *Samyutta-nikaya* (S.I. 197–206), forest-dwelling practitioners are frequently taught and reproved by deities and other supernatural beings apart from the Buddha; the forest is a place to encounter this supernatural world.<sup>17</sup> Thus it is a place where one can witness the peacefulness, contentedness, and serenity of the holy ones who live there.<sup>18</sup>

But the forest can be challenging. In the *Bhaya-bherava-sutta*, the Buddha and a Brahmin converse about how the forest is a difficult place to live because it is so isolated. The Brahmin complains to the Buddha, “it’s not easy to endure isolated forest or wilderness dwellings. It’s not easy to maintain seclusion, not easy to enjoy being alone. The forest, as it were, plunders the mind of a monk who has not attained concentration.”<sup>19</sup> Thus the forest is a difficult place for one who has not attained a level of concentration in meditation, but eventually the forest changes to a pleasant place of enjoyment, once one has overcome problems with isolation and concentration. Perhaps the most well-known quote regarding this from the Pāli canon is in the *Khaggavisāṇa-sutta*, which advocates one to act

As a deer in the wilds,  
unfettered,  
goes for forage wherever it wants:  
the wise person, valuing freedom,  
wanders alone  
like a rhinoceros.<sup>20</sup>

Harrison also finds this isolation of the forest praised in the early texts. He writes that “life in the forest was seen to be conducive to meditation, life in the urban monastery inimical to it.”<sup>21</sup> Ascetic practices such as living in the forest were thought to enhance the contemplative life. This again exemplifies the positive side of practicing in the forest; it allows one freedom and unfettered space for practice even if one feels isolated at first.

Another sutta that depicts the forest as a place of practice is the *Bhaddiya Kāḷigodhā-sutta*. In this sutta the Venerable Bhaddiya Kāḷigodhā “on going to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, would repeatedly exclaim, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’” Bhaddiya Kāḷigodhā explains that he used to be a householder with much property and people to guard it. However, despite his material possessions, he still felt fear

and agitation. But upon entering the forest he says: “I dwell without fear, unagitated, confident and unafraid—unconcerned, unruffled, my wants satisfied, with my mind like a wild deer.”<sup>22</sup> The forest here embodies freedom from worldly possessions and desires.

This is far from a comprehensive look at the Pāli canon’s relationship to the forest, but from this small selection we do see the forest depicted as a place of isolation where one can train one’s mind and a place where one can eventually feel tranquil by following the Buddha’s path. The forest is a difficult place to live but once certain hardships can be endured, the forest can enable a simpler lifestyle. For many of the early disciples of the Buddha, time spent in the forest contributed to their contentedness and serenity. This can be seen as well in the Mahāyāna sutras, most notably through Daniel Boucher’s work on the *Rāṣṭrapālapariṣcchā-sūtra* (Questions of Rāṣṭrapāla) titled *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna*. He translates that the authors of this text advise readers to “‘take pleasure in the wilderness’ (13.17), to take ‘pleasure in lodging in secluded hinterlands’ (14.14–15), to ‘always dwell in forests and caves’ (15.1), and to ‘frequent the wilderness and manifold hinterlands’ (16.3).”<sup>23</sup> Here is the exhortation to practice in the forest and benefit from its pleasures. But we have seen there is also discomfort and isolation related to the forest so that a mix of uneasiness and pleasure characterizes the early Buddhist conceptions of the forest.

Both tendencies of challenge and healing are seen in the literature from the Pāli canon. This tension is depicted in many more examples of Buddhist literature than can be quoted here. These two tendencies are given more overt expression in different ways. The first generation of Thai forest monks, with their wandering lifestyles through vast stretches of forest, portrayed their experiences as fearful and challenging. This reinterpretation brings a different shade of meaning to the tamer ideas of isolation and difficult forest lifestyles related in the Pāli canon. More contemporary forest monks, with the forests tamed and the influence of modernization, reinterpret the forest as a place of escape from modern busy lifestyles. Each reinterpretation constitutes a hybrid formation of ideas and brings a new level of understanding about the forest in the Thai forest tradition.

## THAI FOREST MONKS' BIOGRAPHIES

This section covers the discourses of the forest found in Thai forest monks' biographies, especially those of Ajahn Mun and some of his disciples such as Ajahns Lee and Khao. Ajahn Mun's biography was made famous by his disciple Ajahn Mahā Boowa, published under royal patronage in 1971. Ajahn Mun became a famous forest monk in the 1930s, and his disciples followed his way of life until the 1960s when the forests of Thailand became invaded for their abundant resources. Thus the disciples eventually became settled monastics, but the forest still featured prominently in their lives and teachings. These biographies reveal much about the nature of the forest at this time period. In continuity with the Pāli canon, the forest is still seen as a place of challenge and freedom and a place where one is advised to practice. But while looking for common themes in their writings, it is clear that beyond seeing the forest as merely isolating, the forest monks also find a place of fear, a place of wild animals and uncertainty where mindfulness must be constantly employed.

The biographies of the forest tradition have been studied by three notable scholars: Stanley Tambiah, James Taylor, and Kamala Tiyavanich.<sup>24</sup> These authors seek to understand the relationship between the forest tradition and nation-state and to account for the popularity of the movement. Taylor's book looks broadly at the history of the forest tradition and its relationship to the reform tradition of the Thammayut in Thailand. He traces the forest tradition's eventual institutionalization by the settled monastics of the Thammayut and the complex interplay between state and sangha in early twentieth-century northeastern Thailand. Tambiah looks in depth at the biography of Ajahn Mun and traces the connections between charisma and hagiography of Buddhist saints. He delineates the polarities between town and forest monks, focusing primarily on the description of forest monks within their broad historical landscape. Tiyavanich focuses on Ajahn Mun and many of his disciples' biographies to tell the life stories of the forest monks. She also analyzes what she sees as the nation-state's undoing of local traditions through standardization of the tradition and the forest closure period. Tiyavanich's project of describing the lives of the wandering monks comes closest to my project here; however, the thesis of this article focuses more closely on the meanings of the forest. I use these authors' insights but move the account



forward in history in order to discuss the meanings of the forest to modern interpreters who came to join the forest tradition.

### *Fear and Challenge*

Similar to the Pāli canon literature, in the Thai forest tradition, the forest is seen as a productive place to practice because it offers a challenge to one's mind. Thai forest monks often state this and write about the fears encountered while living in the forest. They argue that living in the forest keeps one alert because of the fear and challenge of the forest environment. The biographies and stories of forest monks are filled with discussions of how they often are faced with dangerous situations while living in the forest. As well the forest is described as wild, lonely, and desolate. Thus it is not seen primarily as a peaceful place, but one that keeps the forest monk alert with mindfulness. Ajahn Khao is recorded as saying that every *dhutaṅga* (a group of thirteen ascetic practices commonly observed by forest monks) monk is afraid of death and one part of the heart does not want to go into the forest, but if one is determined, that is what must be done.<sup>25</sup>

Famous forest masters Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Mahā Boowa discuss fear as both enemy and teacher. Ajahn Mun is quoted as saying that “of all the enemies to his life in the forest, the greatest is likely to be fear,”<sup>26</sup> while Ajahn Mahā Boowa says that the forest monk “will look for a place that arouses fear in order to help him to arouse the effort to do his work more easily.”<sup>27</sup> Ajahn Mahā Boowa continues this discourse as he discusses the usefulness of wild animals, such as tigers, in this effort. Tigers are especially known to arouse fear quickly as just seeing their footprints creates “a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in the place where he is staying.”<sup>28</sup> This creates, for the forest monk, a state of watchfulness from which diligence arises.

Ajahn Mahā Boowa illustrates this when he relates a story of a layman (*upāsaka*) accompanying a forest monk who was significantly changed by his encounter with a tiger. After the forest monk hears of this encounter, he calls the tiger the *upāsaka*'s teacher and concludes that since their meeting “The *Upāsaka* worked hard at his meditation practice and got rid of all his opinionated conceit so that he was transformed into a good person both inwardly and outwardly. From the time that the tiger came to help and train him, even though it was only one night, there was nothing that one could blame in the *Upāsaka*.”<sup>29</sup> Thus the fear of the tiger is what created this positive result for this

man. The tiger trained him to be a better person through this fear, and the *upāsaka* was significantly affected by this encounter. Ajahn Mahā Boowa quotes Ajahn Mun discussing the value of tigers also. He says that “They [the forest monks] must consider the forests and hills as being places of death for those who are afraid of tigers.... But until they have got rid of fear in whatever they are afraid of, they must not leave....”<sup>30</sup> It is not enough to be in the presence of tigers but to stay until the fear has been lifted.

Instead of a fearful and timid person, the forest transforms the forest monk into a warrior. Forests are thus a “suitable battleground for getting rid of fear in his heart.”<sup>31</sup> Ajahn Mun furthers this warrior image by saying that “living under the shade of a tree in a desolate forest is like going into the front line of battle,”<sup>32</sup> and “To live in the forest in the right way a person must be a warrior.”<sup>33</sup> For Ajahn Mun this is the place where one can gain support in the practice of meditation and feel liberated by making progress toward diminishing the hindrances of the mind. Ajahn Mahā Boowa explains that Ajahn Mun felt that the forest was “without a doubt the most appropriate battlefield to choose in one’s struggle to attain all levels of Dhamma.”<sup>34</sup> Thus ideas of struggle, battle, and challenge predominate the depictions of the forest in these forest monk accounts. The forest monks indicate that this fear is necessary to train the mind and produce the mindfulness needed to conquer their fears.

### *Mindfulness*

The use to which forest monks put their fear is increased mindfulness, so the forest is also a place to develop awareness. Ajahn Lee lists a number of reasons he will continue to wander in forests throughout his life, and all involve aspects of mindfulness. He argues that wandering in the forest allows one to observe the environment and take lessons from how animals live. It sharpens one’s senses if one is alone in the forest because one must always be alert for danger. One can reflect on the teachings of the Buddha there without societal distraction.<sup>35</sup>

Ajahns of the forest tradition argue that the forest keeps the *dhutaṅga* monk focused on the task of attaining dhamma. Because of the living conditions, forest monks retain their diligence. In Ajahn Mahā Boowa’s companion volume to Ajahn Mun’s biography called *Paṭipadā: Venerable Ācariya Mun’s Path of Practice*, he describes Ajahn Mun’s teaching style. He writes of Ajahn Mun, “In those wild forests you will be able

to get rid of all kinds of laziness and fear. A lazy or timid person should go and live in such a place for it will help him to develop effort and diligence and also to overcome his fears.”<sup>36</sup> Ajahn Mahā Boowa writes similarly of a forest monk, Ajahn Chob, who found that whenever he left the forest “his heart tended to be lazy, careless and over confident and he had little interest in helping himself.... He ate more food than when he was living in more rigorous conditions, and he also slept a lot and was more lazy.”<sup>37</sup> Ajahn Mahā Boowa comments, “The force of the fear of danger drives [forest-dwelling monks] to be watchful and careful and to maintain mindfulness.... Those who live in desolate, lonely places ... therefore have a much better opportunity to promote their striving in this way than have those who stay where they feel safe and secure and where they feel no anxiety at all....”<sup>38</sup>

Ajahn Mun also found forest dwelling conducive to meditation and awakening the senses. He finds that in addition to the Buddha’s prescription of living in the forest, it is valuable because one doesn’t have distractions or involvements.<sup>39</sup> Meditating in the natural surroundings of a forest environment makes the mind feel “constantly on the alert, earnestly focusing on its primary objective—the transcendence of *dukkha*.”<sup>40</sup>

The isolation of the forest, it is argued, creates an increase in mindfulness as well as makes dhamma practice easier than in places that cause agitation and restlessness. The isolation pushes the *kilesas* (ignorance, greed, delusion) to the forefront of one’s mind so one can destroy them. Ajahn Mun describes the forest as having an eerie solitude of which “the constant fear of danger can motivate the mind to focus undivided attention.”<sup>41</sup> Ajahn Mahā Boowa remarks that remote forests are the right place to cut off all forms of *dukkha*, where a person can hone in on exactly what they need to understand in order to overcome the *kilesas*.<sup>42</sup> Ajahn Lee, in his autobiography, writes that living in the forest allows him to observe influences of the environment. The forest is a place to sharpen your mindfulness so that “rust won’t have a chance to take hold.”<sup>43</sup>

In these Thai forest monks’ biographies we see interpretations similar to the Pāli canon regarding the difficulties of forest living and also the necessity of overcoming this to attain *nibbāna*. But here there is more focus on actual danger rather than just feelings of isolation. There are no worldly distractions in the forest, so this aids in the development of mindfulness, but there is also fear of the unknown

wilderness that creates alertness. The next section demonstrates how the meanings of the forest become further developed in contemporary times so that there is less focus on danger and more on the peaceful, natural settings of forest living.

#### MODERN REINTERPRETATIONS

By the mid-1960s news of Ajahn Chah, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, had spread to Euro-Americans traveling within Thailand and Southeast Asia. Speaking of Ajahn Mun, Louis Gabaude writes: "His radical way of life and practice of strict mental discipline miles away from merit-making or protective rituals, in a pristine, natural environment appealed to westerners who found there a genuine and original way of practice beyond religion, and a monastic tradition previously unknown to them."<sup>44</sup> In 1967 an American monk named Ajahn Sumedho came to stay at Ajahn Chah's monastery called Wat Pah Pong. After this, other Euro-Americans came to Wat Pah Pong, and after five years as a monk, Ajahn Sumedho became the abbot of a new international forest monastery called Wat Nong Pah Nanachat. Later, Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Chah visited England to establish a branch monastery of the forest tradition. Soon after, the first monastery was created, Cittaviveka in Chithurst, followed by a number of other Ajahn Chah branch monasteries throughout England, France, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Italy, Canada, and the United States.<sup>45</sup>

In the contemporary period the forest tradition has expanded to far-reaching locations; however, the forest itself has experienced tremendous physical change. Ajahn Khao describes the forest in 1940s northeastern Thailand as thick with overgrown flora, where wild elephants and tigers roamed, and the few people there traveled not by car or boat but by foot and buffalo cart.<sup>46</sup> The Buddhist monks in contemporary Thailand do not have such lush and dangerous forests in which to roam and wander, but the forest still occupies a space for them within the tradition. This section shows how the accounts of contemporary forest monks' relationships with the forest differ from the forest monks' biographies. Using both Euro-American monks such as Ajahn Sumedho and others within the Ajahn Chah lineage, as well as contemporary Thai forest monks and nuns such as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu and his disciples, the following discusses how meanings of the forest have been reshaped and reinterpreted since further encounters with modernity, Westernization, and globalization, thus creating

a hybrid discourse of indigenous Buddhist ideas about the forest with these new encounters.

McMahan argues that “many staples of Buddhist modernist literature—the exaltitude of nature, the idea of spiritual experience as identifying with the natural world or a universal spirit ... owe much to the intertwining of Buddhism and Romanticist-Transcendentalist stream of thought.”<sup>47</sup> McMahan goes on to assert that modern Buddhist ideas have mixed with Romanticism so that society and nature have become opposed. In this discourse, the West becomes identified with consumerist city life and the East offers hope for a more natural lifestyle.<sup>48</sup> Therefore some modern Buddhists look to the East for a less artificial way of life, corresponding with Romantic thought. McMahan writes that for Romantics and Transcendentalists, nature “militates against contrivance; the voice within is not the voice of society with its conventions and rules.”<sup>49</sup> Influenced by these ideas, for modern Buddhists the forest becomes a place to seek out solitude not only for aid in meditation and to lessen worldly distractions but also for its own sake, to be rid of society in general. Thus it is not perceived as a dangerous place with fearsome animals and other beings, and meditation is not its only purpose.

This can be seen in the discourses of the “naturalness” forest. In the contemporary forest monk writings, the forest is emphasized as peaceful and tranquil with no mention of fear or challenge. The second aspect of this modern discourse of the forest portrays it as a place to escape modernity and the effects of globalization. The forest, for these Buddhist thinkers, has stopped in time and constitutes an unfettered lifestyle. These ideas can be seen in the brochure for Wat Pah Nanachat titled “The International Forest Monastery” where it states, “Far from the stress and busyness that afflict city life, a tranquil, natural setting provides the perfect environment for developing peace and wisdom. Forest monasteries in Thailand provide a calm atmosphere of silence and solitude.”<sup>50</sup> The statements here show the forest as a tranquil spot away from modernity, and a place of peace where one can be at one with nature. This is not to say that there is no discussion of wild animals or fear in more modern forest tradition writings. There is some of this discourse remaining; however, it is infrequent and certainly the ideas of being at one with nature and the forest as an antidote to modernity predominate.

*One with Nature*

One of the most pronounced reinterpretations of the forest's meaning is the idea that the forest engenders a connection with nature. This can be seen in both the Pāli canon's and Thai forest tradition's ideas about the forest; however, the modern reinterpretation takes this further. It depicts the forest primarily as a site to understand nature and how it relates to the dhamma. This feeling for nature is, as discussed above, connected with the tradition of Romanticism. Carrithers argues that this influenced the well-known German forest-monk in Sri Lanka, Nyanatiloka.<sup>51</sup> Carrithers finds that some European monks originally had an interest in German Romanticism, which later developed into an interest in Buddhism. For them the idea of the forest as solitary and private was fundamental to conversion to a committed Buddhist lifestyle within the Sri Lankan forest lineage.<sup>52</sup>

This idea of being at one with nature is seen in writings of second- and third-generation forest monks, both Thai and Euro-American. Speaking of the forests of Tao Dam Forest Monastery in Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, contemporary forest monk Pañnavuḍḍho Bhikkhu writes, "the natural habitat and wildlife make me feel deeply enmeshed in nature. Biologists and botanists who visit speak with great enthusiasm about the diversity of the ecological surroundings. The place is a tropical paradise."<sup>53</sup> Thus this forest monk feels close with nature in this forest monastery, praising its beauty and ecological wonders. This discourse continues with Venerable Santacitto, who writes about how the forests can be of benefit in modern society. "Trees pull us up; especially in our modern materialistic society. To a large extent we have lost touch with our ability to really be with nature. We've forgotten how it functions to help us turn in to our inner nature."<sup>54</sup> The forests provide freedom from modern society and also the conditions to understand our own nature. This is a far different idea of the forest than Ajahn Mun's generation who used the forest more for its production of fear and uncertainty and less for its wonder and awe.

In the introduction to *A Still Forest Pool*, Jack Kornfield and Paul Breiter romanticize the forest monasteries of northeast Thailand, describing them thus: "there is the stillness of trees rustling and the quiet movement of monks doing chores or mindful walking meditation,"<sup>55</sup> "the whole forest setting supports the atmosphere of simplicity and renunciation."<sup>56</sup> In the same book they quote Ajahn Chah as saying that in the forest one learns from nature. "Here in the forest where a monk

can learn to contemplate the nature of things, he can live happily and peacefully. As he looks around, he understands that all forms of life degenerate and eventually die.”<sup>57</sup> So in these contemporary writings the reader is advised to observe nature, take in its peacefulness, and in this way learn about reality. There is no mention of fear or uncertainty, but there is a focus on the simple, natural setting of the forest.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu also understands the forest as embodying the liberating power of nature. He sees nature as dhamma, and this inspired him to found Wat Suan Mokkh as a forest monastery in 1932. He believes we feel a sense of peace and transcendence of the self in the forest. It is nature that shows a way out of suffering and a separation from the troubles of the everyday world.<sup>58</sup> Buddhadāsa adheres to a view of the intrinsic dhammic value of nature because nature engenders well-being and serves as a teacher of the mind and spirit.<sup>59</sup> Thus Buddhadāsa argues that nature teaches us as we observe it, and we need this in the modern world filled with materialism. This kind of teaching is quite changed from the practice of encountering wild animals in order to produce mindfulness.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu continues this trope as he also speaks of the ways nature can heal humanity. Jack Kornfield writes of his talk with Ajahn Buddhadāsa: “Ajahn Buddhadāsa spoke of the healing power of the trees and walkways of Suan Mokkh. When I asked him how so many Westerners who begin spiritual life with deep inner wounds, pain, and self-hatred, can best approach practice [Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu responded that] they should be taken out into nature, into beautiful forests or mountains. They must stay there long enough to realize that they too are part of nature.”<sup>60</sup>

Present here is also the idea that natural living in the forest connects one to the Buddha and his time. Kornfield and Breiter write that one has to leave the city temples where monks study, chant, and preach “to find the simple life of dwelling in the forest, the meditative living with robe and bowl, as old as the Buddha himself.”<sup>61</sup> They continue to praise the forest tradition as the place where one can find what one reads about the Buddha, wandering with his monks in the forests of India, a life of simplicity and meditation, supported by alms-food, and dwelling in the forest. It is here that monks are intent “to live fully and realize in their own hearts and minds the insight and inner peace taught by the Buddha.”<sup>62</sup>

This discourse is also illustrated in the booklet about Wat Pah Nanachat: “The contemporary Thai forest Tradition ... is a down-to-earth, ‘back to roots’ movement that models its practice and lifestyle on that of the Buddha and his first generation of disciples. The advent of the modern age notwithstanding, forest monasteries still keep alive the ancient traditions through following the Buddhist monastic code of discipline (*vinaya*) in all its detail and developing meditation in secluded forests.”<sup>63</sup> These contemporary enthusiasts for the forest dhamma thus feel that in the forest one can live like the Buddha, but also through the practitioner’s appreciation of nature, one can be at peace. Mae Chii Aree Kieatthubthew, a student of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, in a dhamma talk regularly given at the International Dhamma Hermitage<sup>64</sup> writes that, “when we are in the forest, we will learn to appreciate not only its natural beauty but also peace in our mind.”<sup>65</sup> She finds that in the forest we can “learn about one’s self and learn about the nature of existence.”<sup>66</sup>

Here we see a sharp focus on how the forest can teach humanity how to live and the feelings of peace and wonder that arise simply from being in nature alone. The appreciation of nature itself is emphasized here so that the forest is no longer just a place of isolation with no distractions, no longer used for the fear it can induce, but has immense value in and of itself.

#### *Escape from and Challenge to Modernity*

Ajahn Mahā Boowa comments in Ajahn Khao’s biography that one should dress appropriately when visiting a forest monastery because forest monks are so accustomed to living in the forest that they have become a part of it. When they see lots of people and material progress they see a departure from the dhamma and are dismayed. Ajahn Khao would disappear into the outlying forests if many people came to his forest monastery because he couldn’t withstand the current of the world.<sup>67</sup> Here we see Ajahn Khao’s resistance to modernity, but for him the forest is an escape because he is used to the forest life and finds it hard to deal with modern progress. This section shows how the escape from modernity of contemporary forest monks is a resistance to living in the modern world and how these monks find the forest to be an antidote. Ajahn Chah writes, “People outside may call us mad to live in the forest like this, sitting like statues. But how do they live?”<sup>68</sup> Thus there is a critique here of modern life and the forest can provide a



place opposed to this. The critique illuminates how the forest is a challenge to the city and societal living as well as man-made culture and technology that creates a distance from ourselves and nature.

Thus it is emphasized that forests are removed from man-made technologies. Ajahn Kevali, abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, discusses the forest in these terms. He has stated that the technique of the forest monastery is to have one's lifestyle immersed in nature so as to learn from nature. When sitting under a tree one doesn't see anything determined by human intention.<sup>69</sup> Ajahn Jayasāro of Wat Pah Nanachat also finds the forest is uninhibited by man-made creations. He writes, "So we lead a very simple life, one bared down to the essentials, not surrounded by anything man-made or anything that's going to pull you out of yourself."<sup>70</sup>

Maechii Pairor, a student of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and a long-time teacher at the International Dhamma Hermitage, discusses in one of her dhamma talks a vision of nature that coincides with the tropes of Romanticism. She believes that humans have lost connection to the forest through the artificial constructs of society: "At present, we are surrounded by a man-made culture until we have lost the possibility to observe things like the tides, the seasons, and other natural changes, and in this loss we have become afraid of being alone with nature. Instead we feel lonely in a forest, and cannot absorb the serenity offered by nature."<sup>71</sup> Mae Chii Aree believes that one can find peace without technology. She writes, "But after a few days in the forest—a few days without TV, cell phone, MP3 player, or ipod, iphone, computer, Internet—we may feel peace developing gradually and slowly in our hearts."<sup>72</sup> This shows the aversion to modern living that contemporary Buddhists are displaying, with its antidote being natural living in a forest setting. Thus some of these contemporary forest monastics reveal anti-modernity sentiments. This caused a reinterpretation of the tradition where the forest is perceived more as a place of escape from man-made culture, rather than a place of fear and challenge to the mind.

In addition to man-made objects and technology, the forest also provides a space apart from the influence of cities and societal living. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu speaks of the forest as providing a way to live naturally, apart from cities and material items. He is recorded as saying in one of his dhamma talks titled "Forest Wat Wild Monks": "The meaning of 'wild monk' is to live naturally.... Even now, we see

that we're sitting on the ground, which is much different than in the city wats. Here, we sit on the seat of the Buddha—the ground. This is one example for you to understand what nature is like, and how different it is from the cities, and how different are the hearts of those who come sit and interact with Nature."<sup>73</sup> Thus the town monasteries, it is argued, have compromised the natural forest lifestyle by not living as closely with nature.

Ajahn Chah also contrasts city living with living in the forest. Paul Breiter translates him as saying: "Living in the city, we live among distraction and disturbance. In the forest, there is quiet and tranquility. We can contemplate things clearly and develop wisdom. So we take this quiet and tranquility as our friend and helper. Such an environment is conducive to Dharma practice, so we take it as our dwelling place; we take the mountains and caves for our refuge. Observing natural phenomena, wisdom comes about in such places."<sup>74</sup> Thus there is learning and reflection of nature that forests create as opposed to cities and modern living, which are unnatural.

In another collection of dhamma talks, Ajahn Chah finds that the forest is a place to store up one's wisdom to get ready to go back into the city. He is quoted as saying, "Here in the forest we can sow and cultivate the seeds of wisdom. Living amongst chaos and turmoil these seeds have difficulty in growing, but once we have learned to live in the forest, we can return and contend with the city and all the stimulation of the senses that it brings us. Learning to live in the forest means to allow wisdom to grow and develop. We can then apply this wisdom no matter where we go."<sup>75</sup> Contemporary forest monks and nuns are attracted to this lineage, in many cases, because they are frustrated with modern life. They find it chaotic and meaningless. The forest becomes the antidote for this, a place to renew a connection to traditional and premodern ways of living. Thai forest monks were wary of worldly things and material development as well and tried to hide from them. But they did this because they wanted to maintain dhamma, not recreate a more traditional time period. The simplification of life in the forest monastery in contemporary times is a release from contemporary interactions with society.

Ajahn Sumedho also calls attention to this distinction in his article "The Forest Tradition as a Challenge to the Modern World." He emphasizes that the forest is a place that is untouched, uninfluenced, and uncorrupted by the desires and ignorance of humanity.<sup>76</sup> Thus, it

is the ultimate natural environment in contrast to modern urban society, which is characterized as corrupt and artificial. For him, the forest challenges the assumptions of modern life, the conceits of the modern Western world.<sup>77</sup> The forest, in his words, “offers the modern world a gift.” He believes this gift is a truth that has been forgotten.<sup>78</sup>

Well-known Thai monk Phra Phaisan Visalo also sees the forest monastery as a challenge to modern society. He calls forest monasteries spaces of resistance that question the validity of popular values.<sup>79</sup> He believes that they play the role of a “retreat center where people who are worn out by competition in society can heal themselves and recover their wholeness through meditation, relaxation, and reflection upon themselves with a new approach to life.”<sup>80</sup> Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu is quoted as saying that “The deep sense of calm that nature provides through separation from the stress that plagues us in the day-to-day world protects our heart and mind. The lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond suffering caused by our acquisitive self-preoccupation.”<sup>81</sup> Thus forest monasteries are the beginnings of a change in social patterns where new values can be expressed.

In these modern reinterpretations we see that different meanings of the forest are emphasized, such as being close with nature and moving away from modernity and globalization. Nature becomes appreciated for its own sake in addition to being an avenue for better practice through its distance from modern living. For contemporary forest monks, being in nature is pleasant and peaceful from the start—there is no longer fear of spirits or wild animals—only tranquility. Certainly a factor in this is the domestication of the forest in Thailand, but it also has to do with modern ideas of tranquility in nature, the idea of being at one with nature via Romantic and Transcendentalist thought, and the forest as an antidote to city living. The contemporary monastics of the forest tradition, through their writings, produce a hybrid formation of the rhetorics of the forest in Buddhist thought. They mix the indigenous Buddhist attitude of simplicity and peacefulness that the forest can bring with modern attitudes toward nature. Through this the tranquility of the forest becomes amplified and the challenge the forest poses to one’s practice is downgraded.

#### CONCLUSION

The Forest Sangha website’s passage on the history of the forest tradition sums up the two discourses of the first-generation forest

lineage period and the modern period, infused with Western categories. It states: "The Buddha's disciples who chose to undertake these dhutanga practices and live austerely in the forest did so for many reasons: because dwelling in the wilderness with its ruggedness and danger, such as tigers and snakes, provided an excellent arena for spiritual training and overcoming fear; because the wilderness with its simplicity, quietude and natural beauty provided a place for pleasant, peaceful abiding and joyful meditative concentration."<sup>82</sup> These two reasons for living in the forest stated above are actually two separate discourses that have changed over time. The first emphasizes the fear and challenge of the forest experienced by the first generation; the second stresses the romanticist-infused aspects of the forest as a pleasant, simple, and peaceful place.

This case study of the meanings of the forest in the Thai tradition fits into the recent emphasis in Buddhist studies on hybridity and reinterpretations as a way to analyze Buddhist modernism.<sup>83</sup> The Pāli canon writings of the forest and the forest tradition of Thailand already contained the qualities of escaping the distractions of the world and meditating in solitude, but through interactions with discourses of modernity such as Romanticism, this is accentuated. The forest becomes a place to escape modernity. It is a challenge to twenty-first century living, instead of just a challenge to the mind, and becomes a symbol of anti-modernism against materialism and narratives of progress and development. Forest monasteries were always places of natural surroundings and solitude, but this meaning is extended for contemporary interlocutors. Nature itself becomes entwined with the teachings of the Buddha. These reinterpretations show the range of expressions present from which to draw in the Buddhist tradition. The reinventions are not radical changes but are developed and finessed to fit new contexts and discourses of debate about modernity and globalization.

These discourses of modernity that have created hybrid formations with indigenous Buddhist concepts show one of the ways religion adapts and reacts to the contemporary world. There is a growing need to understand new religious formations and how they are constituted. One of the most pressing issues for scholars of religious studies concerns the mechanisms by which religion maintains its relevance in contemporary times. This analysis of the rhetorics of the forest explores one important manifestation of this.

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