

# Meditation Manual of King Taksin of Thonburi

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ABSTRACT—This article offers an English translation of *Tamra Kammathan khong Somdet Phra Chao Krung Thonburi (Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi)*, dated 1775 CE. The manual, obtained from Wat Ratchadathitthan, Bangkok, is identified as belonging to the “*borān kammaṭṭhāna*”, or “old meditation”, tradition and records the practice of mindfulness of breath (*ānāpānasati*), the attainment of divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*), and the vision of a luminous sphere termed, the “Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha”, at the bodily bases between the eyebrows and the navel. After obtaining the Dhamma Sphere, the meditator is instructed to visualise sacred Pāli syllables in Khom script inside the sphere. The practice described in the manual shares similar characteristics with two influential contemporary meditation systems of the Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean (1733–1822) and Wat Pradusongtham, Ayutthaya. The vision of the luminous sphere, which is a common feature of the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* tradition, is also depicted as the highest attainment in the Thonburi and Ayutthaya versions of the illustrated manuscripts of the Traiphum (Three Worlds cosmology).

## Introduction and historical background

King Taksin (1734–1782) is among the few past Siamese monarchs to have been given the posthumous title of “Mahārāja”, or the “Great King”, having liberated and unified Siam after the fall of the Ayutthaya in 1767.<sup>1</sup> The king established Thonburi as the Siamese capital and became the only king to rule from that city. He reigned for fifteen years before he was deposed by King Rama I in 1782. Apart from being a gifted military leader, King Taksin was also known as a devout Buddhist and a serious meditation practitioner. In his effort to revive Siamese Buddhism, the king invited many learned monks from Ayutthaya to Thonburi. Notable figures among them were Phra Achan Dee from Wat Pradusongtham, and Phra Achan Si from Wat Phanan Choeng, who became the first and second Supreme Patriarchs, respectively. The king had Pāli and vernacular texts brought from Ayutthaya, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phetchaburi and Cambodia, and commissioned a new recension of the illustrated Traiphum manuscript. He established

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939. Other Siamese/Thai monarchs, who have been given the title “Mahārāja” include: King Ram Khamhaeng (reigned 1279–1298), King Naresuan (reigned 1590–1605), King Narai (reigned 1657–1688), King Rama I (reigned 1782–1809), King Rama V (reigned 1868–1910) and King Rama IX (reigned 1946–2016).

Wat Hong Rattanaram and Wat Rakhang as the centres of sangha administration and depositories of religious texts. The king had many dwellings built and the compound expanded at Wat Intharam so that he could practise and teach meditation to its monks and novices.<sup>2</sup>

While there have been a number of academic studies discussing the Buddhism of his reign, only a handful of them focus on the king's meditation practice. Such studies include Sathuean Supphasophon (1984), Phairot Photsai (1985), Arthid Sheravanichkul (2012), Wethin Chatkun (2015), Thanachot Kiatnapat (2019), the author's PhD thesis (Cholvijarn 2019) and Phibul Choompolpaisal (2021). These Thai scholars highlight two texts allegedly composed by King Taksin: 1. *Lakkhana Bun* (Characteristics of Merit); and 2. *Tamra Kammathan khong Somdet Phra Chao Krung Thonburi* (Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi).<sup>3</sup> The former, written on a folding paper manuscript, or *samut khoi*, dated 1776 CE, is currently kept at the National Library of Thailand.<sup>4</sup> It was first published as part of the book, *Somdet Phra Chao Taksin Maharat lae Botbat Chao Chin nai Sayam* (King Taksin the Great and the Role of the Chinese in Siam), by Supphasophon (1984: 73). The latter, written on a *samut khoi*, dated 1775 CE,<sup>5</sup> was obtained by Photsai and Mali Phromroek from Wat Ratchadathitthan, Bangkok, and published in the article, "Patchim kan khong Somdet Phra Chao Krung Thonburi kap samut khoi Wat Ratchadathitthan (The final days of Somdet Phra Chao of Thonburi and the *samut khoi* manuscript from Wat Ratchadathitthan)", by Photsai in the July 1985 issue of *Silpa Watthanatham* (Art and Culture) magazine. The manual was republished in 2012 in *Pritsana Phra Chao Tak* (Mystery of King Taksin).<sup>6</sup>

King Taksin is said to have practised meditation in the royal residence at Wat Arun under the guidance of Somdet Phra Wannarat (Thongyu), a learned monk from Wat Pradusongtham who, after the sack of Ayutthaya, took up residence at Wat Rakhang. He may also have studied meditation under Achan Thongdi at Wat Choengtha, Ayutthaya, where he was ordained as a novice for three years, and with Phra Achan Dee, whom he invited from Wat Pradusongtham to become the first Supreme Patriarch.<sup>7</sup> Wat Ratchadathitthan, where the manual was obtained, was built during the late Ayutthaya period by Chao Khrua Ngoen, the wealthy Chinese husband of Chaofa Kaeo and the

<sup>2</sup> See *Phraratchaphongsawadan Krung Thonburi* (*Chabap Phan Chantanumat*) (Royal Chronicles of Thonburi, Phan Chantanumat Version) (2008: 56–57, 64–66, 113–114) (Henceforth, *Royal Chronicles of Thonburi*). Sathuean Supphasophon (1984: 63–74); Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (2012); Barend Jan Terwiel (2014); Nidhi Eoseewong (2018: 221–239); and Phibul Choompopaisal (2021: 238–246).

<sup>3</sup> Choompolpaisal (2021: 244–245) mentions another meditation text, *Lakkhana Tham* (Characteristics of Dhamma), composed by King Taksin, whose presentation he is currently preparing with Andrew Skilton.

<sup>4</sup> 1138 of the minor era. *Samut khois* are folding paper manuscripts made from the inner bark of the rough bush (*khoi*) tree. They have been used as writing material since the Ayutthaya period and were typically used for secular texts as opposed to palm-leaf manuscripts, which were used for religious texts.

<sup>5</sup> 1137 of the minor era.

<sup>6</sup> The book is edited by Pramin Khruethong and consists of articles on King Taksin previously published in *Silpa Watthanatham* magazine.

<sup>7</sup> See *Royal Chronicles of Thonburi* (2008: 113–114), Supphasophon (1984: 71–72), Phlainoi (1993: 49) and Eoseewong (2018: 191, 221–239). The small *vihāra* located in front of Phra Prang, Wat Arun, now a shrine dedicated to King Taksin, preserves the king's meditation stool.

brother-in-law of King Rama I.<sup>8</sup> The temple became a royal temple during the reign of King Rama I when one of his queen consorts, Amarindra, sponsored its renovation. According to its history, the temple, together with Wat Ratchasittharam and Wat Intharam, was one of the three most important meditation centres during the early Bangkok period.<sup>9</sup> Its first abbot, Phra Wisutthisangwon (Sem) (dates unknown), is said to have been a renowned meditation teacher. Subsequent abbots were also meditation teachers who studied meditation under their predecessors, and their monastic titles belong to the *vipassanā*, or meditation division, of the sangha.<sup>10</sup> During the abbacy of Phra Khru Phawanaphirom (Phloi) (1929–1945), however, the temple shifted towards Naktham and Pāli learning. This shift, coupled with the impact of the 19th and 20th century sangha reforms, which allowed the more rationalised and simplified approaches to meditation to replace traditional methods, may have caused the manual to be neglected for almost a century before Photsai obtained it 1985.<sup>11</sup>

While the meditation lineages at Wat Ratchadathitthan and Wat Intharam disappeared, the lineage at Wat Ratchasittharam, known as “Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap”, survives to the present day thanks to the reputation and influence of its founder, Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean (1733–1822).<sup>12</sup> Supreme Patriarch Suk was invited by King Rama I from Wat Thahoi, Ayutthaya, to Bangkok to oversee its sangha’s meditation practice. He became the meditation teacher of Kings Rama I, Rama II, Rama III and Rama IV and headed the council that conducted the purification (*saṅgīti*) of meditation practices in 1821.<sup>13</sup> Although there is no record of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean having taught King Taksin, Wat Ratchasittharam keeps a statue of the king as a monk, who is revered as an *arahant* by Venerable Wira Ṭhānavīro (Phra Khru Sangkharak) (1949–), the meditation instructor and the current lineage holder of Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap.<sup>14</sup> Another premodern meditation lineage that survives to the present day is that of Wat Pradusongtham, which, during the

<sup>8</sup> Formerly known as Wat Ngoen (Silver Temple) after its founder, its name was changed to Wat Ratchadathitthan in 1863 by King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851–1868).

<sup>9</sup> See Wat Ratchadathitthan (1986).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Phra Winaikitkari (Phu) (died 1889), Phra Winaikitkari (Pan) (abbacy 1889–1926), and Phra Khru Phawanaphirom (Chum) (abbacy 1926–1929).

<sup>11</sup> Most contemporary meditation practices in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka are relatively recent developments, which can be traced back to no earlier than the 19th century reforms and revivals. These meditation traditions are based on textual models, whose selection of canonical texts invokes the assumption of ancient roots and uninterrupted lineages from the time of the Buddha (Skilton and Choempolpaisal 2015: 207).

<sup>12</sup> Translated as “the progressive training of the mind in the middle way employing meditation subjects” (Skilton and Choempolpaisal 2014: 90). For discussions of this meditation lineage, see Olivier de Bernon (2000), Patrick Ong (2013), Skilton and Choempolpaisal (2014 and 2015) and Cholvijarn (2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Ṭhānavīro (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Venerable Wira is one of several modern meditation teachers, who advocates the legend that King Taksin was not executed, but through meditation practice, achieved a high level of spiritual attainment, wanted to give up the throne, was ordained and fled to live in a cave in Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Interview of Venerable Wira by the author, 28 November 2021). Other meditation masters, who supported this legend, include Phra Thamsinghaburachan (Luang Pho Charan Ṭhitadhammo), the abbot of Wat Amphawan, Singburi; *Bhikṣuṇī* Voramai Kabilsingh, the first Thai woman to receive ordination from both the male and the female sangha; and Luang Pho Ruesi Lingdam, the founder of the Manomayiddhi meditation tradition (Sheravanichkul 2012).

Ayutthaya period, was an important centre for meditation and learning and the residence of Phra Rachakhana, who was responsible for supervising meditation practice.<sup>15</sup> As I shall elaborate below, the practices at Wat Ratchasittharam and Wat Pradusongtham share common characteristics with, and belong to, the same meditation tradition as the practices described in the *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*.

### *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*

The first text, *Lakkhana Bun* (Characteristics of Merit), is composed in the form of a Dhamma sermon, in which the king encourages his subjects to accumulate merit through good deeds, follow the five precepts, and practise meditation. The brief mention of meditation refers to the forty meditation objects and cites *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breath) as the chief among them (Supphasophon 1984: 73). The practice of *ānāpānasati* is explained as having awareness of one's breath, until the breath becomes more and more refined while the meditator develops *nimittas*<sup>16</sup> (image manifestation) and the four absorptions (*jhāna*). The mention of the forty meditation objects and other Pāli terms such as *assāsa-passāsa* (in-and-out breathing), *uggaha-nimitta* (acquired sign) and *paṭibhāga-nimitta* (counterpart sign)<sup>17</sup> led Kiatnapat (2019: 137–139) to conclude that the source of the king's meditation teaching was the 5th century Pāli manual, *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), composed by Buddhaghosa, and that this was among the texts that the king brought back from Nakhon Si Thammarat to revive Buddhist learning in Thonburi. Whereas Characteristics of Merit provides an explanation of Buddhist precepts and practice in clear and relatively simple language, the language of the second text, *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*, is much more cryptic and ambiguous. In addition to the practice of the mindfulness of breath, the manual tells its reader to develop divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*)<sup>18</sup> in order to obtain a vision of a luminous sphere, which it terms “Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha” (*Duang Tham khong Phra Phutthachao*)<sup>19</sup> at the bodily bases of the navel and between the eyebrows. The base between the eyebrows is termed “*kaeo chat unalom space*”.<sup>20</sup> After obtaining the Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha, the meditator is instructed to visualise sacred Pāli syllables in Khom script<sup>21</sup> inside the sphere. This practice of visualising luminous

<sup>15</sup> Rachakhana is the third-highest rank in the Thai/Siamese sangha, below the Supreme Patriarch and Somdet Phra Rachakhana. See Cholvijarn (2021) and Choompolpaisal (2021: 246–248) for discussions regarding its history and meditation lineage.

<sup>16</sup> *Nimitta* (Thai: *nimit*) is a Pāli term that refers to different kinds of visions that arise in meditation. The term is often associated with the practice of *kasīna* visualisations. See *Visudhimagga* (chapters IV and VIII).

<sup>17</sup> *Uggaha-nimitta* (acquired sign) is an image that is acquired when the practitioner achieves a certain degree of concentration (*samādhi*). *Paṭibhāga-nimitta* is a clearer and more static mental image developed when the practitioner's concentration reaches access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*), or the threshold of mental absorption (*jhāna*).

<sup>18</sup> ตาทิพย์

<sup>19</sup> ดวงธรรมของพระพุทธเจ้า

<sup>20</sup> ช่องแกว้ชาติอุณาโลม

<sup>21</sup> Khom, closely related to Khmer script, has been used for writing Pāli from at least the 13th century. It is commonly drawn on yantras, amulets, images and other sacred objects.

spheres and Khom syllables at bases on, and within, the body is one of the most distinct and common characteristics of the “*borān kammaṭṭhāna*”, or “old meditation”, tradition.

*Borān kammaṭṭhāna*, whose earliest record dates from the 16th century, is the longest traceable tradition of Theravāda meditation. It was widespread in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Sri Lanka and practised by kings, supreme patriarchs, and influential monastic and lay figures in both urban and rural areas. The tradition was exported from Ayutthaya to the Kandyan court by one of the missions of the 1750s to revive higher ordination in Sri Lanka, but since the 19th and 20th century sangha reforms, it has been on a rapid decline to the point where only a few living lineages still survive today.<sup>22</sup> The phrase, *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, is derived from the Thai/Khmer word *borān* “old/traditional” and the Pāli word *kammaṭṭhāna*, a standard term for “meditation”. It incorporates diverse practices, but one of its main characteristics is that the meditation objects, processes and states described in the Pāli canon and Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* are usually seen as spheres of light or gems of various colours on, and inside, the meditator’s body.<sup>23</sup> These luminous sphere *nimittas* (image manifestation), which, in some lineages, contain Pāli syllables in Khom script or are accompanied by visions of Buddha images, are regarded as the visual manifestations of the meditator’s own mind (*citta*), that has attained the meditation objects, processes or states invoked.

### Translation and commentary

The *samut khoi* of *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi* consists of nineteen pages with ninety-one rows of written Thai and Pāli texts. In his articles, Phairot Photsai (1985 and 2012) provides the entire Thai text, which he copied as well as converted into modern Thai. No explanation or interpretation is given by Photsai with regards to the meditation practice. Unfortunately, the Pāli verses in Khom script, which made up a significant part of the text, were not copied from the manuscript and are indicated merely as “*akson khom*” (Khom script) in the articles. Curious to find out the meaning of the Pāli verses, I visited the abbot of Wat Ratchadathitthan and telephoned Mali Phromroek, the former student of the late Photsai, who both said that they had no knowledge of the current whereabouts of the manuscript. Phromroek recalled that the manuscript was in the possession of a monk called Luang Ta Thoem who had moved to a nearby temple, Wat Kaeo in Taling Chan. Having made an appointment with the abbot, I visited Wat Kaeo and was informed that Luang Ta Thoem had died several decades ago. The temple used to possess a collection of old manuscripts, but one of the former deputy abbots had them burned without the abbot’s permission to make ingredients for amulets. I tried browsing through the temple’s books, but could not find anything resembling a *samut khoi* there.

As the manual is yet to be translated into English and analysed in detail, I decided that it would still be worthwhile to translate the Thai texts into English and try to figure

<sup>22</sup> Kate Crosby (2013 and 2020) provides the most comprehensive overview of the tradition’s sources, evidence, history and the processes that led to its suppression and marginalisation.

<sup>23</sup> See Crosby (2013: 14-17, 92-97; and 2020: 54-60).

out the Pāli from other related *borān kammaṭṭhāna* sources. In this translation, the numbers of the rows are given in brackets. The Pāli in Thai script are transliterated with their meaning also in brackets. The Thai appears to be written independently from the Khom, and where the Khom verses seem to interrupt the Thai mid-sentence, I have connected them.

[1] The manuscript containing the Buddha's prophecy, meditation method and instructions.

[2] Day 21 of the full moon of the year of the goat and 1137 of the minor era<sup>24</sup>

[3] Reviewed by Thongkham Alaksanachup, Rachakhana

[4] The Great King, who is endowed with the Dhamma, the scion of the Buddha<sup>25</sup> who aspires to become a Buddha himself, [10] knows the Dhamma and studies the Tipiṭaka Dhamma on his truly sublime throne.

[11] The Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha is a secret to all the worlds. The Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha is within the mind, [15] at the end [of the breath], where the in-breaths and out-breaths are separated.

[16] The place where all Dhammas gather is at the [*kaeo*] *chat unalom* space<sup>26</sup> between the brows where the sights of both eyes meet, and the place [21] for falling asleep. To see the Dhamma of the Buddha, close your eyes completely, and focus still [22] with both divine eyes<sup>27</sup> at this *kaeo chat unalom* space, and then, you will see the Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha there.

[27] Develop your out-breaths up on the left side and in-breaths down on the right side, exhale that air gently [28] until it is refined, until you master it. Look at the Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha with both divine eyes. It will appear rising on the left [33] and falling on the right before the in- and out-breaths. Examine and see the Dhamma [34] with both divine eyes and know with wisdom that the Dhamma of the Buddha arises in the *kaeo chat unalom* space.

[39] The Dhamma of the Buddha is permanent. Once it is seen with wisdom, [40] you realise that the Dhamma of the Buddha truly arises in his *yai monthon tham*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> 1775 C.E.

<sup>25</sup> หน่อพุทธางกูร Literally, “the scion/embryo of the Buddha”, it is a title given to kings and royal princes from the Ayutthaya to the early Bangkok periods, and signifies that they were destined to achieve enlightenment and/or become a Buddha in the future. For a discussion regarding the term, see Eoseewong (2005: 320).

<sup>26</sup> ช่องแกว้ขาดิอูนาโลม It refers to the bodily base between the eyebrows. The word *kaeo* has faded from the manual here.

<sup>27</sup> ตาทิพย์ Pāli: *dibba-cakkhu*.

<sup>28</sup> ไฉยมณฑลธรรม, literally “Dhamma Mandala Thread” is a term that is unique to this manual and refers to the

[45] Then, take the Tipiṭaka Dhamma verses and place the wisdom along the Dhamma row arising in this *yai monthon tham*.

[46] If you develop the in-breaths going in and the out-breaths going out, Dhamma will arise, but slowly [50] so you must develop your out-breaths going up the left side and in-breaths going down the right side as already mentioned. When the Dhamma of the Buddha arises, [54] you gain these two kinds of Dhammas.

[55] Recollect these three Dhamma verses, establishing them firmly as the objects of your mind to support and strengthen the Dhamma.

[60] Know that this Dhamma Sphere is the best in this conditioned world. These three Dhamma verses lead to the seven books of *Abhidhamma*.

[61] Recollect these three Dhamma verses and know that this Dhamma Sphere is the duty of all Venerable Disciples.

[66] I cultivate to gain my vow, the vow of the scion of the Buddha, which is higher than all vows in this world. This vow is rarely found even among the sons of the [67] Tathagata [Thus-gone]. The three Dhamma verses are very subtle; they are the gathering place of all 84,000 *dhamma-khandhas* [teachings] [72] and *bodhipakkhiya-dhammas* [factors of enlightenment]. Once the scion of the Buddha obtains this Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha with wisdom, [73] place the Great Syllables of this verse down into this Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha. When the Dhamma rises on the left side recollect [omitted Khom text] and when the Dhamma rises on the right side recollect [omitted Khom text].

[78] You are to cultivate and master this, until the Great Syllables appear constantly in the Dhamma Sphere. You will receive uncountable merit [79] from the Great Syllables arising in the Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha.

[84] These two verses of the Great Syllables are better than all verses in the world. It was difficult for the Buddha to obtain these two verses; and took him [85] twenty *asankheyya* [incalculables] and 100,000 aeons to do so. Even when he sat on the jewelled throne under the Great Bodhi tree, he did not gain these two Dhamma verses. Only when the Evil One was vanquished, [91] and after cultivating *paṭicasamuppāda* [Dependent Origination], he finally gained *sabbaññuta-ñāṇa* [omniscience], which is this *sabbaññuta-ñāṇa*.

The manual was composed for advanced practitioners, as it starts with the meditator already achieving divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*), an ability to see beyond what the physical

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pattern of the bodily bases for the relocations of the mind.

human eye can. Divine eye is the attainment of one of the six supernatural knowledge and powers (*abhiññā*) mentioned in the Pāli Canon (*Tipitaka*).<sup>29</sup> It is often listed along with five other abilities, namely supranormal powers (*iddhi-vidhā*), such as walking on water and through walls; divine ear (*dibba-sota*); mind-reading ability (*ceto-pariya-ñāna*); recollection of past lives (*pubbe-nivāsānussati*); and knowledge of destruction of mental intoxicants that keep one bound to the round of rebirths (*āsavakkhaya-ñāna*). The first five powers are acquired through meditative concentration (*samatha*), whereas the last is obtained through insight (*vipassanā*). Once divine eye is achieved, the meditator gains a vision of a luminous sphere termed “Dhamma Sphere of the Buddha” in the “*kaeo chat unalom* space”.

As mentioned above, the visions of light spheres at bases in and on the meditator’s body, which are regarded as the meditator’s own mind that has attained various meditative stages, are a common characteristic of the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* tradition. For example, the first stage of “Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap” meditation of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean, as practised at Wat Ratchsittharam, consists of the meditator gaining visions of “Dhamma Spheres” (*Duang Tham*) of the five types of joy that arise in meditation.<sup>30</sup> These different types of joys are experienced not only as bodily sensations, but also as luminous spheres of various colours, which are given the honorifics of “*Phra*” and “*Chao*”. The two terms are translated by Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014: 93–94) as “honourable” and “majesty” and indicate that they are to be seen as “tangible and living entities of exalted status that are to be honoured”. Once the light spheres are invoked by the meditator, they are moved around the body at various bodily bases between the nostril and the navel in specific patterns and sequences.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 1 shows the nine bodily bases in a modern publication of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean’s healing and protective practices compiled by Venerable Wira Ṭhānavīro, the meditation instructor at Wat Ratchasittharam. In this system, the Dhamma Sphere and nine bodily bases, are used both for soteriological purposes, to gain mental absorptions (*jhāna*) and insight into conditioned realities, and for protective and healing purposes.

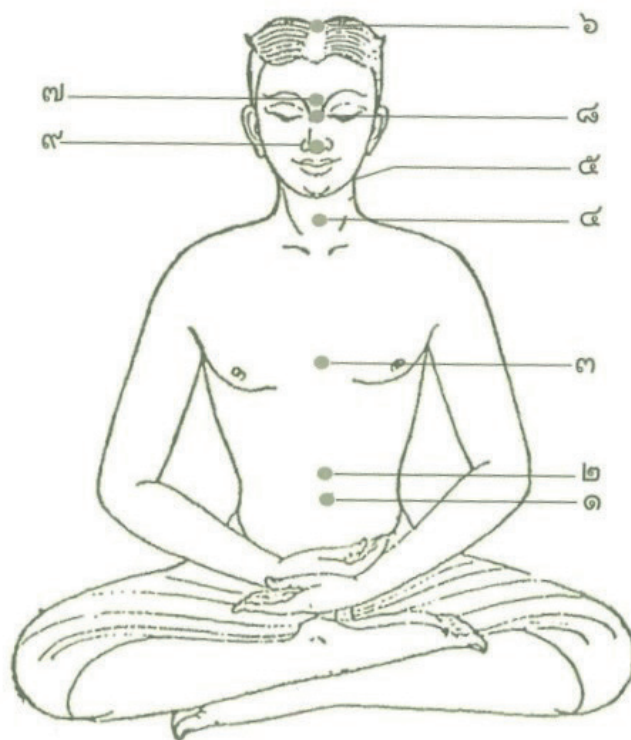
The Dhamma Sphere in *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*, although not given any honorifics, is equated with the highest attainments and the goal of the practitioner, as indicated by the epithets, “of the Buddha”, “permanent”, “the best in this conditioned world”, and “the duty of all Venerable Disciples”. When the divine eye is acquired, it will appear in the meditator’s “*kaeo chat unalom* space”. The word *unalom*

<sup>29</sup> For example, the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, the second discourse of the Dīgha Nikāya (D i 76–84). In references to the Pāli canon, I give the volumes and page numbers of the Pali Text Society editions.

<sup>30</sup> The five types of joys consist of: minor joy (*khuddhakā-pīti*), momentary joy (*khanīkā-pīti*), showering joy (*okkantikā-pīti*), uplifting joy (*ubbegā-pīti*) and pervading joy (*pharaṇā-pīti*). For further discussions of this meditation system, see Bernon (2000), Ong (2013) and Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014 and 2015).

<sup>31</sup> The term “Dhamma Sphere” and the bodily bases were also incorporated into Sammā Arahaṃ (also known as *Dhammakāya*) meditation, a modernised *borān kammaṭṭhāna* system developed by Luang Pho Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro) (1884–1959). In this system, the Dhamma Sphere, also called the *dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna* sphere, indicates a visual manifestation of the mind of an inner body that arises in meditation. For discussions regarding the origins of Sammā Arahaṃ meditation and the influence of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* on Luang Pho Wat Paknam, see Cholvijarn (2019: chapter two).





๑. อัมชดากษเบื่องตำ (สะตือ)
๒. บนนากี นิ้วหนึ่ง
๓. ห้องหทัยวัตถุ
๔. ห้องสุดคอกलग
๕. โคตรภูท่ายทอย
๖. อัมชดากษ เบือบน (กระหม่อม)
๗. ทิพยสุณหว่างคิ้ว
๘. มหาสุณหว่างจักษุ
๙. จุลสุณน้อยปลายนาสิก

Figure 1. A picture of the nine bodily bases in the Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap system (Thānavīro 2014: 42). The bodily bases are as follows: 1. the navel, 2. one finger-breadth above the navel, 3. the heart-base (Pāli: *hadaya-vatthu*), 4. the base of the throat, 5. the occipital part of the head, 6. the crown of the head, 7. between the eyebrows, 8. between the eyes, and 9. the tip of the nose.

refers to the seventh bodily base between the eyebrows, also called “*thippaya sun wang khio*”, literally “divine point between the brows”. The words *kaeo chat*, which are unique to this manual, mean the “birth” or “arising” of a “glass” or “gem”, and refer to the Dhamma Sphere, which is to be seen as a glass sphere (*duang kaeo*) or a gem-like *nimitta* at the *unalom* base. The Dhamma Sphere is also described in the manual as existing within the mind at the bodily base “where the in-breaths and out-breaths are separated”. This refers to the first base, the navel, which is also called the “lower *atchadakat/atsadakat*”.

The main meditation subject, or *kammaṭṭhāna*, of the manual, like that of Characteristics of Merit, is mindfulness of breath. However, instead of following the breath up and down or observing it at a fixed point in the body, the manual instructs the meditator to develop his/her out-breath “up on the left side” and in-breath “down on the right side” while noting that the Dhamma Sphere will appear rising and falling before the in- and out-breaths. The right and left sides refer to the movement of the Dhamma Sphere, which most likely follows a path similar to the one shown on the statue below.

In one of the patterns of the movement of light spheres in Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap called *khao wat ok wat*,<sup>32</sup> the Dhamma Sphere is moved up and down the



Figure 2. A statue showing the movement of light spheres in *khao wat ok wat* pattern, Wat Ratchasitharam (Photo by P. Cholvijarn)

sides of an oval shape, that connects the heart-base with the navel. The heart-base, or *hong hathai watthu*, is located in the middle of the meditator’s chest (base three). When applying this pattern to the *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*, the meditator would breathe out while the Dhamma Sphere was seen moving up on the left side from

<sup>32</sup> เข้าวัดออกวัด For a discussion of the different patterns and sequences of the light sphere in this meditation system, see Skilton and Choempolpaisal (2014: 103–107).

the navel to the heart base, and would breathe in while it was seen moving down at the right side from the heart base to the navel.<sup>33</sup>

The instruction to take “the Tipiṭaka Dhamma verses and place the wisdom along the Dhamma row arising in this *yai monthon tham*” means that while moving from one bodily base to the next, the meditator is to recite the Dhamma verses given in Khom script. The term, “*yai monthon tham*”, which is unique to this manual, most likely refers to the pattern of the bodily bases. The Dhamma verses are described as “the gathering place of all 84,000 *dhamma-khandhas*”, i.e. the entirety of the Buddha’s teachings, “the factors of enlightenment” (*bodhipakkhiya-dhamma*),<sup>34</sup> and leading to “the seven books of *Abhidhamma*”.<sup>35</sup> These unknown verses could be a summary of main doctrines, excerpts from the important discourses (*sutta*), a list of the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment and/or wholesome mental states (*kusala-citta*) and their associated mental factors (*cetasika*) condensed down to representative Pāli syllables. The purpose of reciting these verses is to recollect the Buddha’s teachings, as well as to invoke the refined wholesome states (*kusala-dhamma*) to replace the less refined and unwholesome states (*akusala-dhamma*) in the meditator’s mind (*citta*) as he/she progresses along the path towards the attainment of *nibbāna*. The mention of the seven books of the *Abhidhamma* should not surprise readers who are familiar with *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. Kate Crosby (2019 and 2020: 30–66) has demonstrated the extensive usage of *Abhidhamma* concepts, path and terminology throughout the texts and practices of the entire tradition. For example, the rationale behind *borān kammaṭṭhāna*’s practice of moving *citta* and its associated mental factors (*cetasika*) in and around the body, as expressed in this manual, is rooted in the *Abhidhamma*’s understanding of *citta* as mobile and composite.<sup>36</sup> This pervasiveness of the *Abhidhamma* in *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, she concludes, is not a superimposition on an earlier non-Theravāda practice, but is fundamental to the tradition’s understanding of the path and method of mental and physical transformation (Crosby 2020: 66).

The Khom Pāli verses are not only to be recited, but, as the manual clearly states, they are to be visualised into the Dhamma Sphere as well (see Figure 3). The meditator is instructed to “place the Great Syllables down into the Dhamma Sphere” until “the Great Syllables appear constantly” in it. Having done so, he/she will gain “uncountable merits” from the Great Syllables in the Dhamma Sphere. The visualisation of Pāli

<sup>33</sup> It must be noted that in Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap, *khaowat okwat* pattern is applied to the first three stages of the system, namely, five *pīti* (joys), six *yugala* (pairs) and two *sukha samādhi* (pleasurable concentration), and does not apply to its fourth stage, *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breath).

<sup>34</sup> The thirty-seven factors of enlightenment (*bodhipakkhiya-dhamma*) are qualities conducive to enlightenment. These qualities are grouped into seven sets: 1) the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*); 2) the four right efforts (*padhānā*); 3) the four bases of supernatural powers (*iddhi-pādā*); 4) the five spiritual faculties (*indriya*); 5) the five strengths (*bala*); 6) the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhaṅga*); and 7) the eightfold noble path (*ariya-magga*). They are mentioned regularly throughout the Pāli canon, in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (D ii 100) and Mahā Sakuludāyī Sutta (M ii 1), for example.

<sup>35</sup> The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is the third division of the Pāli canon, which consists of seven books or collections of treatises of technical systemisation of Theravāda doctrines. The seven books are *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, *Vibhaṅga*, *Dhātukathā*, *Puggalapaññatti*, *Kathāvatthu*, *Yamaka* and *Paṭṭhāna*.

<sup>36</sup> In the *Abhidhamma*, *citta* is regarded having a momentary existence, arising and ceasing in quick succession, and constantly moving in and out of the body to catch different sense objects. It is also accompanied by mental factors (*cetasika*), which determine whether it is wholesome (*kusala*) or unwholesome (*akusala*).

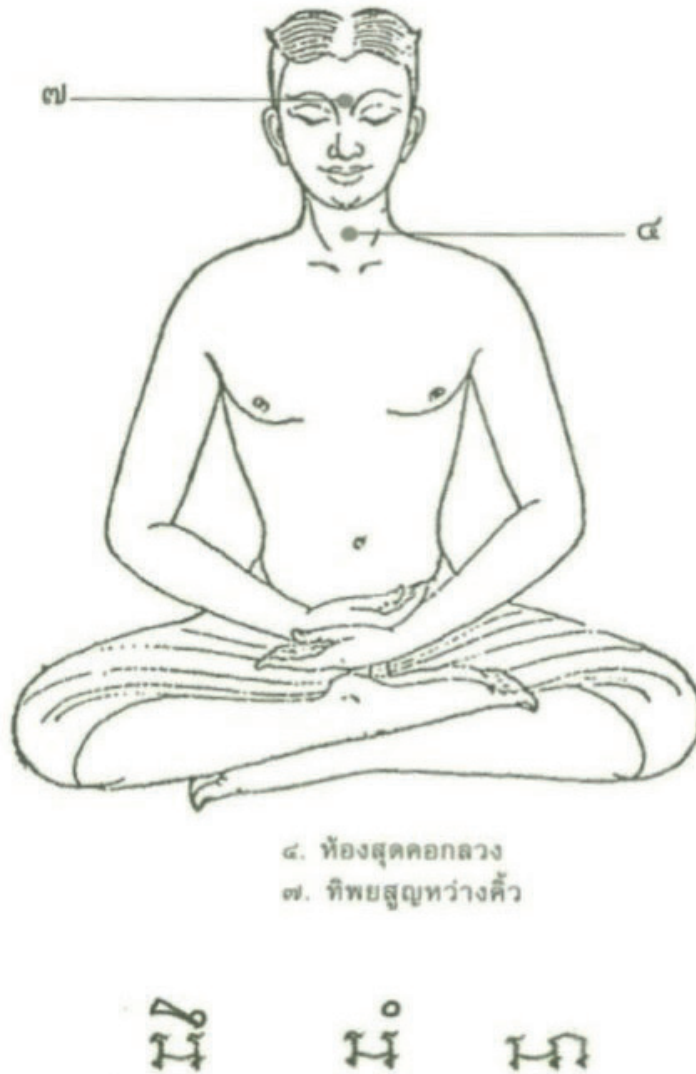


Figure 3. A picture showing the method of visualising Khom syllables ‘im’, ‘am’ and ‘a’ in the Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap system (Ṭhānavīro 2014: 122). The two bodily bases are the base of the throat and between the eyebrows.

syllables is a common characteristic of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* and relates to the tradition’s understanding of Pāli as a sacred language, one that is potent and, as in the case of this manual, able to represent the enlightenment of the Buddha.<sup>37</sup>

In Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap, for example, Khom syllables are visualised as part of its protective meditation. The instruction that accompanies Figure 3 states that the meditator is to recite the *mantra*, “*na ye paraṃ yutte*”, while visualising the three Khom syllables, “*im*”, “*am*” and “*a*” (Ṭhānavīro 2014: 123).<sup>38</sup> After obtaining

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*’s understanding of the potency of the Pāli language, see Crosby (2020: 32).

<sup>38</sup> It is unknown what the three syllables represent, but the *mantra*, “*na ye paraṃ yutte*”, is taken from the eleventh *sutta* of the *Mūlakaccāyana*, a Thai compilation of Kaccāyana’s grammar, and explains the grammatical rule of *sandhi*, or the euphonic combination of words. For example, when a word ending in a

the *nimittas* of the three syllables, the meditator is to remove the syllables and place the pure *nimitta* at the bases between the eyebrows and the middle of the throat or “*hong sut khokluang*” (base four). When an enemy attacks from the front, the meditator is instructed to place the protective *nimitta* in front; when they are approaching from the back, the meditator is instructed to move the *nimitta* to the back; and when they are at the side, the meditator is instructed to move the *nimitta* to the side (Ṭhānavīro 2014: 123).

The visualisation of Khom syllables was also incorporated into another related meditation lineage, that of Wat Pradusongtham, Ayutthaya. As mentioned above, Wat Pradusongtham was a *borān kammaṭṭhāna* centre during the Ayutthaya period and the former residence of Phra Achan Dee, the first Supreme Patriarch of Thonburi, and Somdet Phra Wannarat (Thongyu), one of King Taksin’s meditation instructors. The author’s article (Cholvijarn 2021) examines one of the temple’s important meditation texts, *The Diagrams of the Qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha*, which consists of the method of visualisation of three *yantra* diagrams that represent the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and saṅgha. Each of the diagrams contains circles with Khom syllables taken from the Iti Pi So Bhagavā formula, canonical Pāli verses describing the qualities (*guṇa*) of the Triple Gems. Before the visualisation of each *yantra*, the meditator obtains a vision of a luminous white sphere termed “*lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ*”, which is regarded as the meditator’s *citta* that has attained supra-mundane (*lokuttara*) absorption (*jhāna*). The meditator is to recite “*lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ*” while moving the sphere from the base between the eyes to the base at tip of the nose and back to between the eyes again, and then visualises the Khom syllables from the first circle to the last circle of the *yantra*. At the conclusion of each visualisation, the *lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ* sphere is used to dispel unwholesome mental states (*akusala-dhamma*) from the meditator’s *citta*.

### Spheres depicted in Thonburi and Ayutthaya versions of the illustrated Traiphum manuscripts

The vision of a sphere representing the highest meditative attainment was not only mentioned in the *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*, but also depicted in the Thonburi versions of illustrated manuscripts of the Traiphum (Three World cosmology; see Figures 4 and 5). Barend Jan Terwiel (2014 and 2019) discusses two editions of this manuscript, one kept in the National Library of Bangkok and the other in the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin.<sup>39</sup> Both editions state that they were made by the order of King Taksin in 1776. The one in the National Library was copied from the manuscript of Supreme Patriarch Si, whose former residence, as mentioned earlier, was Wat Phanan Choeng, Ayutthaya. The manuscript illustrates the traditional Buddhist cosmology, which consists of the sensual realm (*kāma-bhūmi*), the realm of form (*rūpa-bhūmi*) and the formless

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vowel is joined to a word beginning with a vowel. The *mantra* used in the protective sense, could mean “as appropriate, may (all approaching dangers) be taken elsewhere (away from the meditator)” (Interview of Rungarun Chantharasongkhram by the author, 3 December 2021).

<sup>39</sup> I would like to thank Barend Jan Terwiel for introducing me to the manuscripts and the photos of the *arahants* with the spheres.



Figure 4. An *arahant* holding a sphere in King Taksin's 1776 Traiphum manuscript, National Library of Bangkok (*Samut Phap Traiphum Chabap Krung Si Ayutthaya–Chabap Krung Thonburi Lem 2* (Illustrated manuscripts of the Three World: Ayutthaya Version–Thonburi Version, Book 2): 16)

realm (*arūpa-bhūmi*). It begins with a picture and a description of “the city of *nibbāna*”, followed by drawings of the eight types of noble persons (*ariya-puggala*).<sup>40</sup> The first seven noble persons are shown attempting to remove obstacles above their heads and reaching for lotus buds. The obstacles symbolise the mental fetters, or *saṃyojanas*, that bind beings in the round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*), and the lotus buds, the goals of enlightenment and *nibbāna*.<sup>41</sup> Only the last of the noble persons, the one who has achieved the fruit of becoming an arhat (*arahatta-phala*), is depicted, holding not the lotus bud, but a sphere with both hands. The sphere, which represents the attainment of *nibbāna*, is positioned at the navel, which is the same place as one of the two bodily bases mentioned in the manual, namely, “at the end of the breath where the in- and out-breaths are separated”, and where the Dhamma Sphere is said to arise.

The sphere in King Taksin's Traiphum manuscripts does not contain any Khom syllables. However, in an Ayutthaya version of the drawings, dated to the early 18th century, the *arahant* is depicted as holding a sphere with a Khom syllable “*jha*” inside it (Terwiel 2019: 13). “*Jha*” is short for *jhāna* or mental absorption, and most likely refers to the attainment of the “*lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ*” sphere as described in Wat Pradusongtham's meditation text. *Lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ*, as mentioned above, refers to supra-mundane mental absorption, a state

<sup>40</sup> The eight types of *ariya-puggalas* are: the ones who have realised the path and fruit of the stream enterer (*sotāpanna*), the ones who have realised the path and fruit of the once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*), the ones who have realised the path and fruit of the non-returner (*anāgāmi*), and the ones who have realised the path and fruit of the *arahant*.

<sup>41</sup> The stream enterer has abandoned the first three fetters (*saṃyojana*), namely *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* (false view of the individual), *vicikicchā* (doubt) and *sīlabbata-parāṃsā* (adherence to rules and rituals). The once returner has, in addition to the first three fetters, abandoned *kāma-rāga* (sensual pleasures) and *paṭigha* (repulsion) in their grosser forms. The non-returner has abandoned all of the five fetters completely. The *arahant* has, in addition to the five fetters, abandoned the remaining five fetters, namely *rūpa-rāga* (attachment to realms of form), *arūpa-rāga* (attachment to formless realms), *māna* (conceit), *uddhacca* (restlessness) and *avijjā* (ignorance). See, for example, A i 231–2 and A v 17.

of deep concentration that is acquired at the moment of enlightenment. It is possible that “*jha*” is one of the Great Syllables in the *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*; and “*lokuttaram cittaṃ jhānaṃ*”, one of the Dhamma verses that represents the highest attainment and the Buddha’s omniscience (*sabbaññuta-ñāṇa*).

### Conclusion

Without the original manuscript, it is impossible to determine the date and the authenticity of the *Meditation Manual of the King of Thonburi*. What is clear from this article is that the practices described in the manual belong to the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* tradition and share characteristics with two meditation lineages that were among the most influential in Siam during the 18th century, namely, Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean’s Kammathan Matchima Baep Lamdap and Wat Pradusongtham, Ayutthaya. The latter was the former residence of Phra Achan Dee, the first Supreme Patriarch of Thonburi, and Somdet Phra Wannarat (Thongyu), one of King Taksin’s meditation instructors. Apart from similarities with these contemporary lineages, the manual also contains practices and terms that are unique to it, thus offering additional

evidence of the diversity and internal variations within the *borān kammaṭṭhāna* tradition. These include the instruction for the meditator to develop his/her out-breaths up on the left side and in-breaths down on the right side, the terms *chong kaeo chat unalom*, *yai monthon tham*, and the Dhamma Sphere “of the Buddha”. These differences suggest that the composer of the manual may have studied with many different teachers and synthesised practices from different lineages into a technique that was uniquely his own. The manual may have been practised and taught at Wat Ratchadathitthan up to the end of the 19th century when *borān kammaṭṭhāna* was rapidly disappearing in Siam and the rest of Southeast Asia.

The author looks forward to future research and discoveries of other meditation texts composed during the same period in order to examine the diversity and intricacies of the different lineages of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* and determine the exact nature of King Taksin’s practice and to which lineage(s) he belonged.



Figure 5. An *arahant* holding a sphere with the Khom syllable ‘*jha*’ in the Ayutthaya version of the Traiphum manuscript, National Library of Bangkok (*Samut Phap Traiphum Chabap Krung Si Ayutthaya–Chabap Krung Thonburi Lem 1* (Illustrated manuscripts of the Three Worlds: Ayutthaya Version–Thonburi Version, Book 1): 16).

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