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Recitation of the “Buddho” in the Thai Forest Tradition and Nian-Fo in the Chinese Pure Land School: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: The Thai forest tradition, or Thai northeastern forest tradition, which originated from King Lama IV's religious revolution, is one of the most important meditation practice traditions in Thailand. This tradition aims to achieve final liberation through strict meditation practice. The unique meditation technique they promote is the recitation of the mantra “Buddho”. They practice the recitation of “Buddho” together with an awareness of breathing in and out. This meditation technique seems similar to the technique of Nian-fo (recitation of Buddha's name) in the Chinese pure land school; however, this article points out that these two techniques are quite different in not only their scriptural bases but also their methods practice and the results they bring.

Keywords: recitation of the “Buddho”; recollection of the buddha; Ānāpānasati; Nian-fo

1. Introduction

Ajarn¹ Chah (1918–1992) was a famous meditation master in Thailand, who was well-known in Asia and widely respected by Western meditators. The recitation of the mantra “Buddho” is a meditation technique unique to the Thai Buddhist lineage Ajarn Chah belongs to. From Venerable Sumedho as his first Western disciple in 1967, Ajarn Chah and his disciples gradually spread Thai meditation in the West, and now his meditation courses are very popular there. Ajarn Chah studied meditation in his early years with Ajarn Sao Kantasilo (1859–1941) and Ajarn Mun (1870–1949), who were the founders of the Thai forest meditation tradition. This Thai forest meditation tradition uses the “recitation of Buddho” as the main meditation technique to calm one's mind. In Chinese Buddhism, the “recitation of Buddha's name” is also an important practice of meditation. It can be seen that both the Thai forest meditation tradition and the Chinese pure land school take chanting Buddha's name as an important method of meditation; thus, this article aims to make a comparative study between them.

There are already lots of research on the Thai forest meditation tradition. First of all, the studies by meditation masters and their disciples are the most fundamental materials for the study of the method of “recitation of Buddho”, with which we can not only figure out the background and development of this tradition but also understand the meditation techniques that are taught. For example, *A Still Forest Pool: The Insight Meditation of Achaan Chah*, *On Meditation: Instruction from Talks by Ajarn Chah*, and *Straight from the Heart by Ajarn MahaBoowa* are all important pieces of literature for understanding the thoughts of meditation masters from this lineage. In addition, Western scholars began to pay attention to and research the Thai forest meditation tradition in Northeastern Thailand as early as the beginning of the 20th century. For example, Tambiah Stanley's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and Cult of Amulets*, Taylor's *Forest Monks and the Nation-state: Anthropological and Historical Study in Northeastern Thailand*, and Kamala Tiyanavich's *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* are all important books to discover the meditation systems of Ajarn Sao, Ajarn Mun, and Ajarn Chah. These Western scholars went deep into the local areas and even became monks for a short time to investigate the background, historical development, and social impact of the Thai forest meditation tradition.



Citation: Lei, Xiaoli. 2023. Recitation of the “Buddho” in the Thai Forest Tradition and Nian-Fo in the Chinese Pure Land School: A Comparative Study. *Religions* 14: 1059. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14081059>

Academic Editor: David Peter Lawrence

Received: 21 April 2023

Revised: 10 August 2023

Accepted: 16 August 2023

Published: 18 August 2023



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Their work gives a very lively description of local religious life and provides us with rich research materials.

In Chinese Buddhist and academic circles, although the work by these Thai meditation masters has been or will be translated into Chinese one after another, academic research on the history of the Thai forest meditation tradition and the meditation practice of this lineage is truly rare. Prof. Wen Tzungkuen's thesis *Research on the Method of "Recalling the Buddha" in the Meditation Tradition of the Northeast Forest in Contemporary Thailand: with Ajaan Sao, Ajaan Thet, Ajaan Li, Ajaan Maha Bowwa, and Ajaan Chah as Examples* focuses on the historical background, theories, meditation techniques, and the literature basis behind the method of the "recitation of Buddha" in the forest meditation tradition of northeast Thailand. In this article, Wen Tzungkuen also mentions the significance of a comparative study between the method of the "recitation of Buddha" and the method of "reciting the Buddha's name" in Chinese Buddhism, although he does not discuss it in detail. Based on reading the existing academic achievements, the author finds out that although both of these two methods require reciting the name of Buddha, different theories and scriptures work behind them.

2. Thai Forest Tradition

Thai forest meditation tradition grew out of a reform movement known as the foundation of Dhammayut Nikāya by King Rama IV, in response to the problems existing in Thai traditional Buddhism. The Buddhist community at the time was lax about the monastic precepts and Thai Buddhism was attached to religious rituals and the making of merit. Most Thai Buddhists spent their time and money joining Buddhist ceremonies and making donations. It was universally believed that no one could attain the final enlightenment as the Buddha's teaching had already declined. The Dhammayut sect aimed to invigorate the Thai Sangha and to revive the academic studies that mainly concerned the Pāli canon. On the contrary, Ajarn Sao (1859–1941) and his disciple Ajarn Mun (1871–1949), although they also belonged to this tradition and strictly adhered to the Vinaya (discipline), were concerned more about the meditation practices leading to the final liberation, initiating the Thai forest practicing lineage. Monks in this lineage care more about the purification of the heart by following the Buddha's original way of life and practice, rather than ritual participation or scholastic learning. Ajarn Mun said, "So as long as we are devoting ourselves merely to the theoretical study of the Dhamma, it can't serve us well. Only when we have trained our hearts to eliminate their 'chameleons'—their corruptions—will it benefit us in full measure" (Mun and Bhikkhu 2016, p. 8). The emergence of this lineage was mainly to reject the popular notion held by their contemporaries that the path to Nibbāna was almost lost to mankind.

Most of the eminent masters in this lineage in its early stage came from Lao villages in Northeastern Thailand. Much of the local population was ethnically related to the Lao people and remained largely unaffected by Bangkok's culture and values (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 48). Monks and villagers living in these outlying areas followed indigenous religious customs. They were not sent to government schools, so they could not read or even speak Thai before their ordination, and they still followed the Lao tradition of combining a settled monastic lifestyle with ascetic practices. Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun spent most of their life in the forest. They stayed in caves, graveyards, or under trees. Later, when they became more and more well-known, some lay people or town-dwelling monks supported them and invited them to leave the remote forest to give meditation courses. To fulfill the supporters' requirements, they settled temporarily in some particular forest areas. After finishing their instruction, they would go back to the remote forest to continue their wanderings as before. For example, Ajarn Mun was once chosen to work as the acting abbot of Wat Chedi Luang temple in Chiangmai Province, although when the temple got everything back on track, he left the temple and chose to follow a more austere way of life in the forest.²

The monks in this Thai forest practicing lineage follow an uncomplicated and disciplined way of practice. It is called *Dhudanga*, an ascetic way of life. It requires strictly following at least one or more of the 13 kinds of ascetic practices to limit the number of robes, amount of food, and dwellings of the monks.³ The heart of this lifestyle is having few possessions, performing extensive meditation, and a once-daily round of collecting alms food (Chah 2012). They hold the idea that learning and chanting the Buddhist scriptures does not lead to enlightenment, and the key in the way to *Nibbāna* is meditation. Wandering and practicing in the forest alone prevents external distraction by a wide range of stimuli, improving their concentration on meditation. Monks who live near the town may lead a busy life, with many responsibilities to provide religious services to householders, and so cannot give as consistent attention to mental cultivation as one who lives in the remote forest.

Ajarn Sao labeled himself as a “doer” rather than a “preacher” or “speaker”. He thought we simply have to meditate on the word “*Buddho*” over and over in our mind and focus on the breath, following it in and out, until the mind becomes calm and bright. When we keep our mind on these objects and do not let them slip away from “*Buddho*”, mindfulness will be established and it will get stronger and stronger naturally. In Ajarn Sao’s opinion, when we make up our mind to repeat “*Buddho*” continuously, the act of making up the mind is in itself the act of establishing mindfulness, during which our mindfulness and alertness will be healthy and strong, and there is no need to establish mindfulness anywhere (Thaniyo 1997).

Ajarn Mun, Ajarn Sao’s disciple, inherited his teacher’s method of practice and advised a method of meditation on “*Buddho*” and contemplation of the body. This lineage sets a high value on concentration (*Samādhi*). Ajarn Mun’s disciple Ajarn Maha Boowa mentioned, “The stillness is the strength of mind that can reinforce discernment and make it agile ... If there is no stillness, if there is nothing but discernment running wild, it is like a knife that has not been sharpened” (Nyanansampanno and Bhikkhu 1994). Ajarn Mun is also widely regarded as possessing supernatural powers achieved through meditation (usually *Samadhi*) and as embodying the spiritual truths taught by the Buddha (Jackson 1989, p. 206).

Ajarn Mun inherited this lineage from Ajarn Sao and then cultivated several disciples to become famous meditation masters, such as Ajarn Thate (1902–1994), Ajarn Lee (1907–1961), Ajarn Maha Buawa (1913–2011), and Ajarn Chah (1918–1992), all of whom devoted themselves to propagating this meditation technique. Among them, Ajarn Chah was quite special, as he attracted a lot of Westerners to join meditation in this lineage and spread it to Western countries.

3. Ajarn Chah’s Innovation of the Thai Forest Tradition

Like Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun, Ajarn Chah (1918–1992) was also born in Ubon Ratchathani Province in Northeastern Thailand (Isan). For the first time, he spent three years as a novice in the temple to learn how to read and write when he was at the age of nine, then he left the monastic life to help his father on the farm. He returned to his high ordination as a monk when he was twenty in the year 1939. He spent his early monastic life studying Buddhist teachings and Pāli scriptures, although he found it did not help to approach the cessation of suffering even when he got proficient, so he finally abandoned his studies and went to take up the life of a mendicant forest-dwelling monk in the year 1946.

Ajarn Chah wandered to Central Thailand, and on the way, when he stayed in a temple where the precepts were strictly studied and observed, he heard that there was an accomplished meditation master named Ajarn Mun in Northeastern Thailand, so he went to seek him out and it was not long before he met Ajarn Mun. Ajarn Mun helped to solve his confusion about putting the complicated meditation techniques into practice by pointing out, “Although the teachings are indeed extensive, at their heart they are very simple. With mindfulness established, it is seen that everything arises in the heart-mind—right there is the true path of practice.”⁴ This meeting transformed Ajarn Chah’s approach to

practice, leading Ajarn Chah's practice in the style of the austere forest practice lineage taught by Ajarn Mun for the next seven years. Ajarn Chah wandered and stayed in the remote countryside and secluded forests until he was invited back to his home village in 1954. He stayed in a forest called "Pah Pong" in Ubon province, where he slowly established a forest monastery, Wat Pah Pong,⁵ and taught his meditation technique there.

In addition to spreading his meditation technique in Thai society, Ajarn Chah was also the one who took this practice lineage into Western peoples' lives and even established temples in Western countries. In 1967, Venerable Sumedho came to Wat Pah Pong accompanied by a monk from this temple and became Ajarn Chah's first Western disciple and later a prominent meditation master in the Thai Forest Tradition. Subsequently, more and more Westerners came to practice meditation under Ajarn Chah at Wat Pah Pong. In 1975, Venerable Sumedho, who at that time had been a very competent teacher, together with other Western monks, moved to another forest not far from Wat Pah Pong and established Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) to fulfill the needs of the local villagers. Since then, this temple has trained a lot of foreigners to practice meditation every year, as this temple is run by English-speaking meditation masters. In 1977, Ajarn Chah was invited to the United Kingdom to establish a local Buddhist Sangha. Thereafter, Ajarn Chah visited Europe, America, and Canada, and his Western disciples also established temples and spread his meditation technique throughout the world. From the year 1981, he went back to stay at Wat Pah Pong because of health problems until his passing away in 1992.

Ajarn Chah inherited Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun's meditation techniques. Before he constructed new monasteries, he spent many years wandering and meditating in forests to develop his practice. Ajarn Chah's meditation technique is not alien to the traditional three-fold training in Theravada Buddhism. In his idea, these three aspects assist each other and each one acts as a supporting factor for the other two. The greater purity of our morality facilitates the development of stronger and more refined Samadhi, and this, in turn, supports the maturing of wisdom. He believed that everyone is born with different temperaments, meaning each meditator should choose suitable places and meditation subjects fitting for himself or herself accordingly. For example, for one who is afraid of death, a graveyard can be chosen to challenge and eventually overcome the fear of death. He believed the Buddha does not invent anything. What he has provided for us is the discovery of the noble path of enlightenment. The supreme Dhamma originates from our purified mind, so what we should do is find the purified mind inherent in us. If we are concentrating on practicing, no matter if we are sitting under a single tree, lying down, or in any other posture, we can find the purified mind and the true Dhamma.

After finishing the preliminary work, we should first fix our attention on the head and move it down through the body to the tips of the feet, and then back up to the crown of the head. Passing awareness down through the body and observing it with wisdom is done to gain an initial understanding of the way the body is right now (Chah 2010, p. 1). Then, begin the meditation to observe yourself breathing in and out. When we breathe in, the beginning of the breath is at the nose tip, the middle of the breath at the chest, and the end of the breath at the abdomen. This is the path of the breath. When we breathe out, the beginning is at the abdomen, the middle is at the chest, and the end is at the nose tip. In the beginning, we should keep our awareness following the breath, taking note of these three points to make the mind firm, to limit mental activity so that mindfulness and self-awareness can easily arise. When our attention already settles on these three points, we can let them go and concentrate on the breath solely at the nose tip or the upper lip, where the air passes when breathing in and out. We do not have to follow the breath anymore, just establish mindfulness in front of us at the nose tip and note the breath at this one point, watching it entering, leaving, entering, leaving. Ajarn Chah claims that we should not force the breath to be any longer or shorter than normal, just let it flow easily and naturally. We should not put any pressure on the breath, rather let it flow evenly, letting go with each breath in and out (Chah 2007, p.51). One should simply observe the breath without trying to control or suppress it in any way. One should be mindful of the breath as it is, and the

mind will become calm. However, if the mind is agitated or feels doubt that leads to no concentration, it is alright to take an extra deep breath to release this passive emotion. We can do it several times until we become peaceful again, and then re-establish awareness and continue to develop concentration.

Meanwhile, we can also recite the mantra “Buddho” to assist the awareness of breath, that is, concentrate on the breath using the mantra “Buddha”. Mentally recite “Bud” when breathing in and “dho” when breathing out. Just stay with the breath in this way rather than pay attention to anything else that arises in the mind. No matter what kind of feeling arises in the mind, just let it go. Turn the awareness to the contemplation of the breath without controlling it, until you are aware of breathing in and breathing out. Naturally, the breath will become lighter and lighter, the concentration will be increased little by little, and the mind will become still and peaceful by itself.

In Ajarn Chah’s opinion, it is easy to say that all of us have a delusion of the existence of a permanent self or *atta*, and we have a firm and unyielding attachment to it, so he advises us to contemplate the body to investigate a correct personality view, which is the way to go beyond the delusion that identifies the body as a self. He advises repeatedly investigating the body and breaking it down into its parts. His teacher, Ajarn Mun, insists that there is no such thing as a Buddha or an Arahant who has not fixed on at least one part of the body as a meditation theme (Mun and Bhikkhu 2016, p. 14). Ajarn Mun instructs, “From the very beginning, all earnest meditators investigate the body methodically until they have it mastered. Before the body becomes clear, they investigate whichever part or aspect of the body is agreeable to their temperament until a particular aspect of the body appears as an *uggaha nimitta* (an image appearing spontaneously during meditation). Then, they focus on that aspect, working at it and developing it repeatedly.” (Mun and Bhikkhu 2016, p. 14). Ajarn Chah inherited his meditation technique from Ajarn Mun. He believed that a meditation master should lead each new meditator to investigate one or several meditation objects out of the forty mentioned in the *Visuddhimagga*, and sometimes five of them could be chosen by the beginners, including the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, and skin. When the body is investigated, we should use our method to methodically separate the body into the elements of earth, water, fire, and wind or air, examining the body until we see it in those terms. By doing this, we will find there is no such thing as “mine” or “self” but only elements. When we see the body for what it is, all doubt and incorrect personal views are gradually uprooted. With this new understanding, we can see the truth that attachment to the body is a defilement that obstructs the minds of all human beings from gaining insight into the Dhamma.

However, Ajarn Chah made some innovations in their monastic lifestyle. By performing a comprehensive survey of Ajarn Mun’s life, we find that he insisted on spending most of his life meditating in the wild even though he was invited to stay in temples many times. His disciple, Ajarn Chah, to some degree combined this forest tradition with the village-dwelling monastery tradition. Although he still followed the uncomplicated and disciplined ascetic life, he built Wat Pah Pong to stay there for teaching, and he also built other temples in both Thailand and abroad to propagate his practice. Therefore, differing from Ajarn Mun’s practice in a secluded environment alone, Ajarn Chah’s practice was taken out from the isolating forest or forest cemetery setting and has come into people’s daily lives with popular support from the laities.

4. Recitation of “Buddho” and Nian-Fo

Taking Ajarn Sao, Ajarn Mun, and Ajarn Chah as representatives, the important meditation techniques of the Thai forest meditation tradition have been discussed, and we have shown that the “recitation of Buddho” is a unique meditation technique in this lineage. Tzungkuwen Wen mentioned in his paper that there are two ways of dealing with the “Recitation of Buddho” in this lineage: one is to specifically concentrate on the “recitation of Buddho”, while for the other group the “recitation of Buddho” plays a subsidiary role to the mindfulness of breathing in and out and other meditation techniques (Wen n.d.). He also

believed that early meditation masters in this lineage, such as Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun, are the representatives of the first group, while Ajarn Chah belongs to the latter group. Besides the “recitation of Buddhho”, Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun also taught other meditation techniques, especially by contemplating breathing in and out. For example, it is recorded that Ajarn Sao taught a senior monk of the Mahanikaya sect to focus on the breath as his object in his awareness after he forgot and abandoned the repetition of “Buddho” (Thaniyo 1997). In Ajarn Mun’s teaching, an investigation of the body including the breath is highly valued, as it is regarded as the stronghold for the establishment of mindfulness (Mun and Bhikkhu 2016, p. 14). However, in the period of Ajarn Chah, mindfulness of breathing played a more and more significant role in their meditation. In general, no matter which group they belong to, the meditation masters from the Thai forest meditation tradition, represented by Ajarn Sao, Ajarn Mun, and Ajarn Chah, all take the “recitation of Buddhho” as an essential means of cultivating concentration and generating wisdom, and the “recitation of Buddhho” has already become a label in this lineage.

In the Chinese pure land school, the main practice is Nian-fo (the recitation of the Buddha’s name, 称名念佛). In this school, all kinds of Nian-fo including the recitation of Buddha’s name, contemplation on the self-nature of Buddha (实相念佛), contemplation by thought (观想念佛), and contemplation of an image (观像念佛) are followed. In the beginning, they paid more attention to contemplation by thought and contemplation of an image. Later, because the Amitābha Sūtra (《阿弥陀经》) had been rendered into Chinese and had been widely prevalent in China, Nian-fo (the recitation of Amitābha’s name) was focused on instead. Here, a comparative study will be made between the recitation of Buddhho in the Thai forest tradition and Nian-fo in the pure land school.

As mentioned above, in the Thai forest tradition, the recitation of Buddha’s name is mainly the repeated recitation of the mantra “Buddho”. It involves the recollection of the Buddha in Visuddhimagga, which is mindful of the Enlightened One’s special qualities as its object to increase the recollection required to be the Enlightened One. It is mentioned in Visuddhimagga that recollection means mindfulness, which arises again and again and it occurs only in those instances where it should occur (Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli 2011, p. 191).

In Visuddhimagga, ten recollections are listed, of which the recollection of the Buddha is the first one. This has mindfulness of the Buddha’s special qualities as its object. The recollection of the Buddha can be further separated into ten kinds according to the Buddha’s ten qualities, which means that the meditators recollect that the Buddha is accomplished, fully enlightened, endowed with vision and conduct, sublime, the knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, and blessed (Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli 2011, p. 191). For each quality, he should recollect, “That the Blessed One is such since he is accomplished, he is such since he is fully enlightened ... he is such since he is blessed” (Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli 2011, p. 191). The most important thing for the recollection of the Buddha is mindfulness of his virtues. However, the recitation of the word “Buddho” in the Thai forest tradition simplifies the recollection of the Buddha in Visuddhimagga by only involving one of ten epithets of the Buddha as the object for contemplation and only constantly repeating the Buddha’s epithet without regarding being mindful of his special qualities as a must. In the Thai forest tradition, the word “Buddho” acts as a kind of mantra and the Buddha’s special qualities are not the key issues in this practice. The recitation of “Buddho” is only done to make the mind concentrated and calm by preventing it from wandering here and there, so some other words, such as “Dhammo” or “Sangho”, can be recited in place of the word “Buddho”.

The practice of Nian-fo in the pure land school is mainly performed according to the Amitābha Sūtra, Aparimitayur Sūtra, and Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra, and involves reciting the Amitābha Buddha’s name and his special qualities. The following is mentioned in the Amitābha Sūtra:

If there are good men or good women who hear of Amitābha Buddha, and recite his name single-mindedly and without confusion, for one day or two days or

three days or four days or five days or six days, or seven days, then when these people are about to die, Amitābha Buddha and all the sages who are with him will appear before them. When these people die, their minds will not fall into delusion, and they will attain rebirth in Amitābha Buddha's Land of Ultimate Bliss. ([Amitabha n.d.](#))

When practicing Nian-fo, one should recite “na-mo-a-mi-tuo-fo” (Namo Amitābha) or “a-mi-tuo-fo” (Amitābha) single-mindedly, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, whether for long or short periods; thus, at the moment the person is going to die, the Amitābha Buddha will come to guide them to the western pure land or the Amitābha Buddha's Land of Ultimate Bliss, as mentioned above. Nian-fo can be divided into two kinds: oral recitation with the voice and silent recitation in the mind. For beginners, it is better to orally recite with the voice, as it is easier to stay mindful. However, a loud voice is also undesirable, as it takes a lot of effort and causes restlessness. On the contrary, a low voice will make one drowsy. When one is familiar with oral recitation and to some extent has reduced their false thoughts, silent recitation in the mind could be chosen. It is believed that as long as one seriously concentrates on the practice of Nian-fo, Amitābha Buddha will come to lead the meditator to the western pure land when they are dying. Therefore, for them, the keys to being reborn in the pure land are the vows and power of the Amitābha Buddha, meaning no other words can be recited instead of Amitābha Buddha's name.

The recitation of “Buddho” in the Thai forest tradition should be practiced in the system of threefold training—“sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā”. The Visuddhimagga points out that the recollection of Buddha is only effective for the cultivation of access concentration, “Owing to the profundity of the Enlightened One's special qualities, or else owing to his being occupied in recollecting special qualities of many sorts, the jhāna available is only access concentration and does not reach absorption.” ([Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli 2011](#), p. 209) As the recitation of “Buddho” is only one of the ten recollections of Buddha, meditators can attain momentary concentration or access concentration; thus, it is one of the Samatha practices. When the meditator has attained some degree of concentration, they should continue to develop their wisdom; that is to say, turn to the Vipassanā practice. Taking Ajarn Sao's practice as an example, he advised the meditator to achieve access concentration via the recitation of “Buddho”, then to attain absorption concentration via the contemplation of impurity, and lastly to develop Vipassanā to faithfully observe the nature of phenomena on the body and mind. Wen Tzungkuen also commented in his article that the recitation of “Buddho” in this tradition is only one link for the cultivation of concentration in the path, which aims to develop concentration and start to build mindfulness and lays the foundation for wisdom cultivation ([Wen n.d.](#)).

However, oral recitation alone is not enough in this Nian-fo practice. The Chinese scholar-monk Yinshun pointed out that it includes two meanings: when someone is in difficulty or an emergency and nothing can be done, then they can be taught the technique of Nian-fo; when someone has insufficient capacity to study other difficult methods, then they can be taught this expedient method, which is easy to learn ([Shi 2009](#), p. 41). He thought that Nian-fo is an expedient method to teach those who have never known the Buddha's teachings, as when they are going to die or in face of a crisis, there is no time to teach other methods.

Therefore, it is better for people who satisfy some conditions to practice this technique. For example, Vasubandhu proposed in his *Commentaries on the Aparimitayur Sūtra* that “five gates of intention” should be practiced first: physical worship of Amitābha Buddha, praising the Amitābha's virtue, an intention to be reborn in Amitābha's pure land, visualization of Amitābha and the pure land, and transference of merit to all sentient beings. Ven Yinshun also mentioned three essential factors in the practice of Nian-fo: faith, the vow, and action. In his idea, the meditator should first build faith in the existence of Amitābha Buddha and his extremely blissful pure land and believe the practice of Nian-fo helps their arrival to the pure land. Secondly comes the vow to rebirth in the pure land and lastly comes the actions for the final goal, including the practice of Nian-fo and providing

merit (Shi 2009, pp. 63–68). However, in later developments, the practice of the Nian-fo in pure land Buddhism became increasingly simplified. This cumbersome practice system or process has been streamlined. The technique of Nian-fo, with low barriers to entry, is not that complicated, no matter whether the precepts have been fully observed or not, or how long or how often the Buddha's name has been recited; only if the Amitābha Buddha's name is recited constantly when one is in need will the Amitābha Buddha come to take the meditator to the pure land.

In the pure land school, when the Amitābha Buddha's name is recited, even without the assistance of any other practice or any other sages, the meditator can be reborn in the pure land with the help of Amitābha Buddha's power. The key to the pure land is Amitābha Buddha's vows and power, so it depends on "other-power", which is Amitābha Buddha's power. On the contrary, the recitation of "Buddho" in the Thai forest tradition is effective for access concentration, and we cannot turn to the development of wisdom and attain Nibbāna directly in this practice without combining it with other practices. In addition, in this practice, no "other-power" can save us. Progressive practice is the only choice for the meditator to gain final enlightenment; thus, it depends on self-power.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Thai forest tradition, or Thai northeastern forest tradition, was born out of the religious reform of King Rama IV and is a small special group of the Dhammayut order, which was founded by King Rama IV. It was a way for northern Thai monks represented by Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun to respond to the lax discipline and indulgence in religious rituals and merit accumulation at that time. The Thai forest tradition strictly adheres to the precepts and shifts the focus from accumulating good karma and pursuing good rebirth to meditative practices that lead to Nibbana. These monks spend most of their time wandering in solitude in the jungle, which means it is difficult to keep them under the control of the sangha authorities. Thus, there was tension between these wandering meditation monks and the central Dhammayut order. In the Dhammayut sect, monks are not only required to observe the precepts strictly but also to pursue academic studies and attend the Dhamma and Pali examinations. The Dhammayut sect paid no attention to meditation and believed that a monk's main duty was to teach and serve in a monastery (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 173). Wandering meditation monks, although belonging to the Dhammayut sect, lived a quite different way of life, and it was difficult to integrate them into the mainstream of Dhammayut monastic system. In some parts of Thailand, wandering meditation monks from the forest tradition were chased away from the forests and villagers were forbade to give them alms by Dhammayut senior monks (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 175). Dhammayut administrators tried to turn these wandering monks into settled monastics to serve in the propagation of the Dhammayut sect in the north and northeast of Thailand. Many monks from the forest tradition were forced to abandon their meditation, and this situation did not change until the 1930s because the Dhammayut administrators wanted the wandering monks to help in their competition with the Mahānikāya sect.

"Recitation of Buddho" is a characteristic meditation method of the Thai forest tradition, and it can even be regarded to be the label of this meditation tradition. "Recitation of Buddho" is one of ten "recollections of the Buddha" in Visuddhimagga. In the system of precepts, concentration, and wisdom, "recitation of Buddho" involves the cultivation of concentration, which can lay the foundation for the further development of wisdom. This also shows that there is no way for a meditator to obtain liberation directly only by practicing the "recitation of Buddho" method. Having developed some degree of concentration, the meditator must shift to the cultivation of wisdom through meditation methods such as contemplation of breathing. The repetition of "Buddho" is taken as the initial step in the meditation. It is quite common to find in Theravada Buddhism that when doing the Ānāpānasati meditation, some objects that are easier to observe are used to assist the cultivation of calmness and mindfulness; for example, Mahasi advised to observe the breath in the abdomen by noting its rising and falling, while Buddhadasa taught people to count

the breath as a preliminary technique. The meditator could choose whichever works for them. In the Thai forest tradition, if repetitions of Buddhho do not work well, the meditator could use other word such as Dhammo or Sangho instead of Buddhho. However, the meditators are still recommended to depend on this word “Buddho” over anything else (Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery 2011, p. 401). The word “Buddho” represents the awareness and wisdom of the Buddha (Chah 2010, p. 7). It is easy to find Buddhists to whisper “Buddho” when they are having health problems or in an emergency, so similarly the repetition of this word is a way of reminding us the virtues of the Buddha and keeping the Buddha in one’s heart. Ajarn Lee also mentioned the advantages of the recitation of the Buddha’s virtues, including purifying themselves and improving their environment (Lee and Bhikkhu 2006).

By the time of Ajarn Chah, the way of life of the early forest meditation traditions represented by Ajarn Sao and Ajarn Mun had been partly changed. Beginning with Ajarn Chah, monasteries belonging to this tradition were continuously established for monks to live in and for the convenience of teaching meditation. Meditators can learn Ajarn Chah’s meditation techniques in those monasteries without having to spend most of their time wandering in the secluded forests or forest cemeteries. This is precisely why the Thai forest tradition began to be promoted on a large scale, attracting more and more meditators, for whom it is more convenient to join meditation courses in the monasteries near towns. On the other hand, due to the arrival of disciples from Western countries and the establishment of international meditation centers, more and more foreign meditators began participating in meditation courses, and the meditation methods in this lineage were spread overseas.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Social Science Fund of China: A Research on the Insight Meditation Movement in Modern Theravadin Buddhism From a Perspective of Modernity 中国国家社科基金项目“现代性视野中的南传佛教内观运动研究”. Funded by the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences, China (fund project number 20CZJ009). This research was also supported by “Funding Project for Science and Research Innovation of China University of Political Science and Law from the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities 中央高校基本科研业务费专项资金资助中国政法大学科研创新项目” (fund project number 20ZFG72001).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Ajarn is from the Thai word อาจารย์. It means teacher and is also used as a respectful title for a senior monk. It is also rendered in “ajan”, “ajahn”, “achaan” or “Ajaan” by some scholars.
- ² Kamala Tiyanich mentioned, practicing in the dense forest and the isolation of villages shielded wandering ascetics from political intrusion from Bangkok at that time. See (Tiyavanich 1997, p. 46).
- ³ 13 kinds of ascetic practices, see (Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli 2011, p. 55).
- ⁴ Unknown, *Biography of Ajahn Chah*, see <https://forestsangha.org/ajahn-chah/biography> (accessed on 10 April 2023).
- ⁵ The word “Wat” means temple or monastery in the Thai language, so “Wat Pah Pong” means Pah Pong Monastery.

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