

## Meditation in Laos and Buddhist nuns

In Lao Buddhism, meditation is a personal, individual effort. It is the fundamental way towards awakening from the dream existence in which every human being is caught, stumbling between the pleasures and pains of impermanence. The meditator is alone with himself and his experiences, and seeks no communication with others, especially not with supernatural beings. In Laos, meditation was always a cultural practice rather than a purely religious one. It is open to everyone, can be practised anywhere and in different degrees of intensity. It is the monks' most important exercise, but many lay people also meditate under the guidance of the monks.

Women can retreat to some of Luang Prabang's bigger monasteries for meditation exercises. They do this either for a limited time during which they observe the eight rules of fasting and abstention, or they live in the monastery for longer, especially if they have no living relatives. In this case they observe a canon of precepts that are even stricter than those of the monks. Present-day Theravada Buddhism has no nunneries, as the tradition of ordaining female novices died out over 1,500 years ago. Until now, recent efforts to reintroduce the bhikkhuni ordination have been limited to Sri Lanka and Thailand. This means that in Laos meditation is the only form of spiritual practice open to women within the monasteries. Some abbots in Luang Prabang view these limitations as a contradiction to the equality of all people and genders postulated by the Buddha, who did not recognise the Brahmanic caste system and preached his teachings to men and women alike.

In Luang Prabang the two forms of Lao meditation are practised especially in the Vat Pa Phon Phao monastery and in a grove on the Phu Pasat: samatha, the development of equilibrium and concentration, and vipassana, the development of inner contemplation and intelligent insight. Precise exercises, behaviour patterns, distance from external stimuli such as colours, sounds, smells or community are the precondition for both these types of meditation. For samatha a master names a contemplation theme selected from forty objects. He applies these themes, like prescribing a medicine, depending on the meditator's level of spiritual progress. Intellectual concentration develops step by step; the final goal of this meditation is rebirth in Brahma's world which is considered the best of all worlds. The vipassana meditation is designed to promote the insight that all things are transient, full of suffering and impersonal. This meditation is practised while walking, standing, sitting or reclining, either in a wood or in a solitary place beside the river. Its aim is to attain a particular state of contentment which fills the body and the spirit and allows the meditator to perceive all forms of reality. He sees what is truly bad and harmful and extinguishes it; finally, he comprehends the true nature of nirvana.

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