

A Study of Forest Dwelling and Meditation Practice

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ABSTRACT

Forest dwelling in the context of Vinaya Pitaka, indicates the nine types of monk's dwellings prescribed by the Buddha as forest, tree-root, mountain, mountain-hole, cave, charnel-ground, jungle, open-air, and straw-heap. All these dwellings are called solitude dwellings in which the Buddha himself preferred to stay. Naturally, the forest in the meaning of austere practice, denotes Arañnikangadhutanga—forest-dweller's practice. The forest-dwelling monk is to stay far away from home surrounding areas at least about one kilometer. Forest provides all of atmospheres of solitude, freshness, pleasure, natural beauty of trees and wild animals, mountain, cave, waterfall, river and canals, thus suitable for meditation exercises conforming to foundations of mindfulness.

Keywords

Forest Dwellings, Dwelling under a tree, Austere Practice

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Introduction

Actually speaking, forests are the natural resources to have provided all requisites for human living. King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, Rama IX had ever stated that forests are the resources for the benefits of the people living both directly and indirectly. Forests maintain balance atmosphere, water resources and moisture to support other natural resources such like soil and water including plants and trees. This royal address was expressed in the point of economics view[1]. In the life of the Buddha, he was accustomed to forests since his birth through the enlightenment up to the passing away. In his mission, he wandered from forest to house and from house to forest for his preaching and staying. Even after home-dwellings were built and given to him and his disciples, the Buddha preferred to stay in forests more than home surroundings, except during the Buddhist lent [2]. What the forest is? Why the forest is significant? What the purpose of the Buddha is to have stayed in the forest dwellings? And what the final goal is to be gained from lodging in the forest? Therefore, the relations between forests and meditation practice is a subject of study and research as to seeking the answers to the above questions.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this paper were to study forest dwellings, and to utilize forest dwellings as solitude lodges for monks to practice meditation.

Research Method

This is a documentary research based on references found in Buddhist texts and their commentaries with additional explanations of the Buddhist scholars. The process of research entitled "A Study of Forest Dwellings and Meditation Practice" could be shown as chart below:

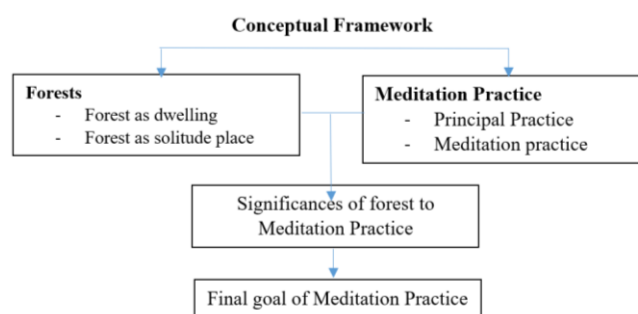


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

Research Results

Forest Nature

Forest is large area of land thickly covered with trees, bushes, etc. Tropical rain forests are found near the Equator. On this hot and steamy climate, many kinds of trees and plants grow very quickly. In some places, the trees grow so close together

that the sunlight cannot reach the dark, bare forest floor. Five layers can be seen in a tropical forest. At ground level, fungi, moss, and ferns grow in the rich leaf litter. Then comes a layer of tree ferns, shrubs, and lianas. Above this is a layer of young tree crowns and then the thick canopy, the crowns of mature trees. The topmost layer consists of the few trees that stand above the canopy [3]. Partially speaking, the forests are roughly divided into two groups; i.e. thick trees or jungle, and sparse trees. The first are mostly in the deep forests surrounded by mountains. The second group stands on the foothills. Forests are not only sources of trees and plants, but they are also homestays of wild animals of various species and breeding, big and small, poisonous and non-poisonous, harmful and friendly to human beings. The forests are also water sources providing water-falls, canals, and rivers. Combination of many profiles of natural circumstances make forests beautiful, charming, pleasurable, and inevitable to approach.

1. Dwelling in a Peaceful Place

Yet though the Buddha had permitted monks to live in roofed buildings constructed and given by the faithful donors, he preferred and appraised Vivittasenaśana, dwelling in a peaceful place, or solitude dwelling, nine in number as stated earlier. However, only the five were mentioned for the austere practices.

How does one undertake (the austerity of) 'dwelling in a peaceful place'? When the village is crowded, one's mind is touched by the five objects of sense and saturated with the desire for pleasure. When one dwells in a crowded place, one is disturbed by people going and coming. One sees these faults and the merits of the observance of 'dwelling in a peaceful place' (and undertakes thus :) "I abandon dwelling in the village from today and observe (the austerity of) 'dwelling in a peaceful place'".

What are the merits of 'peaceful place'? Even when the village is crowded, one's mind is not touched by the five objects of sense and is kept away from attachment. If one dwells in a crowded place, one is disturbed by the going and coming of many: One knows the excellence of the ten kinds of words praised by gods and men. One does not wish to become worldly, and wishes to gain tranquility. One dwells in solitude, speaks little

and meditates, according to one's bent of mind. This is an observance of good men. This observance is doubt-free.

Q. What is the nearest distance of 'dwelling in a peaceful place'? What is the observance? How does one fail?

A. One dwells outside (the village) keeping some distance from the walls and avoiding the far end of the suburb. The nearest distance of 'dwelling in a peaceful place' is five hundred bow-lengths. One bow-length is four cubits of an average man. Avoidance of dwelling in a village is called 'dwelling in a peaceful place'. If bhikkhu (yekin) dwells in a village, he fails in the observance of 'dwelling in a peaceful place'.

2. Dwelling under a Tree

Araññikaṅga may be translated as "Forest Dwelling" or "Dwelling under a tree". Here, the latter is preferred. Truly speaking, this dhutaṅga is practiced in the forest, the others may be or may not be in the forest, i.e. home surroundings.

How does one undertake to observe (the austerity of) 'dwelling under a tree'? One avoids roofed places. One does not keep animals. One does not build or long for (roofed places). One does not search (for roofed places). One sees the faults (of dwelling in roofed places) and the merits of the observance of '(dwelling) under a tree' (and undertakes thus :) "I abandon roofed places from today and observe (the austerity of) 'dwelling under a tree'. Thus one undertakes to observe.

What are the benefits of '(dwelling) under a tree'? One relies on the place one likes, one does not hold intercourse with the world, one is pleased because one is free from all work, one dwells with the gods, cuts down resentment due to residence, and is free from attachment. This is an observance of good men. This observance is doubt-free.

Q. Under the trees should a bhikkhu dwell? What trees should be avoid. What is the observance? How does one fail?

A. The place on which shadows of trees fall during the day and the place where leaves of trees fall when there is no wind are the places to dwell in. One avoids dangerous decayed trees, rotten trees with hollows and trees haunted by evil spirits. One avoids roofed places. This is the observance of 'dwelling under a tree'. If a

bhikkhu (yogin) goes to (live in) a roofed place, he fails in the observance of 'dwelling under a tree'.

Q. How should a bhikkhu (yogin) develop the perception of the loathsomeness of food through (the task of) "searching for it"?

A. This bhikkhu (yogin) sees that many beings encounter trouble in searching for drink and food; they commit many evil deeds such as killing and thieving (for the sake of food). Further, he sees that these beings are the recipients of various forms of suffering and are killed or deprived of liberty. And again, he sees that such beings commit diverse evil actions such as eagerly searching for things, deceiving and pretending to be energetic. Thus these beings perform evil. Seeing food thus, he develops dislike through the thought: "Impure urine and excrement are due to drink and food".

3. The Dwelling of the Homeless

And again, a bhikkhu (yogin) sees the dwelling of the homeless man in the clean forest-retreat where fragrant flowers bloom, where birds sing and the cry of the wild is heard. In that prosperous field which the good man cultivates, are shadows of trees, groves and water which captivate the mind of others. The ground is flat and exceedingly clean; so there is nothing uneven. Seeing this, men admire them with awe. Here are no quarrels and noises. This place where the homeless man trains for enlightenment is like the dwelling of Brahma. In such a place the mind is unfettered; and he, reciting (the Law) and developing concentration always, enjoys the practice of good deeds. (Leaving such a place) the homeless man goes in search of food in cold and heat, wind and dust, mud and rain. He traverses steep paths. With bowl in hand, he begs for food, and in begging enters others' houses. Seeing that, the yogin stirs up the thought of tribulation in his mind as follow: "Drink and food are impure. They come out in the excrement and urine. For that one goes in search of food". Thus abandoning, he should look for the highest bliss.

4. Why of Dwelling under a Tree (Forest Dwelling)

Because of the varying disposition of the yogin. For paucity of wishes, for contentment with little, for freedom from doubt, for the destruction of

craving, for the increase of energy, for the sake of using little and not accepting the offerings made to others, for solitude, for the cutting down of clinging and for the protection of moral virtue. These (the merits of the austerities) are the equipment of concentration. These are (practices of) the ancient lineage of the Ariyas. These are the excellent considerations such kinds of this practice are stated by the Buddha also in *Brahmacariyasutta* and *Santuṭṭhisutta* of *Catukkanipāta Aṅguttanikāya, Suttanta Piṭaka*.

To provide the suitable means to whom leading sublime life, the Buddha laid down the thirteen austerities.

The Thirteen Austerities

What are the austerities? There are thirteen teachings: two teachings connected with robes, namely, dirt-rags and three robes; five teaching connected with alms, begged food, regular alms-round, one eating, measured food, no food after time; five teaching connected with residence : the first : dwelling in a peaceful place, the second : dwelling under a tree, the third : dwelling in a dewy place, the fourth : dwelling among the graves, the fifth : any chanced upon place; and there is a kind of sitting connected with energy, namely, always sitting and not lying down.

And again one fulfils eight teachings through these thirteen austerities. In the *Abhidhamma* these eight are taught: 'Measure food' and 'one eating' are involved in 'no food after time'. 'Dwelling under a tree', 'dwelling in a dewy place', 'dwelling among graves' are involved in 'dwelling in a peaceful place', because, if one gathers funds for building a house, or if one likes to (do remunerative) work, keeps animals or is attached to 'dwelling in a peaceful place', one's mind is not ease. Thus thinking one dwells in peace 'under a tree', 'among the graves' or 'in a dewy place'. Thus the eight are fulfilled [4].

By these eight austerities, three teachings are fulfilled: the first: 'dwelling in a peaceful place', the second: 'dirt-rags', the third: 'begged food'. If these three are pure, the austerities are fulfilled. Therefore the Buddha taught the Venerable Elder Nanda thus: "Always you should observe 'dwelling in a peaceful place', 'dirt-rag' and 'begged food'. You should not see the objects of lust."

What of Observance of a Forest Dweller

Truly, a yogin practicing austerities should comply with satipaṭṭhana- (the four) Foundations of Mindfulness as presented in Mahāsatiṭṭhanasutta to which Phra Brahmgunabhorn (P.A. Payutto) [5] extends his exposition as follows:

1. Kāyānupassanā – contemplation of the body, mindfulness as regards the body.
2. Vedanānupassanā – contemplation of feelings, mindfulness as regards feelings.
3. Cittānupassanā – contemplation of mind, mindfulness as regards thoughts.
4. Dhammānupassanā – contemplation of mind objects, mindfulness as regards ideas.

In brief, mindfulness to have realized all Dhammas of whole Nirvāṇa, Khandha, Āyatana, Bojjhaṅga, and Ariyasacca are; how they are; within oneself they are; and how they do arise, develop, and extinct, etc. as their true conditions. [6]

Here is an example of mindfulness of major body postures: one is in, such as standing, walking, sitting or lying down, one is required to set one's mind, as the opportunity allows, to become aware of the body posture as being "Rūpa is standing, walking, sitting or lying down" [3] instead of "I am standing, walking, sitting or lying down" [7]. Such awareness will at least enhance one's knowledge of reality as it really is in order to do away with misconceptions and blind attachments, [8] which are the basic causes of suffering in life.

Conclusion

The Buddha preferred and appraised a monk resting in the forest under a tree for practice of meditation. Forests and trees are peaceful places of charm and pleasure, mostly suitable for austere practice. They are beautiful by nature. However, as stated in Mahāgosingasutta of Majjhimanikāya Mūlapannāsaka, the Buddha addressed to the Venerables Sāriputta, Moggallāna, Kassapa, Anuruddha, Revata, and Ānanda as to the questions how Gosīngasāla Forest be beautiful with what kind of monk is. He pointed out that "Gosīngasāla Forest should be beautiful with a monk in this doctrine, after going about for alms

and having his breakfast, sits down, with legs crossed under him, with the body held erect, with mindfulness established in front, keeping in his mind that: so far as my mind has not escaped from attachment and not emancipated from kangers, I never give up this crossed legged sitting. Sāriputta, Gosīngasāla Forest should be beautiful with such kind of this monk.

The virtue of forest dweller could be seen from an example of a Rajagihan millionaire, incidentally having gazed a group of monks coming out from forest dwelling earlier in one morning for alms-collecting with self-controlled, he had appreciated and expressed his will to have built a cell for them. And later the Buddha allowed monks to stay in home dwelling. However he himself preferred to the peaceful places and appraised monks of such character.

Recommendations

A. Recommendations for Executive Policy

Anyone, especially a monk, should not invade in order to establish a monastery, temporary and or permanent. In some case, he has allowed to do so but keep its surroundings with consideration: not to destroy woods and trees, not make any harm to wild animals, and not to make pollution to them.

B. Recommendations for further research

A research study should be made as to the following concepts and ideas:

1. Survey and evaluate the existing meditation centers as to their activities conforming to the austere practices or the four foundations of mindfulness. What to be improved, and what to be promoted and appraised them.
2. Is it necessity to allow anyone to establish a new monastery within the surroundings of forest? Is it possible to re-innovate a big monastery partly to a forest grove in the area of city or community?

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