



# MEDITATION IN LUANG PRABANG

An exhibition of the Buddhist Archive of Photography  
with historic photographs from monastic collections  
and  
photographs by Hans Georg Berger of the Sangha's *Vipassana* Teaching Retreats

No activity is more important in monastic life than meditation. It is through meditation that a monk achieves serenity, through meditation that he achieves insight-wisdom, and through meditation that he may attain his ultimate goal - enlightenment and nirvana.

Meditation and the teaching of meditation practice look back to a centuries-old tradition in Luang Prabang. Specific meditation techniques have been developed. The Western World knows very little about this religious and cultural heritage of Laos. With our exhibition, we try to offer a glimpse of a tradition that is both hidden and beautiful.

Lao Buddhism has its own forms of *Samatha* (a concentrated meditation leading to calm and serenity of mind) and *Vipassana* (a meditation cultivating mental awareness and development of insight). *Samatha* has always been a widespread technique, often practiced by laypeople, while *Vipassana* was restricted to some monastic centers that formed around a learned monk who sometimes would create a tradition.

Monks of Luang Prabang also practice *Parivassakam*, when they retreat for meditation to an isolated place, often a forest, for fourteen days and stay in basic huts while they observe strict rules of silence and do special chanting. There is also the *Tudong* tradition, where monks live and walk in the forest, with a large white umbrella as their only shelter. Physical and mental isolation play an important part in these meditations reserved to monks.

Our exhibition on Luang Prabang's meditation is divided in two sections,  
historic and contemporary:

The historic part shows original photographs taken or collected by Buddhist monks over almost 100 years in three showcases: the first case focuses on Pha Xaisamut Chotiko, of royal descent, who, after meditation studies in Thailand and Burma, started in the 1960s a *Vipassana* tradition at Vat Pha Pone Pao, Luang Prabang. The second case shows meditation photographs related to Pha Khamchan Virachitta Maha Tela. The third case shows the tradition of women's meditation in photographs taken by a monk photographer in the 1940s and 1950s, Pha Oune Heuan, from Vat Nong. Such photographs are extremely rare in the Theravada world.

The contemporary section underlines how *Vipassana* meditation today again is alive in Luang Prabang. The renaissance of Buddhism in Laos in recent years made it possible for the monks of Luang Prabang to boldly reintroduce systematic teaching of *Vipassana*. The large photographs exhibited on the southern walls document recent teaching retreats of the Sangha.

These black and white photographs in a square format by photographer Hans Georg Berger are the result of a unique community project, where the monks of Luang Prabang worked together with a Western artist in order to attempt an accurate documentation of their meditation practice and their teaching. Each photograph is the result of a precise process of discussion, has been chosen by the monks and constitutes their precious statement directed at the world.

Hans Georg Berger took these photographs during two meditation retreats in 2004 and 2005. They are part of "The Quiet in the Land", an art and education project organized between New York and Luang Prabang. They have been shown from 2006 to 2013 in an exhibition entitled THE FLOATING BUDDHA at the National Museum of Luang Prabang. Recently, they have also become part of museum collections in the West, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and private collections of photography.

The Satipatthana Sutta, the canonical text that outlines the practice of *Vipassana*, prescribes four fundamental exercises: sitting, standing, lying down, and walking. The movements accompanying these exercises are meticulously prescribed and must be learned by the meditator. In both retreats, the monks were joined by a growing group of nuns who joined their exercises under the guidance of a young nun from the South of Laos, who has created a women's monastery there. Under the guidance of The Most Venerable Pha One Keo Kittiphattho, such *Vipassana* teaching retreats are now organized regularly in Luang Prabang, and attract large numbers of young monks from all Northern provinces of Laos. The retreats are part of an ambitious project of education of the monks aimed at the creation of an Academy of Higher Buddhist Education in Luang Prabang.

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Exhibition set up by the Buddhist Archive of Photography  
under the High Patronage of the Most Venerable Pha One Keo Kittiphattho  
by Khamvone Boulyaphonh and Bounsou Saylam, in collaboration with Hans Georg Berger.  
Graphics Anna Weil, Administration Brian Lingham, Stencils Nithakong Somsanith.

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Hans Georg Berger's photographs courtesy of the artist  
with thanks to France Morin, The Quiet in the Land (2004-2008)

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A catalogue of THE FLOATING BUDDHA exhibition is available  
as well as the publications of the Buddhist Archive of Photography