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## BOOK REVIEW

### Coming of age in old Siam

*To be a monk or bandit? The story of three men who chose the former*

CHRIS BAKER

This book reconstructs the early lives of three famous monks. Acharn Buddhadasa became the most creative philosopher of Thai Buddhism in the modern era. Acharn Panya transformed the art of Buddhist preaching for a modern, urbanised world. Acharn Jumtien won fame as a meditation teacher and healer with an international following.

All came from southern Thailand. But their common regional roots and their shared lives in the robes are almost irrelevant to the first achievement of this remarkable book - describing childhood and growing up in a world that has now vanished.

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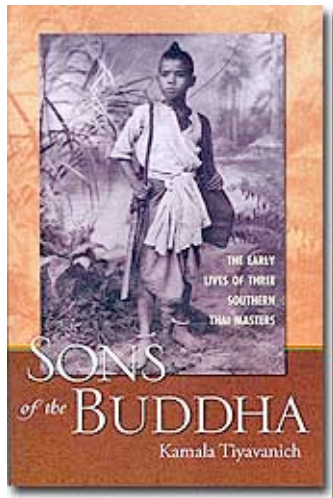
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#### **Sons of the Buddha: The Early Lives of Three Southern Thai Masters**

Kamala Tiyavanich  
 Silkworm Books, 277pp,  
 495 baht  
 ISBN 978-974-9511-34-3

Their backgrounds were very different. Buddhadasa was the son of a second-generation Chinese shopkeeper and poet manque'. Panya came from a family of middle farmers. Jumtien's father was a former monk, traditional healer and dabbler in the supernatural arts.

The common motif of their early lives is hard work. All three seem to have begun labouring almost as soon as they could stand up. Buddhadasa helped out in his father's shop and became the family cook. Panya herded buffalo. Jumtien was his father's aide and pupil in

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making herbal cures. All three also spent much of their time in the hunting and gathering activities that supplemented the family's food supply. They fished, trapped insects, shot birds and gathered herbs and vegetables. From this, all three became fascinated with the intricacy of nature and troubled over the conundrum of killing other living beings in order to sustain their own lives.

For all three, their families were close but not enclosing. They learned about life from their parents, but also from a penumbra of relatives and village neighbours. As the wat was the school, hospital, social centre and even provider of entertainment for the village, it played a large role in the lives of all three children. They shuttled between the family bosom and spells as temple boys, which again meant more hard work. The monks beat some basic education into them and put them to work cleaning, painting, building, carrying and cooking - learning for a tough life. Buddhadasa and Panya both grew up in the 1910s and 1920s when modern state-controlled primary schooling was just taking root. Jumtien was born a generation later, but the schooling system had progressed little in the interim. For all three, this modern schooling was not the dominating environment of their childhood as it is for children today. Rather, it was a peripheral activity that they found awkward and unnatural. The school discipline of timetables and rules did not come easily to boys raised in the village environment and accustomed to physical labour from an early age. Buddhadasa goofed off most of the time. Panya disliked the discipline so much he went back to being a temple boy. Jumtien spent more time with his teacher father.

All three grew up fast because they had to. Jumtien's mother died and his father fell apart mentally so that by the time Jumtien's age reached double figures he was the virtual head of the family. At the age of 10 he had made his name locally as a healer, astrologer, preacher and solver of local problems. He tested himself by fighting with crocodiles and sharks. He stood up to the local bandits.

Panya had to fend for himself by the age of 15 when his father was stricken with illness. He spent time in Ranong, became a tin-miner in Phuket, did a string of odd jobs and fetched up as a schoolteacher. Buddhadasa also became the family mainstay at 16, when his father died. By the time they had passed their teenage years these three men had learned a lot about life.

All were fiercely intelligent and headstrong children. The local saying of the time was that such lads had a choice between two fates - becoming a bandit or becoming a monk. Bandits and buffalo rustlers were a prominent part of the social landscape. For a young man with quick wits and high ambition, this direction was a natural career choice.

Yet, nudged by various preceptors, and tempted by learning, all three finally gravitated towards the robe. Buddhadasa became fascinated by the books that were sold in the family shop. He started to read the output of the novelists, social commentators and political ideologues from Bangkok and drifted from there into reading Buddhist texts. He ordained at the age of 20 with the aim of staying for the usual three months but found that the life suited him and never left.

Panya stumbled into Wat Khachon in Phuket while trying to sneak away from his fellow tin-miners who had taken him along on a brothel outing. He became the odd-job man for the wat, ordained at 18, became fascinated by reading dharma texts and did brilliantly in the Naktham examinations for the monkhood. He moved to Nakhon Si Thammarat and by the age of 20 had laid the grounding of his fame as a remarkable preacher. Jumtien also began reading texts in his local wat library while in his late teens, and became fascinated by the itinerant forest monks passing through his village.

At 20, when his father died, he decided to spend the rest of his life in the monkhood and gave away all of his meagre inheritance of family possessions. Kamala Tiyanich's account of these three men's early lives is gleaned from their own autobiographical writings, from interviews and from some third-party biographies.

Unsurprisingly, their life stories, especially as they emerge from their own mouths and pens, is stamped by their aptitude as preachers and teachers. These are stories of life as lessons for the living. They tell of the importance of nature, compassion, learning and morality.

In her previous two books (Forest Collections and The Buddha in the Jungle), Kamala celebrated the forest monk tradition as a way to criticise the modern state-controlled Sangha for being over-regimented, antagonistic to learning and increasingly irrelevant to society.

Here she continues the same theme by celebrating the humanity and simplicity of three of Thailand's most effective religious teachers of the past century. These three monks came from a traditional local background but became famous for making the practice of Buddhist teaching more relevant for a changing world. In its own subtle way Kamala's book is a sermon which honours the three monks by replicating the simplicity, directness and humanism that is part of their own style.

As an intimate portrait of coming of age in old Siam, or as a subtle sermon about life and learning, this is a very lovely book.

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