

Interview with a Ruesi

Laura Covington, CMT with Tevijjo Yogi

In this past year I have been graced with the friendship and guidance of Tevijjo Yogi and was recently invited to interview him about the Reusi of Thailand. Tevijjo wears long cotton robes, long hair, and a long beard; external evidence of his recent commitment to the life of a Thai Reusi. A Reusi, Tevijjo explains to me, is an ascetic seer. Tevijjo Yogi has spent most of his life in the quiet pursuit of ancient knowledge. He began his studies with Theravada Buddhism and Traditional Thai Medicine at a very early age, moving into a Buddhist monastery when he was just fifteen years old. I am blessed and thankful for Tevijjo Yogi for taking the time to talk to me about this path such that we all may better understand what is a largely unknown practice.



Laura: What is a Ruesi? What does the term mean?

Tevijjo Yogi: The Thai term Reusi originates from the Sanskrit word Rishi, meaning seer. In the Vedic tradition the Rishi are the sons of Brahma. They are credited with discovering/receiving many of the mantras found in the Vedas and other Indian texts. Every mantra has a seer who received this mantra from a higher being or from his or her own insight. This is the meaning of the term Rishi on the linguistic level. In India, this word generally refers to a group of ascetics associated with or descended from Brahma. This title is not given out easily and some might say that one must be of the Brahmin caste in order to use this term. Others use the term to refer to a highly accomplished practitioner of the Vedic sciences. In Thailand the term Reusi is a blanket term used to refer to various types of practitioners who are practicing esoteric sciences and have the appearance of an ascetic. In actuality, the practices of many of the people called or calling themselves Ruesi are often very different from one another. Some people are practicing as ascetics, some as householders, some in the city, some in the wilderness, some practice mantra, tantra, yoga and others practice meditation or medicine. To summarize, the Reusi are the holders of the natural laws and sciences, which have been passed down over the millennia.

Laura: What are these sciences you speak about?

Tevijjo Yogi: I use the term 'sciences' to describe the different types of knowledge which many ancient cultures and religions have based most of their practice and theory on. These include both esoteric sciences like astrology, alchemy, palmistry, demonology, etc. as well as the exoteric sciences such as mathematics, medicine, music, etc. There are two Sanskrit terms that are often used to refer to these methods, Vidya and Sastra. Vidya means knowledge and Sastra means sci-

ence. Both of these terms are used to refer to the ‘sciences’ which I speak of above. The Reusi, in my tradition, are known as those who are the protectors of these sciences.

Laura: How long ago did this tradition begin?

Tevijjo Yogi: This tradition is very old and can be found all over the world. We know from the Buddhist texts that there were Reusi during the time of the Gotama Buddha. In fact, the Buddha himself practiced as a Reusi before his enlightenment and spent many past lives as a Reusi. Putting a date on the origins of the practice is very difficult. If we look at Reusi outside of the Buddhist tradition, we can find ascetics as far back as the Indus Valley period (circa 2600–1900 BCE).

Laura: How is the Thai tradition similar to traditions from other countries?

Tevijjo Yogi: Of course each country and religion has its own characteristics but at their heart all ascetic traditions are very similar. The Ruesi of Thailand are just like the Vijjadharas of Burma, the Reusi of Cambodia, the Yogis of Tibet, the Siddhas of India, the Immortals of China, the Sufis of Islam, the Hermits of Europe, the mystics of Christianity and the Shamans of the Americas and Africa. It is about living with nature, relying on nature and rediscovering ourselves in nature. Nature includes both wilderness and universal truth.

Laura: In the beginning was the practice Animistic and later adopted Buddhist principles?

Tevijjo Yogi: Well, the Reusi tradition had been around for many thousands of years before the birth of Gotama Buddha. When we look at Buddhist texts, we find that even the Gotama Buddha was a Reusi in many of his past lives. In fact, he was a Reusi during the time of Dipamkara Buddha, one of the Buddhas of the past that lived many eons ago. It was during this life time as Sumedha Rishi that Gotama Buddha gave up his chance at enlightenment in that life time and vowed to become a fully enlightened Buddha. Being a Reusi is not about what religion you believe in. It’s the way in which you approach your practice. Reusi are experiential in their practice. They prefer a solitary path, which brings them close to nature. Overall, I’d say that we mostly see a naturalistic approach that deals with the elements, nature, deities, spirits and ghosts. Some may consider this to lean towards Animism but it’s really not about the worship of nature it’s more about the living as a part of nature. During the time of Gotama Buddha there were many Reusi that became disciples of the Buddha but never ordained as monks. Instead, they chose to continue their practice as Reusi. These were the first Buddhist Reusi of our time and it is where my lineage originates. Prior to being followers of the Buddha we might say that they held Brahministic beliefs. But this is only speaking of the Reusi in India. Whether one is a Reusi, a monk or a layperson is not really specific to any religion. Someone can be a Catholic monk, a Hindu monk, etc. It’s the level of practice you take on. So being a Reusi in the Buddhist religion is just about the way in which I practice the Dhamma. Those we would call a Reusi in other religions are practicing their religion on the same level that I am practicing Buddhism. While we have different beliefs and culture perhaps, we are still working with the same methods and have a similar approach.

Laura: What is the goal of your practice as a Reusi?

Tevijjo Yogi: The goal of a Reusi is to understand nature and natural law. This includes learning and practicing the various sciences such as astrology, medicine, meditation, etc. We must preserve these so that they will be around for future generations.

Laura: Can anyone become a Reusi?

Tevijjo Yogi: Technically, yes. In actuality, the training period required before one becomes a Reusi coupled with the commitment to daily practice is rather difficult and often prohibitive for most. Additionally, it is absolutely necessary to have a competent teacher, who is already a practitioner, in order to be initiated into the tradition. Due to the gravity of this commitment, it is necessary for the teacher to put the student through a probationary period to test his/her dedication to the tradition. Many who ordain as Reusi vow to keep their precepts for life. Becoming a Reusi is not for everyone and is a decision that should not be made lightly.

Laura: What are the rules you must follow?

Tevijjo Yogi: The most fundamental guidelines are simple. These have been laid out by the Buddha for all of his followers. They are separated into Body, Speech and Mind. Under bodily action we have, to refrain from killing, not to steal and not to commit sexual misconduct. Speech includes, not to lie, not to speak poorly of others in order to create discord, not to use harsh language and not to indulge in gossip or idle chatter. Mentally we avoid coveting other's possessions and excessive desire, thoughts of ill will towards others and false views.

These are the most basic. There are many others, which govern things like how we eat and when. These help us to maintain mindfulness throughout our day.

Laura: What does a daily practice consist of?

Tevijjo Yogi: It really depends on the person and what they have set out to accomplish. The whole purpose of the Reusi is to study and practice the sciences, control one's mind, develop loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity and most importantly to help others find and tread the path to enlightenment. It is very similar to the Bodhisattva path in Mahayana Buddhism.



To answer your question, we do a lot of meditation, chanting, protecting nature as well as maintaining balance between the spirit world and the human world.

Laura: *As a Buddhist Reusi, is your goal to reach enlightenment?*

Tevijjo Yogi: Yes, though we willingly postpone our enlightenment in order to continue existing in this world for the benefit of others. It's similar to the Bodhisattva vows in Mahayana Buddhism but it differs in that our vow is to remain until the birth of the next Buddha. We vow to be his/her disciple. The Bodhisattva's vow is to stay in this world system until the last being has attained enlightenment. So, their commitment is much longer.

Laura: *Can you further explain how the sciences and the spiritual are connected? To me they seem to go hand in hand and one cannot fully be practiced without the other.*

Tevijjo Yogi: Yes, this is true. Many of the sciences themselves are interdependent and they all have a connection with the spiritual. In reality, there isn't much distinction between the two. The sciences are a way of practicing the spiritual and they lead to the spiritual. It's much like the connection between the physical form and the energetic form. They coexist and are co-dependent.

Laura: *Can you describe the clothes and physical appearance of Reusi?*

Tevijjo Yogi: There are three types of clothing we can wear, white robes, a brownish colored robe or animal skin. Many years ago the Reusi lived in the forest and had no contact with people. Sometimes they would have to make clothes from things they found, often the carcass of a dead animal. Traditionally wearing animal skin as clothing was a sign of an advanced practitioner. This is because he would have spent a long time in the forest to come across such materials. However, in this modern age we substitute animal skin with animal print cloth in remembrance of the old tradition. In the past, the Reusi never killed anything for their comfort and this ideal continues today.

Usually, for myself, I only wear white and brown colored robes.

As for other aspects of the appearance, we don't cut our hair or beard for the first three years. This is because every Reusi is empowered with the spirit of the past Reusi and teachers. Cutting the hair would be cutting the connection to this power.



Laura: Can you further explain the significance of not cutting the hair for three years?

Tevijjo Yogi: The focus is not on the hair itself. It's more about the commitment one makes and keeping that commitment. Keeping one's word and practicing various types of tapas, or austerities, are a major part of the life of the Reusi. We do this as a commitment and offering to personal deities, our teachers and ourselves. Keeping the commitment means success and that we are ready to move on. Breaking it means that it's not time yet and we must start again. One's word is one's source of power when it comes to incantations. Breaking one's commitment is a defeat not only mentally but spiritually as well.

Laura: Do Reusi draw strength or power from the animal skin? It reminds me of Native Americans wearing bear, wolf or deer skin.

Tevijjo Yogi: Yes and no. The skin of certain animals is sacred but in general the skin serves two purposes. One is to prevent our energy from descending while in meditation. It acts as a barrier to cut off our negative, downward flowing energy. The second is more symbolic and represents our mastery over the "animal mind." In practical terms, animal skin is warm and proves to be a good source of clothing. Of course a Reusi would never kill anything for his own use, these skins must be 'found.' This means it comes from an animal which has already expired from natural causes.

Laura: Is this lineage predominately male?

Tevijjo Yogi: Currently there are very few women in this tradition. I have only heard of one or two female Reusi in the Thai tradition. There are, however, many women still practicing in the Tibetan tradition so it is not completely male but the majority seems to be.

Laura: Are there any rules which pertain to your interaction with the opposite sex?

Tevijjo Yogi: Of course there are rules on how we relate to the opposite sex but ours aren't as strict as those a monk undertakes. Some Reusi marry and have partners. There are, however, rules on when sexual relations are permitted. In addition to this, we generally have more interaction with the opposite sex than monks. For example, being a practitioner of medicine, I treat men and women alike.

Laura: Is everything taught orally or are written texts utilized?

Tevijjo Yogi: This is definitely an oral tradition. However, many of the sciences, which we learn, use and preserve, are written down for others to study as well. Also there have been many texts which were discovered by the Reusi and have been written down. The Vedas are the most famous example of this.

Laura: I have heard that information is sometimes left out of text purposely, is this true?

Tevijjo Yogi: One reason certain information might be left out is to protect the reader from practicing something which is beyond their understanding. Information is also left out because it

might be considered 'common knowledge' and not necessary to include. This would be something that is learned with one's teacher. The texts are not there for us to learn from. The texts are study aides and references to be used in conjunction with a competent teacher.

Laura: Is it the goal of a Ruesi to know and practice all the sciences? Why learn some and not others?

Tevijjo Yogi: It would take many hundreds of years to learn all of the sciences completely. Of course one might have a working knowledge of more than one science but to have mastery of a science takes a lifetime or more. Often the philosophy and theory used within a particular science may overlap with those of another. For example numerology, palmistry and astrology have very similar theory. A person might work with a few sciences which have overlapping theory in order to improve his/her understanding as well. As for which ones we learn, it's a matter of disposition and choice, the choice of either the practitioner or the teacher. Sometimes we don't get to choose though and our teacher picks for us.

Laura: Have any of the teachings been lost or forgotten?

Tevijjo Yogi: Yes, absolutely. Many sciences have been lost, are missing information or are on their last generation of teachers. This information is one of the greatest treasures of humankind and I encourage people to go out and find authentic information from legitimate sources in order to preserve true knowledge and not just commercial information.

Laura: Are there different lineages and traditions practiced within Thailand? Which do you follow?

Tevijjo Yogi: Yes, I am part of two major lineages. One is the Northern tradition, which has its roots in areas like Tibet and Burma. I refer to it as the Tibetan-Burmese-Northern Thai tradition. The other tradition is a Thai-Cambodian tradition, which has its roots in central and Eastern Thailand as well as Cambodia. The two traditions may appear different but the central teachings are very much the same. The major differences are the language used in chanting and texts.

Laura: Why did you decide to take this path?



Tevijjo Yogi: The Reusi are the protectors and teachers of the sciences. Of course by this I mean the natural sciences such as astrology, medicine, alchemy, etc. Having been studying these sciences from a young age, finding this path was natural. In addition, the path of a Reusi, while there are certain precepts and practices to follow, did not limit me in my interaction with others. In this way, I am able to pursue my knowledge of medicine, for example, and use it to help others. If I were to become a monk, however, I could not practice and study to such a degree while still maintaining the precepts.

Laura: Did you choose this path or did it choose you?

Tevijjo Yogi: Probably a little bit of both. It sort of happened as a natural progression from one thing to the next. Looking back, my path has always been leading me this way but it took the right teacher to show me just how to get here and go about it.

Laura: Was it hard to find a teacher?

Tevijjo Yogi: Not really. I was lucky to have found a very open and caring teacher who was able to see that I was ready to make this step even though I wasn't consciously aware of it. After meeting this teacher, I met my third teacher who has further helped me to understand the practice of the Reusi.

Laura: Were there any requirements before your teacher would accept you?

Tevijjo Yogi: Of course. Any time one studies in a traditional teacher-student setting there are many tests the student must pass before the teacher is willing to accept you as a student. As for the requirements for becoming a Reusi, there are even more and they take longer to fulfill.

Laura: Would you take on an apprentice to continue the tradition/lineage?

Tevijjo Yogi: I am not at the point where I could even think about that but I feel that it would be my responsibility to pass on whatever little knowledge I have to someone if it could help.

Laura: What sciences have you chosen to practice?

Tevijjo Yogi: Well, my primary path is that of a healer. To be a healer one must study not only medical theory but also astrology, herbs, exercises, physical therapies, incantations and all sorts of other practices.

Laura: Why is this tradition important?

Tevijjo Yogi: The Reusi tradition, whether in Thailand or anywhere else, is important because the Reusi are those who keep the knowledge of the world. They are the ones who discover and teach many of the most basic sciences we have. They learned through experience and through trial and error. They are the real teachers and scientists. If we want to preserve these methods and maintain an understanding of living in balance with nature, it is important to protect the Reusi tradition.

As you might have guessed, this tradition is a dying one. There are very few authentic practitioners these days. There are more and more people claiming to be Reusi for economic and/or ego driven reasons. In these modern times it has become a source of material gain instead of a practice of true renunciation. One reason that this practice has faded so much is because of the huge increase in the population and the lack of respect for nature. Another reason is the worldliness that most people are caught up in. In Thailand in particular this practice died out when monks started doing the jobs of the Reusi. A monk's job is to be a student of the Dhamma and practice the Buddha's teachings to his best ability. He is to strive for enlightenment and teach others to do so as well. Nowadays, however, many monks are more interested in learning the sciences and not focused on the Buddha's path. They would rather obtain magical incantations and make amulets in order to gain status and fame. With monks doing this, there isn't a place for the Reusi so the tradition began to die.

Laura: Is the status of a Reusi similar to that of a monk?

Tevijjo Yogi: Since the tradition has died out considerably in Thailand, their status is dependant upon the area where they reside. In rural Thailand, especially the Northeast, the Reusi still hold a place in the community. In the cities most people don't know the tradition and respect the Reusi less. This is of course a generalization. Everywhere one goes there are people who both recognize and respect the tradition and those that do not.

Laura: Does the Thai government recognize the Reusi and what they represent?

Tevijjo Yogi: Maybe on an individual basis but in general no. We do not get support or recognition from the government.

Laura: Do you feel you have the responsibility to educate the public about the Reusi and their role in society?

Tevijjo Yogi: The Reusi have always been there and will always be there. Whether it's the Thai tradition, the Indian tradition, Chinese tradition, European tradition, etc. they have all been around for centuries. It is not necessary to tell the public about them, or how they work. The Reusi are hermits after all and like to keep a low profile. It's only recently with the over population of the world and the deforestation that the Reusi have come out to speak up for nature. Like many endangered species of animals, we have fewer places to go to find solitude to study and practice in the first laboratory, na-



ture.

Laura: Thank you for your time Tevijjo Yogi. I know those reading, as well as myself, appreciate your willingness to share with us.