

Buddha Bless and Dharma Products: A New Trend of Teaching Dharma in Thailand¹

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Abstract

While most Thai say that 'Buddhism is the Thai national religion', how much do Thai people really understand Buddhist teachings. We cannot deny that in the past few decades, Buddhism in Thailand has been a symbol more than a practice. Therefore, some people are trying to promote Buddhism and Buddhist teaching again, especially to the young. It is the aim of this paper to introduce new teaching techniques of Dharma in Thailand and to analyze the significant and the effect of those techniques to the masses. I chose two interesting data from 2006 to 2007: a Hip-Hop band named Buddha Bless and Dharma products of Phra Rajadharmanides (Phra Phayorm). Buddha Bless uses the contemporary style of music such as hip-hop and electronic dance to teach. Although the lyrics deal heavily with love and romantic relations, the composers, who are the artists themselves, add some basic teaching like *sīla* into their song. Phra Phayorm has been recognized for decades as a leading 'phra nak thet' or teaching monk. However, in these past few years he has launched a new style of teaching, which are Dharma

¹ Paper presented at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, USA, June 23-28, 2008.

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products. Instead of teaching verbally, Phra Phayom has used trendy products such as wrist-bands, animations, cookies, t-shirts, paper bags, to teach Dharma. As a result, many youth and middle aged people are attracted to this kind of teaching technique. This new style of teaching is easier to understand and to use in their real life than are the classical texts. For better or worse, hopefully, these are another way of sustaining Buddhist teaching in modern Thai society.

Introduction

‘Thailand is the land of Buddhism.’ This is a phrase well known to all Thai people. Unfortunately, it is unclear what percentage of Thai people really understand Buddhism? How many practice Buddhism? Do most people clearly comprehend and perceive Dharma? Nowadays, we see Thai Buddhists queuing for Chatukhām Rāmathep amulets; making vows to Phra Rahu; presenting red roses and lighting red candle for Trīmurti; and offering bribes to Ganesha. Are these acts that the Buddha taught and the early sangha collected in the Tipiṭaka? If not, will Thailand still be the land of Buddhism when Buddhist practices are not in the Buddhist consciousness? Or, do we appear to be Buddhist only on our identification cards?

One of the problems of understanding Buddhism for some Thai people is the difficulty and complication of the teachings. They think they are too far to reach and understand, especially for urban teenagers and the middle-class in our capitalist society; where people still fight for their life; where non-skilled workers work hard for their dinner; where poor people seek fortune; and where singles try to find love. Moreover, some people miscomprehend Buddhist teachings, for example; the mistranslation of *sīla* as a ‘prohibition’ or ‘rule’; the misconception of meditation as sitting quietly in some monasteries; the delusion of chanting as a blessing. One of the major causes of these misunderstandings is the complication of ‘Pāli’ words, and maybe, some

difficult explanations from well-educated monks. Although, some of the leading monks such as Buddhadasa and Phra Brahmaganābhorn (P.A. Payutto) have tried to put things in simpler terms, for the young it is still difficult to understand. Most of all, the style of teaching, i.e. Dharma books and 'thet' (oral teaching given by monks), is out of date. Thus, there are some new innovations of Dharma teaching that help maintain and promote what the Buddha taught here in the land that claims to be 'the land of Buddhism'. In this paper I want to introduce a new kind of teaching of Buddhism in Thailand, which is close to the behavior of the masses.

Rapping Dharma

The first innovation of Dharma teaching comes from a young hip-hop band, "Buddha Bless". From my experience, when I first heard the name of the band I thought of "Nirvana", a heavy-metal rock band that was very famous in the 1990s (and maybe until today). I thought they just used the word 'Buddha' to draw attention from the audience. After I first listened to the single 'Ching Mhā Kerd' or 'snatch the dog to be born', I realized that there was something interesting about this band.

Before discussing their songs, let me give a brief history of the band and the popularity of hip-hop songs in Thailand. Buddha Bless is a group of young Thai artists who perform hip-hop style songs. They are members of 'Kānkho Club', which is a sub-company of Grammy Entertainment Public Co. Ltd. – a hip-hop genre sub-company. Kānkho Club is run by Joey Boy³, one of the leading rappers in Thailand. Although, rap technique has appeared in Thai music since 1991, Joey Boy was the first successful singer who performed rap in hip-hop songs for an entire commercial album in 1995. His first

³ Joey Boy resigned from his executive position and as a member of the board in April 2008 due to being bored with having to manage, but he still is an artist member of the company.

successful album was produced around 1994, but it was an underground album containing a lot of rude and abusive words. Hip-hop music has become popular because of globalization. Thai teenagers imitate a culture and lifestyle from the west. Hip-hop is one of those. Discotheques and pubs are places where hip-hop has spread widely. Hip-hop songs have become a symbol of freedom and are trendy for Thai teenagers.

There are three members in the Buddha Bless band: Oui–Na-de Ekvicitr (who represents yellow), Em–Kittipong Gamsātr (who represents red) and Tong–Suranant Jumdhārādon (who represents green). The three colors are the color of Rasta, a Reggae group. Moreover, the colors also represent joyfulness and cheerfulness, which are the personal characteristics of the members. Oui used to work as a salesman before he became a singer. Em is a graffiti artist, while Tong is a Tae-kwan-do champion from the North Island of New Zealand and the chief of Capoeira Club in Thailand. They write the lyrics and compose the music by themselves. Most of the songs talk about youth and urban life problems. The lyrics of their songs have a good meaning. They do not just complain about society, the fighting of minorities or songs for world peace, but also give a moral lesson. That is to say, they teach the listener a moral, in this case Dharma. In addition, as they are composed with an exciting beat, Buddha Bless' songs have hit the charts of modern radio all over Thailand, especially on the dance genre radio. Their songs have been frequently chosen for all kinds of recreational practices; from large entertainment complexes such as discotheques, pubs, restaurants, bowling lanes, to home or small group entertainment such as karaoke, personal parties or in cars.

Buddha Bless received the “Golden Bodhi Award” from The Committee of Buddhist Organizations in Thailand (Sabhā Ongkorn Buddha Sāssanā Haeng Prathet Thai). The award is giving to a person or a company who have dedicated themselves to promote Buddhism. Buddha Bless won a prize in the category of entertainer for four songs, which are “Ching Mhā Kerd”, “Lam Yong”, “Ya Seb Tid” and “Jai Yen Yen”. Even though the lyrics do not refer to or mention the name of the ‘Buddha’ or any specific Pāli term like ‘sīla’ or ‘puñña’,

the messages of the songs are very clearly influenced by Buddhist teaching. In addition to the awarded songs, the rest of the album is also similar.

In this paper, I have chosen the first two songs on the list above as examples. Please note that most of the lyrics of Thai songs are not a complete sentence, as they usually omit the subject. In order to translate them into English, I have added the subject to the sentences and rewritten them as new sentences line by line. Some important idioms or words that I have put into normal English sentences are defined and discussed in more detail at the end of each song. All the translation is mine, not an official or company translation.

Ching Mhā Kerd⁴

The hell is real...How about the heaven, Luang Tā (honorable monk)?... Heaven is real. How about good deeds? Good deeds must receive good rewards. How about bad deeds? How possible it is that bad deeds will get good rewards?

It is hard to be a human. There are a lot of problems, no matter rich or poor. Use your wit and patience. Be industrious to practice (Dharma), chanting and praying. Nowadays, people do not discriminate what is good or bad, therefore, they obsess to have (something) and to be rich, doing

⁴ The original lyrics: นรกมี...สวรรค์ละคับหลวงตา...สวรรค์ก็มี แล้วทำดีละคับ...ทำดีก็ต้องได้ดี แล้วทำชั่วละคับ ทำชั่วมันจะได้ดีได้ยังงี้เล่า เกิดเป็นคนนี้มันลำบากลำบากสารพันปัญหาไม่ว่ารวยร่ำรวยจน ใช้สติปัญญาและบวกกับความอดทน ขยันปฏิบัติทำวัตรสวดมนต์ คนเราสมัยนี้ไม่รู้จักดีชั่ว ก็อยากได้ อยากมีจนหน้ามืดตามัว ทำแต่เรื่องชั่วๆ ไม่ต้องกลัวเวรกรรม ดีเลวไม่สนใจ ได้ดีก็รีบทำ เกิดมาทั้งที รีบทำกันหน่อยความดี รอนจนพุงนี้มันจะสาย อยู่ไม่นาน ก็ตาย หากไม่เคยทำดีเอาไว้ ก็โชคร้าย บ้ายบาย มนุสโสลี อามะกันเต เป็นคนรีบเล่า ไซ่ครับ โอ้เย มนุสโสลี อามะกันเต เกิดเป็นคนทั้งทีก็ ทำดีกันหน่อยเซ่ พระพยอมท่านก็สั่งก็สอนวัยรุ่นสาว ๆ อย่างकिनแวนอน วัยรุ่นหนุ่ม ๆ อย่างมั่วแต่ พนันบอล ตั้งหน้าตั้งตาทำมาหากิน เกิดเป็นคนอย่าทำเป็นหนักแผ่นดิน เกิดมาทั้งทีอย่าให้เสียชาติเกิด อย่าให้คนเขาตำว่าชิงหมามาเกิด หะ...อะไรนะ โอ้ชิงหมาเกิด หมาจะเกิด ชิงหมาเกิด...หมาจะเกิด ชิงหมาเกิด หมาจะเกิดดุดด หมามันเลย ไม่ได้เกิด เกิดแก่เจ็บตายมันเป็นเรื่องธรรมดา ยากดีมีจน ก็แล้วแต่กรรมที่ทำมา คนเราต่างจากสัตว์มีสมองใช้ปัญญา มันทำแต่ความดีหลังอาหารสามเวลา คนเราอยู่สบายจนเกิดเป็นความเคยชิน วัดกันที่ลาภยศเงินทองและทรัพย์สิน เป็นคนดีของสังคม ไม่คิดไม่โกงกิน ก้มหน้าไม่อายฟ้าเงยหน้าไม่อายดิน

only bad deeds, not afraid of fate and karma. People do not care for good and bad, hasten to do if it will have good results.

Born as a human, hurry up! Do good deeds! If you wait till tomorrow, maybe, it is too late. We live not too long. If you have not ever done a good deed, I wish you luck [see you in hell]⁵ ...Good-bye.

manussosi...āma bhante! Are you human? ...Yes I am! ...Oh Yeah!
manussosi...āma bhante! Have a chance to be a human, let's do a good deed!

Phra Phayorm is teaching; female teenagers, do not work horizontally (prostitute), male teenagers, do not gamble on football. Work hard! Born to be human, do not act uselessly. Do not waste your life. Do not let other people swear at you that you snatch the dog to be born ... ha! what!... snatch the dog to be born...

[Melody of Happy Birthday song]

Dog is going to be born...(you) snatch the dog to be born... Dog is going to be born...(you) snatch the dog to be born...Dog is going to be born, thus the dog cannot be born.

Birth, aging, illness and death are the law of nature. Rich or poor is based upon your past karma. Humans are different from animals, because we have and use our brain. Continuously do good, three times a day after meals.

Humans live comfortably yet become habitual, therefore, we measure with rank and wealth. Be a good person for the society. Do not be corrupt! Thus, bending down the head will not shame the sky; look up to the sky will not shame the land!

“Ching Mhā Kerd” I translate literally as ‘snatch the dog to be born’. In Thai, we use this idiom to define a person who has done nothing worthy of being a human. Thai people, as well as in Buddhism, believe that we are reborn according to our karma. Rebirth as a human is very difficult. It is a task for humans to do right, act well, be good and so on, in addition to striving to ascend to ‘nirvana’. Therefore, if you are born as a human and you have done nothing good, you are wasting this life and your life is worth nothing more than being a dog.

⁵ This phrase is used in a negative way. It means wish you luck, not to go to hell, which is impossible.

In this song you can hear Pāli ‘manussosi...āmabhante’ which means ‘Are you human? ...Yes I am’. If you want to ordain as a monk in Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition, you will be asked this question by the sangha to ensure that you are a human and qualified to be ordained. Oui ordained once and this song was inspired by the Pāli from his experience in entering the monkhood.

Unlike the next song, this song appears to be a formal teaching of life and rebirth, put in new language and trendy music. It begins with the problem of urban and city life, especially capitalism, where people seek more property, become mean and do not care for others. The song tells the audience to stop ‘Lobha’ or greed. The hook of the song (in bold) clearly emphasizes the teaching of Samsāra, the wheel of rebirth, in a more understandable way for normal people. The end of the song also stresses the idea of the law of nature – birth, aging, illness and death. Thus, the song merges some major tenants of Buddhist teaching to simply combine them into one single idea, which is ‘Let’s do righteousness’.

Lam Yong⁶

At first sight, I am fond of you than I have ever been before. I want to talk and greet you, but I am terrified of you. You down liquor faster than I can count. Damn it! This is a sin.

First glass, you still look good. Second glass, you start showing your body, when we stand aside. Third glass, the atmosphere starts to be obscure. Fourth glass, your face becomes frightening. You never give up a toast...

⁶ The original lyrics: แรกเพียงได้พบสบตา ก็ถูกใจกว่าที่เคยพบมา อยากเข้าไปคุยเข้าไป ทักทาย แต่ก็เกรงกลัวเธออยู่เหมือนกัน เธอยกแก้วกระดกจนนับไม่ทัน เห็นแล้วบปจจริง ๆ เธอให้ตาย แก้วแรกเธอก็ยังดูเข้าที แก้วที่สองเธอเริ่มโชว์ของดี ตอนที่เรายืนอยู่ใกล้กัน แก้วที่สามบรรยายกาสร่มจะมีดมีว แก้วที่สี่หน้าตาเธอเริ่มน่ากลัว เธอเล่นชนไม่ถอย... เมามากแล้ว อย่างนี้ไม่ไหว ฉันทว่าเธอไป พักก่อน กลับไปนอน หาน้ำร้อนกินสักแก้วนึง ส่วนตัวฉันกำลังดี ก็แค่พอตึงๆ เป็นเพราะฉัน ไม่เมา เหล้า แต่เมารัก...เธอ... อยากจะเจอเธออีกสักที ตอนที่มึนตึ๋นซัดใจดี เพราะว่าวันนี้เธอดื่มมากไป เอ...เปลี่ยนไปเป็นคนละคน กลายเป็นมีดคมจากเคยสดใส นางฟักกลายเป็นลายองไปได้ใจ เจอเธอ ตอนไม่เมา คงจะเข้าที หน้าเธอตอนไม่เมา คงจะสวยดี อยากให้โลกนี้มีแค่เราสองคน อยากบรรยายความรู้สึกที่มีอยู่ข้างใน แต่ตอนนี้พูดไปเธอคงไม่เข้าใจ (เพราะเธอชนไม่ถอย...) (เธอเล่นชนไม่ถอย...)

You are too drunk! It is too much. I think you should take a rest. Go back to sleep. Drink a glass of hot water. For me, I am OK. I am only a bit dizzy. Cause, I am not inebriated with alcohol, but I am besotted with your love.

I want to meet you again when you are more conscious, because today you have drunk too much. You have changed into a different person. Your delight has turned to be horrible. How does an angel become “Lam Yong”.

It would be great, if I meet you when you are not drunk. Maybe, your face, when not drunk, is very beautiful. I hope it could only be us in this world. I want to express my feeling, but you won't understand now because you never give up a toast...

Lam Yong is the name of a protagonist in one of the well known Thai novels, ‘Thong Nuea Kao’. Most Thai people know this story through a television series. The story is about Lam Yong’s son, who is a very grateful boy. He looks after Lam Yong, who suffers from alcoholism. The main point of the story is to show the reward for being grateful and the punishment for being a drunk. At the end of the story, the boy, who was born in a slum, becomes successful—caused by his gratefulness, while his mother dies pitifully from alcoholism. Nowadays, Lam Yong is used as a metaphor for a woman who gets drunk and cannot control herself, therefore she performs some improper actions or has some unpleasant manners.

Drinking alcohol is prohibited according to the five *sīlas*, the percepts or rules of morality.⁷ Although *sīla* is only a suggestion, to maintain *sīla*, especially, the five *sīlas*, is a must for Buddhists. When Buddhists go to a temple and present something to the Sangha (Sanghadāna) or invite monks to pray at home, before beginning the blessing, the monk will have us repeat the five *sīlas*. One of the fives is *Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī*: to abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness’.⁸

⁷ Some schools translate *sīla* as ‘normal’.

⁸ P.A. Payutto., *Dictionary of Buddhism*, 10th edition (Bangkok: Suetawan, 2002) 175.

In this song, Buddha Bless talks about the disadvantage of drinking. Nevertheless, the song is quite different from the teaching. Buddha Bless does not totally deny drinking or persuade the listener to stop drinking. Drinking is all right, in some level, unless you drink too much and cannot control yourself. That is to say, drinking a small amount of alcohol to feel a little bit dizzy is acceptable.

In an orthodox way, this kind of teaching is not admissible. For some people, to avoid drinking alcohol totally is hard. Both working men/women and youth may drink to entertain and keep company within the society. Therefore, what Buddha Bless does is not forbidding you to drink, if you can control your consciousness and not perform something shameful or wrong caused by the alcohol. In this non-canonical teaching, if one is not eager or ready to abstain from *sīlas*, it would be better for that person to be more conscious of what he/she is doing. Thus, the Buddha Bless song may be the first step for youth and drinkers to keep the *sīla*.

As with these two, the other two songs of Buddha Bless are in the same tone and style. They extract or use some teaching as a theme of their songs. “Jai Yen Yen”, simply translated as ‘be patient’, suggests to the listener not to be angry with the worst events such as heart-break, traffic jam, being poor, car broken, but sit back, take a rest and think carefully about the cause of those events and you will find a path to solve the problems. This is the same as the teaching of *samādhi* (concentration) which leads to *pañña* (wisdom) that helps solve the problem. “Yā Seb Tid” talks about the disadvantages of drugs both for health and social behavior. The rest of the songs on the album, even though they were not awarded, all use Buddhist teachings as the theme.

Dharma Products

What is not prohibited in Dharmavinaya is all the sangha's responsibility. People depend on the wat (monastery) from their birth to death. Why cannot the monks and the wat do something in return for society? Some wats receive a large amount of *sanghadāna* (things donated to the sangha) and leave them unused or expired, while some people who live near the wat are badly in hunger. I am not sure! Is such a monk a monk by heart or just wearing a yellow robe? I play with Dharma.

You see! It is bang (become popular) all the time because I can adapt it. I have an ability to do it, why do I have to keep it quiet?⁹

Phra Rājadharmānides, or Phra Phayorm Kalyāṇo, has been recognized for decades as the number one ‘phra nak thet’ or teaching monk. He is the abbot of Wat Suan Kaew in Nonthaburi province, which is very close to Bangkok. Phra Phayorm has his own style of teaching. Unlike the normal or traditional way of teaching in the monastery, he adds some jokes and humorous stories while he is teaching. He also invents his own proverbs for teaching, which are easy to recognize, for example; ‘Krot Khue Ngo...Moho Khue Bā’ (angry is stupid...angry out of your mind) or ‘Krot khao wā khao ko muean ao fai phao tua rao eng’ (angry and blaming the other is like you are burning yourself). His proverbs are very famous among Thai people and most of them are widely used nowadays. As a result of his contemporary style of teaching, he has a chance to appear on the media (television, radio and newspaper) very often for both teaching Dharma and for commenting on some social problems and other issues about Buddhism.

Besides the teaching, Phra Phayorm is also well-known as ‘phra nak pattanā’ or a ‘developer monk’. He helps the poor, orphans, handicapped, old people and also unemployed workers by giving them work in his temple. He established a supermarket for the poor, which sells donated recycled items such as furniture, computers, radios, televisions, etc. The recycle process is done by those people he helps. For the orphans, he built a school to educate them. Nevertheless, the orphans

⁹ Original message: อะไรที่ไม่เกินกว่าพระธรรมวินัยล้วนเป็นกิจของสงฆ์ทั้งสิ้น คนฟังวัดตั้งแต่เกิดจนตาย ทำไมพระและวัดจะทำอะไรกลับคืนเพื่อคนในสังคมไม่ได้บ้าง วัดบางแห่ง พระบางรูปได้รับสิ่งขทานจนล้นเหลือให้เสียหาย แต่คนใกล้วัดกลับต้องอดอยากปากแห้ง ไม่รู้ว่าท่านมีใจเป็นพระหรือเป็นพระเพียงเพราะห่มผ้าเหลืองเท่านั้น เราเอาธรรมะเข้าไปเล่น เห็นหรือเปล่าว่า ดังเบียร์ทุกเรื่องเพราะเราประยุกต์ และมีศัคยภาพที่จะทำ แล้วจะมัวเก็บไว้ทำไม. Phra Phayorm Kalyāṇo, interviewed by Trīdhēp Kraingu (pen name), *Komchadluek*, 18 June 2007.

are asked to do agriculture and some other unskilled work around the wat to support their living costs and to help the wat reduce expenses.

After his social projects expanded and he was promoted to a higher rank in the Thai monk system, he began to appear less in his teaching role. However, he still is highly respected and is always interviewed when there are some issues that involve Buddhism or social topics that need comments from a Buddhist point of view.

Nevertheless, in the past five years he has launched new campaigns involving Dharma products, which recalls the portrayal of Phra Phayorm as a teaching monk again. Distinct from teaching verbally, Phra Phayorm is using new trendy products such as wrist-bands, animation, cookies, t-shirts, paper bags, to teach Dharma. He uses popular culture objects as a means to teach Dharma. The major intention of these products is to attract the masses, mostly teens and the middle aged, to understand and adapt Dharma to their everyday life. Below are some examples of Phra Phayorm's Dharma products¹⁰, which are interesting to look at.

Kao Dī Phra Phayorm Wrist-Band

'Kao Dī Phra Phayorm' literary translates as 'nine good deeds by Phra Phayorm', but in Thai, 'kao (/kǎv/)' or 'nine' has the same sound as 'step' or 'walking', thus, for this campaign 'Kao Dī' means 'walk in a good path' – a good path for practicing and doing.

Around 2003, Lance Armstrong, the world famous bicycle racer, was diagnosed with cancer. During the time he was under treatment, he sold a small rubber wrist-band to raise money to support research on cancer. His wrist-band, light yellow with the words LIVE STRONG on it, became very popular around the world.

¹⁰ Apart from the Dharma products introduced in this paper, he also brings his recycle products and introduces them to the public wherever he is visiting to give a teaching. I do not count them as a 'Dharma products' because they are used to introduced his project in helping the poor, not for teaching Dharma.



Figure 1 People queuing for wrist-bands.

At that time, the original LIVE STRONG wrist-band cost more than 1,000 baht in Thailand, which was about 25 USD.¹¹ Many Thai teenagers were eager to have one. Phra Phayorm thought that it was a waste of money to buy a wrist-band that costs more than 1,000 baht just to make a fashion statement, while the material cost was not more than 10 baht, especially since Thai teenagers did not recognize the objective of the wrist-band. They just wore it because western people wore it, especially stars and famous people. Therefore, Phra Phayorm launched his wrist-band with the word ‘Kao Dī Phra Phayorm’ (in Thai)

carved on the outer side. Inside, there was an embossed word ‘rhum rao rak dī’ (‘we love doing good’ collection). This is to remind the wearer to do good deeds when they wear this wrist-band.

You can call the Kao Dī Phra Phayorm wrist-band a ‘sacred object’¹², but I prefer to call it a ‘consciousness object’. It does not highlight the power of enchantment (spell). It is not an accent on miracles. It is more to emphasize morality, Kao Dī (walk in a good path) is, for example, going to the temple, going to religion (understanding Dharma), going to Dharma, going away from bad things, doing right in Dharma.¹³

‘Kao Dī Phra Phayorm wrist-band’ sold more than 150,000 pieces. It raised more than 3 million baht—the sale price was 20 baht

¹¹ According to the exchange rate at 2003.

¹² All the wrist-bands were blessed in a ceremony.

¹³ Original message is; สายรัดข้อมือ ๙ ดี พระพยอม อาจจะเรียกว่า วัดอุ้มงคลก็ได้ แต่อยากให้เรียกว่า วัดอุเตือนสติผู้สวมใส่มากกว่า เพราะไม่เน้นเรื่องการปลุกเสก ไม่เน้นเรื่องปาฏิหาริย์ แต่เน้นเรื่องคติเตือนใจมากกว่า ๙ ดี เช่น ก้าวเข้าวัด ก้าวเข้าหาพระศาสนา ก้าวเข้าหาธรรมะ ก้าวให้ห่างจากสิ่งเลวร้าย ก้าวให้ถูกทางธรรม เป็นต้น Phra Phayorm Kalyāṇo, interviewed by Trithep Krai-ngū (pen name), *Komchadluek*, 18 June 2007.

each. All the profits were given to teenagers who were working as volunteers at Wat Suan Kaew during that summer time. Due to the huge success in selling these wrist-bands, Phra Phayorm, began his new style of teaching using material and popular culture as a medium for teaching Dharma.

Chatukham Cookies

Around 2006-2007, one of the most interesting phenomena in Thailand was the ‘Chatukhām Rāmathep’ fever. A lot of Thai people, especially Buddhists, sought to buy Chatukhām amulets. Leading newspapers reported that in six months, between January and June 2007, the market cost for Chatukhām amulets rose to over 40,000 million baht. The frenzy began when there were plenty of news and stories reporting on the power of Chatukhām Rāmathep, notably on providing richness. Therefore, there were over 1,000 different types of Chatukhām amulets made. Most of the names signified the supremacy of Chatukhām Rāmathep in acquiring wealth, such as ‘Mahā set thī’ (very rich), ‘Ngeun thong lai ma’(money and gold flow in), ‘Khot set thī’ (very, very rich). People who wanted to be rich were buying Chatukhām amulets and wearing them openly, with no exception as to whether they were poor seeking a better income or they were already rich but wanted more.

In short¹⁴, Chatukhām and Rāmmadheb were formerly kings from the south who believed in Buddhism and became Buddhists after they listened to the Dharma. They donated money and built Phra-Borommathāt Muang Nakhon, at Nakhon Srīdharmarāj province, which is still a center of belief for local people and one of the city’s landmarks nowadays. Their images were put in front of the gates of

¹⁴ As it was very popular during that time, there were a lot of stories and myths about Chatukām Rāmmadheb. The history itself is too long to present in this paper. The aim of this paper is only to introduce the technique of Phra Phayorm, with only a short history and the statistics provided here. A reader who is interested in Chatukām Rāmmadheb can easily find books about this in both Thai and English in Thai bookstores.

the pagoda. Therefore, some scholars refer to them as guardian gods. Whilst some legends about Chatukhām Rāmathep say that Chatukhām Rāmathep prayed and wished to become a Bodhisattva. In this way, it is said they give a lot of mettā (compassion) to people who pay homage and pray to them, as the result, sooner or later, they will be reborn and become the next Buddha.

Chatukhām Rāmathep became popular when TV programs promoted the story about the success of people who worshipped Chatukhām Rāmathep, as well as from the news about the death of Khun Phan Rājadej, who was the first person who invented Chatukhām amulets. Khun Phan was a former policeman who could catch the most wanted thieves in the period when there was a lot of mafia in Thailand (50s – 60s). Those criminal used a ‘Mondam’ (dark magic) to rob villagers and escape from being caught. Khun Phan was a well-known person who had a Mondam (dark magic), but he used it in a good way. He also used his ability to catch the thieves. Some stories were told that he was unable to be stabbed; that he had an immortal body. His dead body would not burn until one of his followers asked his spirit to give up the body and let it be burnt. That is to say, the popularity of Chatukhām Rāmathep and Chatukhām come from two lines, one from the power of mettā and one from the power of protection.



Figure 2 Chutukham amulets on the left and Chatukham cookies on the right.

As people were infatuated in praying to Chatukhām amulets to become rich, Phra Phayorm thought that this was useless and not a right way to becoming rich. ‘It is not possible to be rich only by worshipping and wearing the amulet’ he said. Besides, it is not a Buddhist path. The Buddha did not teach Buddhist to believe in the power of sacred objects. The best path to becoming rich is working hard and using money wisely. As a result, Phra Phayorm invented ‘Chatukham cookies’ to compete with Chatukhām amulets. Occasionally, the Chatukhām amulets were shaped very much like a cookie; Phra Phayorm, then, chose to make cookies in order to humiliate the amulets. As well, he advertised that his cookies were eatable; he said ‘Buying the cookies you can eat them, but buying the amulet you can not even bite it’. In spite of making a joke on the amulets, Chatukham cookies also contained a Dharma riddle that, ‘when you swallowed or ate the cookies, they let the teaching of the Buddha be inside and be absorbed into your body and mind.’

For the teaching, Phra Phayorm chose *Diṭṭhadhammikattha-samvattanika-dhamma*¹⁵ or *Diṭṭhadhammikattha Prayoj* (in Thai), meaning ‘virtues leading to temporal welfare’. Which are *Uṭṭhānasampadā* or to be endowed with energy and industry (achievement of diligence), *Ārakkhasampadā* or to be endowed with watchfulness (achievement of protection), *Kalyānamittatā* or good company (associated with good people) and *Samajīvitā* or balanced livelihood (living economically). Nevertheless, instead of using confusing and hard language to understand the Pāli words, he shortened them and renamed it as ‘Chatukham’ (literally means ‘four words’). He used first letter of each word ‘U Ā Ka Sa’ to make Pāli easier to remember, and simply explained the term as in the brackets. These four words were also imprinted on the cookies to tease the amulets which were carved with the image of Chatukhām Rāmathep.

This campaign was very popular and became a talk of the town. It was one of the reasons impacting Chatukhām amulets becoming

¹⁵ Payutto 116. All pāli words and explanation are also from the same source.

less popular. Furthermore, after the huge success of the cookies, Phra Phayorm produced a T-shirt which was screened with the picture of Chatukham cookies on the front.

Thung Klaui Khaek Phra Phayorm (Phra Phayorm's Banana Fillet Bag)

Phra Phayorm was cheated by a woman. She sold the land in front of Phra Phayorm's temple at a cost of 10 million baht, however in 2007, the legal owner of the land came to the temple and asked for his right to the land. He claimed that the land was his inheritance. After an investigation by the police, it was found that the woman who sold the land to Phra Phayorm had no right over the land. She conspired with an officer from the Department of Land to issue a fake land certificate, which was used to fool Phra Phayorm. The case went to the court. Finally, the trial court ordered Wat Suan Kaew to give the land back to the true owner. While Phra Phayorm had the right to appeal to the higher court, he decided to give up and began a new campaign, 'Phra Phayorm's Banana Fillet Bag'.

Before plastic bags became very popular and used widely today, Thai people used paper bags. The bags were usually made from used paper, folded and glued by sticky rice powder. As they look unfashionable, they are rarely used nowadays. Mostly this style of bags is used for Thai style banana fillets, potatoes or taro fillets as well, therefore this kind of paper bag has a nickname 'Thung Klaui Khaek' which means 'banana fillet bags'. Today, the word 'Thung Klaui Khaek' also uses to signify something 'useless' or 'worthless'.

Phra Phayorm began his campaign by writing a book, '*Phra Phayorm's Banana Fillet Bag*'. In one part he wrote; 'who would imagine that a banana fillet bag would be worth more than a land certificate issued by the Ministry of Interior Thailand'.¹⁶ Interestingly, Phra Phayorm came up with the idea to copy the land certificate and

¹⁶ Phayorm, Kalyāno, *Phra Phayorm's Banana Fillet Bag* 2nd ed., (Bangkok: Vattha Printing Group, 2007) 49-52. Translation is the author's.

fold it into paper bags. He gave the paper bags to the banana fillet street vender in front of the temple. Surprisingly, the banana fillets in the paper bags made from the copy of the humiliated land certificate was very popular. 'People bought the banana fillets because they want the bags to remind themselves about the events', Phra Phayorm wrote. The street vender shared the profit with Phra Phayorm by donating some of the profit to the monastery. Then, Phra Phayorm satirically said; 'the useless land certificate became useful again in the form of banana fillet bags'.

As a result of the campaign's unbelievable success, Phra Phayorm established a center to help the people who have cases concerning land certificates, especially, ones who have cases with the Department of Land. The center is run by legally certified attorneys who volunteer to help people. Moreover, Phra Phayorm used his case to promote the idea of 'honesty' not only for government officers, but also for everyone. That is to say, he used his 'Thung Klaui Khaek Phra Phayorm' to push the movement on anti-corruption. While I am writing this paper, Phra Phayorm is in the process of making a Thung Klaui Khaek Phra Phayorm monument in order to remind people and to drive his anti-corruption operation.

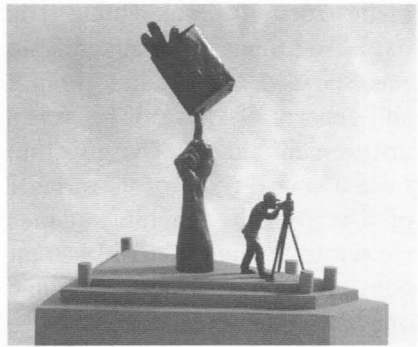


Figure 3 The model of Thung Klaui Khaek Phra Phayorm monument.

Thung Dham Phra Phayorm (Dharma bags)

The AIDS protection campaign grew rapidly in the past decade, which significantly helped reduce the number of HIV infections. Nevertheless, it has been found that HIV infections increased unexpectedly in Thailand during these past few years. Research done by the government found that the reason for this is because people are not using condoms. The most important reason is that people are

too shy to buy condoms from the convenience store and other shops. Therefore, the government and NGOs began to promote the protection against AIDS campaign again, especially, the movement to persuade men to use condoms.

‘Yued Ok Phok Thung’ (be proud to carry a condom) is the name of the campaign. Thung in this context means condom, which in full is called ‘Thung yāng a na mai’. In general, ‘thung’ simply translates as a ‘bag’. Phra Phayorm played with the word ‘thung’ by introducing ‘Thung Dham Phra Phayorm’ which used the same words used by the government ‘Yued Ok Phok Thung (Dham)’ (be proud to carry the Dharma bag). Additionally, he added a slogan ‘Thung Dham Phra Phayorm... Suk Sud Yod...Prod Kilet’ (Phra Phayorm Dharma bag leads to ecstasy and gets rid of kilesa). This was a very good parallel and satire to the government slogan. The government is concerned about the pleasure from a sexual point of view, but Phra Phayorm promotes the pleasure of life from the teaching of the Buddha, without a sexual relation. He wrote “‘Thung Dham’ has more benefit than ‘Thung Yāng’ (condom). It is more protective. If one carries Thung Dham in one’s heart, one would be saved everywhere. When one does not immerse oneself in kilesa, AIDS would not harm one.”¹⁷

Inside the bags, he put a book describing four words that are very common in Thai, Āyu, Varno, Sukham, and Balam. These are also known as ‘Caturabidhaborn’ or the four great blessings. It is a shortened form of ‘Anumodanagāthā’ or a chant of appreciation. Most Thai people think that these four words are a blessing that is given by a monk. However, it is better to describe them as a ‘reminding’ word from the monk. Phra Phayorm is using his Thung Dham to explain this idea. In short, he describes:

¹⁷ Original message: “อุงธรรม” มีคุณประโยชน์กว่า “อุงยาง” ป้องกันได้ดีกว่าเยอะ ถ้ามีอุงธรรม ประจําใจ ไปที่ไหนก็ปลอดภัย เมื่อใจไม่หมกมุ่นกับกิเลส เอดส์ก็ไม่มาหา

Āyu: the first blessing is to take care of health, therefore one has long life. Combined in this blessing is Chanda, Viriya, Citta, Vimaṇsā. When gathered together, it is called Iddhipāda 4. ... Varno: the second blessing is to behave oneself in sīla. Combined in this blessing is pāṇātipātā veramaṇī, adinnādāṇā veramaṇī, kāmesumicchācārā veramaṇī, musāvādā veramaṇī, surāmeraya-majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī. When gathered together, it is called pañcasīla or five sīla. ... sukhaṃ: the third blessing is to make your mind calm and happy. ... Combined in this blessing is prāmodya, pīti, passaddhi, sukha, samādhi. ... Balaṃ: the fourth blessing is using one's strength in a creative way. Combined in this blessing is pañña balaṃ, viriya balaṃ, anavaḥ balaṃ, saṃgaha balaṃ. When gathered together, it is called balaṃ 4.¹⁸

He also writes:

As for the blessings, everyone likes them. We always ask for blessings. ... Many people think that; just by doing good deeds (in this case offering something to monks, the sangha or temples), monks will give them a blessing that they will receive only good things for the rest of their life. In fact, the monk is giving a 'Dharma blessing', which is the teaching for use in everyday life. If one only received the blessing without doing it, it is useless because blessing does not happen as a result of begging, it occurs because of doing.¹⁹

¹⁸ The original message: อายุ พรข้อที่ ๑ คือ รักษาสุขภาพทำให้มีอายุยืน ส่วนประกอบในพรอายุ คือ ฉันทะ วิริยะ จิตตะ วิมังสา เมื่อนำมาประกอบกันจะได้คำว่า อิทธิบาท ๔ ... วรโณ พรข้อที่ ๒ ประพฤติตนอยู่ในศีล ส่วนประกอบในพรวรโณคือ ปาณาติปาตา เวรมณี อทินนาทานา เวรมณี กาเมสุมิฉาจารา เวรมณี มุสาวาทา เวรมณี สุราเมรยมัชชปมาทัฏฐานา เวรมณี เมื่อนำมาประกอบกันจะได้คำว่า เบญจศีล หรือ ศีล ๕ สุขขัง พรข้อที่ ๓ คือทำจิตใจให้มีความสุขสงบ ส่วนประกอบในพรสุขขัง คือ ปราโมทย์ ปิติ ปัสสัทธิ สุข สมานี พลัง พรข้อที่ ๔ คือใช้พลังในทางสร้างสรรค์ ส่วนประกอบในพรพลังคือ ปัญญาพลัง วิริยะพลัง อนุวัชพลัง สังคหะพลัง เมื่อนำมาประกอบกันจะได้คำว่า พลัง ๔

¹⁹ Phayorm Kalyāno, Four Blessings For a Rich Happiness (Bangkok: Thung Lang Phra Printing; 2007). The original message: เมื่อพูดถึงพรแล้ว ไม่มีใครที่ไม่ชอบพร ตามปรกติแล้วคนเรามักจะหาโอกาสขอพรกันเสมอ ... ถ้าทำบุญแบบไทยๆ พระก็จะให้พรว่า "อายุ วรโณ สุขขัง พลัง" แต่รู้บ้างไหมว่าหมายถึงอะไร...? หลายคนคิดว่า แค่ทำบุญ พระให้พรก็สบายไปทั้งชาติแล้วแต่จริง ๆ แล้ว พระกำลังให้ "ธรรมะพร" คือพรสำหรับมาใช้ในชีวิตประจำวันต่างหาก ถ้ารับแต่พร แต่ไม่ทำ พรก็ไม่มีความเกิด เพราะพรไม่ได้เกิดจากการขอ แต่เกิดจากการลงมือทำ

Thus, Thung Dham Phra Phayorm is not only a product that plays on and satires the government campaign on AIDS, it also gives Thai people knowledge about Dharma which they see everyday, but do not understand.

From these four examples, we can see that Phra Phayorm converts his style of teaching in order to blend it with the age of capitalism. As opposed to teaching by speech alone, he talks and teaches via contemporary products. The interesting thing is the idea of adaptation of products that are 'in trend' and use them for teaching Dharma. In the case of wrist-bands, Phra Phayorm simply uses the original idea of wearing them to remind one to do something. Thus, the Kao Dī Phra Phayorm Wrist-Band is used to criticize teenagers who wrongly adapted the idea to wear wrist-bands only for fashion. At the time, it was used to spread the idea of doing good deeds every time you see the wrist-bands. For Chatukham cookies, Phra Phayorm wisely plays with the words 'Chatukhām' and 'Chatukham', which is different only in the last syllable, the first has a short vowel, but the second has a long vowel. Above all, from his sense of humor, he saw the shape of the amulets and thought of cookies, which, it seems to me, is a very clever and fascinating idea. He adapted the difficult Pāli words into a more common word to remember, while still carrying the same meaning. Moreover, he turned his disaster of losing 10 million baht into a chance to teach people to be honest. Hence, instead of attacking the problem from the result, as the government does in promoting the using of condom to prevent AIDS, he suggests to resolve the problem from its cause. If one does not lust and is not promiscuous, one would not risk being infected by HIV. Again, if people have Dharma in their mind, they will manage their mind properly and not get down deep into the sea of kilesa (desires or defilements).

Even if this new style of teaching has been blamed by some orthodox teachers, for me, which I take for granted to speak for other common Thais, especially the youth, the benefit of this kind of teaching is that it, at least, brings the youth and people to the temple again. Maybe it is the first step to educate Buddhists to be real Buddhists, not only to appear as such on the identification card.

Apart from these examples, Phra Phayorm has also launched some other 'in trend' products, for example; telephone ringtones, telephone wallpapers, Dharma cartoons (Nen Phayorm Jorm Yung). Because of his new style of teaching, some newspapers have named him 'Kechi Intrend' or 'in trend respectful monk'.

Conclusion

In April 2008, while I was ordained at Wat Bavornnivesavihāra Rājavoravihāra, which arranges a short course to teach Dharma to new monks, one of my Phra Ajarns (monk teachers) said "I did not expect you to really understand what Dharma is in this short 15 days period. I did not expect you to gain such insight in this few weeks. I think at least in these 15 days you would understand what was 'good' and 'bad'. Above all, you will do less bad and more good deeds in your real life." I think what my Phra Ajarn said was a very good conclusion of this paper. For Buddha Bless and Phra Phayorm, the objective of their teachings is not to try to bring or lead their audience to 'nirvana' or to the level of 'arahant'. They only try to persuade their consumers to lower their bad habits and do better things. They tell us to be more conscious of our life and understand "karma".

In a positive view, this kind of teaching is the basic step to move up to the next level of Dharma, to a more difficult and complicated level. Thus, even though Buddha Bless does not tell their audience to maintain strongly the five *sīlas*, and Phra Phayorm does not teach people to be satisfied with whatever one's own (*santoṣa*). These are not "pure Buddhist teaching" especially in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, but we cannot deny that it is these kinds of teaching and techniques that younger people are attracted to. The teaching is more easily understood and more adaptable to their life than what has been explaining in classical texts. For better or worse, hopefully this movement is another way of sustaining Buddhist teaching in modern Thai society.

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