

Chapter Three

The Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4

3.1 The Tamnak: Palace of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva

The word “Tamnak” used as the name of the religious group, in the Thai language, is another word for “a place with functions similar to those of a temple”. To the religious group of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4, it is also referred to as the “Palace of Buddha” (herein after referred as the “Tamnak”). Although Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva still retains the title of a Bodhisattva, to her followers Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva is regarded as a Buddha, as the Bodhisattva has postponed entry to Buddhahood for a cause that is meaningful to other beings. Therefore, her residing place, it is generally referred to as a “Palace of Buddha.” Also for this reason, at the Tamnak, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva is referred to as “Phra Mae”, an honorary title for a Reverend Mother.

Chokchai 4 is the location of the main Tamnak where the full address is: No. 4/37 Soi-Suksunti 7, Chokchai 4, Ladprao Road, Ladprao Area, Bangkok. Built by donations from devotees and the founder, Phra

Mae Kuan-Seng, herself, the Tamnak is also the largest Mahayana Buddhist Institution attributed to Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva in Thailand. The Tamnak was said to have been built at an approximate cost of more than forty million bahts. The present location of the Tamnak is said to be chosen and the Tamnak itself was built “with the personal assistance of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva herself; her male child attendant Chao Chai Ang-Hai-Yi (Prince Red Child), and other divine beings including the Chao Pho Mangkon Khiaw (The Green Dragon who is said to have been seen and whose photograph was taken by a passenger aboard an airplane, with Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva on his back traveling through clouds) who has been residing in the plot of land long before the construction of the Tamnak while waiting for the Tamnak to be built.

The religious group of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 was originated in Huai-Khwang area in Bangkok and had moved to its current address in Ladprao area in Bangkok in 1984, which according to members of the group is to “follow the instruction given by Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva.” Although named as the “Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin”, to the followers, all Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Divine Beings living within and outside the Mahayana tradition are also the main objects of worship. Therefore, at the Tamnak compound and inside the building, there are large collections of statues of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Divine Beings completed with the altars, offerings and safety boxes reconstructed for

donations to be placed. For devotees, there are collections of statues and amulets of different functions and of different sizes to bring home by paying a certain amount of contribution.

Illustration 3.1 (a)

The symbolic statue of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva with Chao Chai Ang-Hai-Yi on the sacred toad.



Illustration 3.1 (a)

The symbolic statue of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva Bodhisattva with Chao Chai Ang-Hai-Yi on the sacred toad.



Illustration 3.1 (b)

Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva travelling on the back of the Green Dragon as seen in the widely distributed photograph which is said to have been taken by a passenger aboard an airplane.



At the center of the compound, immediately in front of the building, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva stands tall on the toad that symbolizes prosperity, and with her is her male child attendant, “Chao Chai Ang-Hai-Yii” on her left, cruising on waves in the sea which is symbolized by the pond where they stand. Statues of Bodhisattvas and Divine Beings could be seen surrounding the compound area and on the roof top of the first floor of the building behind the statue of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva and on top floors of the buildings in the same compound.

Inside the main building on its first floor, the hall is divided into different legendary worlds as described in the old Chinese, Indian and Thai beliefs. In each world, besides statues of objects of worship, it is completed with altars, offerings and reconstructed safety boxes for contribution. On the first floor, there is a shop offering amulets and statues for devotees to bring home and an information center where donations for the temple are accepted. At one of the entrance on the left to the building there is another information counter where offerings are sold and where advises for placing offering as according to one’s wishes could be sought.

The second floor of the main building is mostly used as storage space and also serve as private quarters for followers. It is therefore normally closed to public. The third floor is the meditation hall used for sermons, rituals, and also used as a place for meditation and where devotees

communicate with Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva, Gods and Goddesses and other supernatural beings. The hall is also served as a place to worship Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other Divine Beings. The fourth floor is called the Vegetarian Hall. It is the dining room and also a place where vegetarian food for offering is prepared. There are also altars for paying homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On the top floor of the main building, there are quarters for the disciples.

Along the walls at both sides of the stairs leading to the third and fourth floor and also on the fourth floor there are photographs of the past and present of the Founder with her family and friends. All are there to show that the Founder had come from a happy family. According to the Founder, she had left the happy family life not to seek refuge in a religious institution, but, because Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva has make her realized that there is a more meaningful cause which is to promote the teaching of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva to be compassionate to all beings, and to save their souls.

On the top floors of the buildings, there are Heavenly World for Buddhas built as seen by the Founder during her trips to Heaven and Hell. This is a special floor normally not used for ordinary rituals but could be visited with permission. A new twenty-one story pagoda, which is to be the

world largest, is expected to be completed by 1999 to house a total of 10,000 statues of Buddhas.

To date, there are two other Tamnaks in different locations which are being built under the commission of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4. Besides the main Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 in Ladprao area of Bangkok, there is a mostly completed Tamnak in Chiang Mai city in Chiang Mai Province in the north of Thailand. Another one is situated on Ramindra Road in Bangkok where construction has already begun. The Tamnak at Ramindra is also attached with a housing estate opened to public for sale, which has been partly completed, also for a community of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva followers who wish to live nearby the temple.

Location of the three Tamnaks are printed on the name card as in the following:

Illustration 3.1 (c)

The Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 in Bangkok



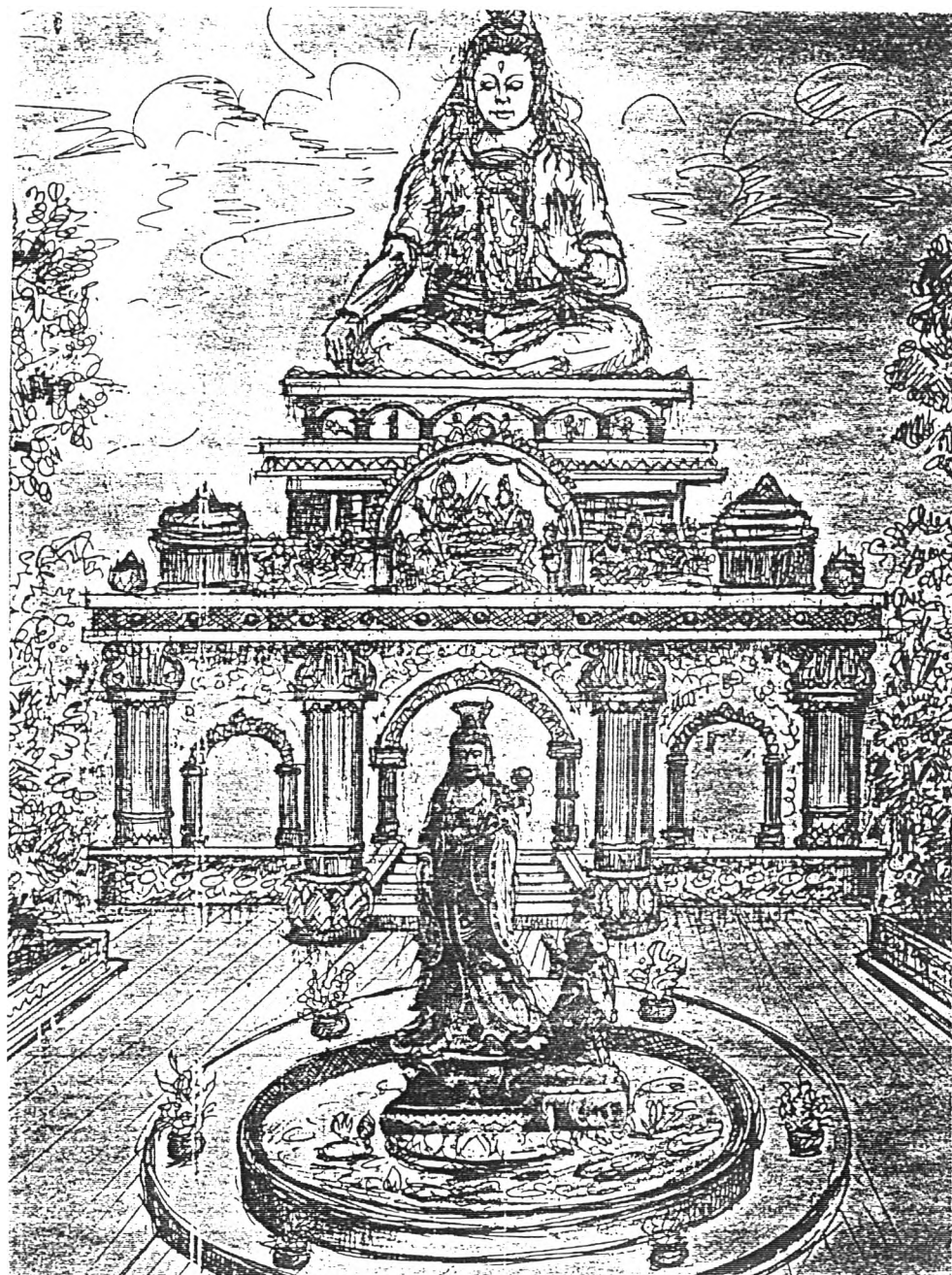
Illustration 3.1 (d)

The Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin in Chiang Mai



Illustration 3.1 (e)

The Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 (Ramindra Branch)





3.2 Its Membership

The religious group of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4 was at first formed by close friends of the Founder, Phra Mae Kuan-Seng. It started as an informal gathering of a few devotees who meet frequently to read scriptures and for rituals. As the Founder became known to more Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva devotees, members of the group increase gradually. A religious group of more than seventy members was then formed within a year under the name of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin. When the group expanded and the old location had become too small, they moved to the present address at Chokchai 4 and became the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4. At present it has a membership of dozens of live-in men and women ordained disciples; hundreds of lay disciples and regular members. It has also been gaining an increasing numbers of new followers.

To organize activities and events, and also to assist in the daily welfare of the Tamnak and its followers, the Disciples Society is established under the patronage of the founder and leader of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4, while maintained by a group of disciples and followers. Although the Disciples Society is mainly made up of disciples and followers of the Tamnak, all members of the public are welcomed.

Basically, there is also no specific written requirement to be fulfilled or required process to become a member of the group. It requires only the active participation of the member. As the group members has increased sharply in recent years, the Tamnak has begun a registration system in 1996 for those who regularly attend its functions and activities. To be a registered member, one is required to fill up the form and pay up the sum of one hundred bahts as a monthly contribution to cover the expenses for all printed acknowledgment of activities forwarded to a member's address. Data to be filled by an applicant are as follows:

- i. Name, address, age, name of introducer, educational attainment;
- ii. Occupation, place of work, position, office telephone number;
- iii. Special capability;
- iv. Date of joining membership;
- v. Amount of financial contribution;
- vi. Contribution is made for which particular month.

The objectives of the Disciple Society, as stated by the founder and as printed on the handouts distributed by the Tamnak, are based on the teaching of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva which are:

- a. to participate in and promote the religious activities;

- b. to promote unity and for the improvement of the well being of the members;
- c. to promote mutual understanding and team work among members;
- d. to promote social welfare so as to improve members' spiritual being;
- e. to promote better understanding of Buddhas' teachings so as to improve members' spiritual state.

The overall membership of the Tamnak could be categorized as in the following:

1. Ordained disciples
2. Lay disciples
3. Followers—Regular and Irregular members

Aside from the first group of ordained disciples who wear the traditional robe and clothing for monk and nun, the second and third group, the lay members, are free to wear anything of their own preferences when attending functions and ceremonies. Although usually lay group members identify themselves by wearing white robe or white clothing on ceremonial occasions.

Despite its increasing number of members, the Tamnak has maintained the same simple organization chart as when it was established with its first generation of ordained disciples:



3.2.1 Ordained disciples

According to Phra Mae Kuan-Seng, ordination is for those who have expressed strong determination and ability to renounce the worldly life—those who are prepared to sacrifice oneself completely for the sake of other beings and to seek the way to Nirvana, the supreme enlightenment. A monk or a nun of the Mahayana school, while bearing in mind the compassionate way as observed by Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva, to relieve living beings of all sufferings, should therefore, first of all, have the compassion of

never to exploit or eat the meat of any living beings. Thus he/she has to be able to become a vegetarian for his/her lifetime. A disciple, ordained or lay disciple, devotes himself/herself to the moral and religious practices of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

In 1991, the religious group had first started with five ordained disciples as the first generation of ordained disciples of the Tamnak. They were ordained at the legendary holy land of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva in the People's Republic of China together with the founder, Phra Mae Kuan-Seng. Since then, the number of ordained disciples has been increasing with both male and female members who come from different age groups and of different background.

The following are the first five ordained disciples of the Tamnak Phra Mae Kuan-Yin Chokchai 4, ordained at the same time as the founder.

1. Mr. Apilarak Sae-Tang (ordained at age 34)
2. Ms. Pakthpring Sungstichot (ordained at age 32)
3. Mr. Sutheth Sungstichot (ordained at age 30)
4. Mr. Natchesit Suphasiriwithaya (ordained at age 25)
5. Ms. Suphita Chatrapirak (ordained at age 18)

Illustration 3.2

The Founder and the first generation of the Ordained Disciples.



An ordination ceremony is normally held once a year on the ordination day of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva, as stated in the **Dharani of Great Compassion**, and in the legendary holy land of Nam-hai Pho-tho-Sua¹ in the People Republic of China. Being ordained in the holy land, according to the founder, would mean a better beginning on the path to salvation. An ordination ceremony is performed at the Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva Temple in the People's Republic of China where according to the legend is the enlightenment place of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva. The ceremony is normally held once a year for the disciples of the Tamnak on auspicious day.

Ordained disciples occasionally visit Hut-Kwang-Sua, a large and famous Buddhist temple in the South of Taiwan to study scriptures and for the meditation practice. According to the disciples and followers, the reason for choosing Hut-Kwang-Sua as location for the religious studies is, it is a holy place where Phra Mae Kuan-Seng has been shown of her faith, a place where the truth of life and her missions in this world has been revealed. It is also a place where the Founder has been visited by Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva and has experienced miracles such as being lifted off to the sky and taken to a tour to Heaven and Hell by Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva.

¹ According to the legend, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva lives in Nam-hai, which in Chinese means the South Sea. Pho-tho-Sua, the name of place adopted from the *Photola* where it is said in the legend that Avalokitesvara lives.

Important as it is, the ordination is performed by a Mahayana Buddhist authority of appropriate religious status in a simple ceremony which includes paying homage and taking up the vow to follow the religious teaching. Once ordained, the disciple is required to remain at the holy land for a short period of religious study which include recitation, meditation and other religious practices. If conditions allowed, normally the disciples would then visit Taiwan for further study.

In daily life, the ordained disciple, male or female alike, would wear gray or dark gray loose top and baggy trousers. And in ceremonial activities, they would wear yellow robe over the white or dark robe. with white cotton or straw boots. In the Tamnak, there are separate living quarters for monk and nun. Each individual live-in disciples performs their daily duties in the Tamnak separately and by helping each other.

3.2.2 Lay disciples

A lay disciple is a devotee who follows the religious practices and if the requirements have been fulfilled, a simple but formal ceremony would be held at the Tamnak for the acceptance of the disciple to become a formal disciple. According to the founder and the religious calendar of the Tamnak, the acceptance of lay disciple is held twice a year, on the birthday



and the ordination day of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva for the well-being of the disciple and as a tribute to Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva.

A lay disciple, while leading the normal life of a laity, also has to follow the moral and religious practices which include meditation, recitation of scriptures, and has to be a vegetarian. A lay disciple usually wears dark, dark brown or white robe with big sleeves on ceremonial occasion, for rituals, sermon, and during recitation and meditation classes. In the Tamnak, although lay disciple are not live-in disciples and they are not required to perform the daily duties of maintaining the condition of the Tamnak, they have been known to have always come in to help voluntarily in the daily welfare of the Tamnak.

Acceptance of lay disciples is performed at the Tamnak on the birthday of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva and on the enlightenment day of the Bodhisattva each year. Admitted disciples are given an identification card with a new religious name and date of admission printed on the card.

For this occasion, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva is invited through a long process of recitation and meditation. By midnight, all prospective disciples would go up to the top floor of the main building to welcome the teacher, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva. After the rituals of paying homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva would come down and enter the

meditation hall from the top floor to perform a series of rituals to give blessings to the prospective disciples through the physical appearance of the Founder, Phra Mae Kuan-Seng. Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva would first give blessing to attendants of the day through Phra Mae Kuan-Seng from her throne, a golden chair with layers of cushions placed in the center at the back of the hall facing the main altar of the images of Buddhas, the Bodhisattva as Avalokitesvara and Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva. As an identification for an accepted lay disciple, Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva would place a red seal mark on the white robe of the lay disciple.

The whole session is performed under the atmosphere of a casual family gathering. Attendants are free to talk, to ask questions, to joke with Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva in the form of Phra Mae Kuan-Seng. As this is also a Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva's birthday and ordination day, during the session, other Bodhisattvas and supernatural beings would usually join in. The ceremony then become a spectacular gathering of many beings—of Bodhisattvas, supernatural beings and the human being.

3.2.3 Followers

A follower is a member who follows part of the religious practices. Among followers of the group, there are members who attend all functions regularly (regular members) and those who participate in the group

activities occasionally (irregular members). The most significant difference between disciples and followers is that all disciples are vegetarian, while some followers of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva, although many among them are vegetarian, for those who cannot become a vegetarian, would refrain from eating beef for the reason that beef is the meat of one of the twelve animals in the zodiacal signs and therefore it also under the care of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva.

1. Regular Members

A regular member is a devotee who regularly attends all functions and activities held by the Tamnak. There is no specific requirement for anyone who would like to become a member although one would be requested to fill in a registration form for a prospective member. Data required are as follows:

As the member registration has only started in the year 1996 on a monthly and voluntary basis, the complete statistical record is for the time being for the purpose of book keeping the amount of contribution on a monthly basis. The one hundred bahts contribution is used to cover expenses for delivering acknowledgment of activities to a member's home. The group has not yet designed a registration system for a yearly membership or lifetime membership.

2. Irregular Members

An irregular member is a devotee who, while is also a devoted follower of Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva and Phra Mae Kuan-Seng, has not been able to attend all functions or activities regularly but is a supportive member always ready to provide support to the activities of the group and its members alike. Irregular members might not visit the Tamnak on a regular basis, but might be an active member in participating the activities held at the Tamnak. They might be devoted members who follow the religious practices faithfully. Irregular members also include devotees who come to visit occasionally to pray and to make merits.

To maintain the on-going of the daily activities, the ordained disciple and volunteered lay disciple share the work load. A committee is usually formed to manage and organize particular activities, especially when more hands are needed for the task. Basically, there is no specific written rules or restrictions for followers to become a committee member except that being a committee member, one has to have the understanding and the willingness to be an active participant. Member of committee could be an ordained disciple, a lay disciple or any of the followers. As a committee member, a disciple or follower, while working to organize

activities, sometime also helps maintain the management and development of the daily welfare of the Tamnak.