



## Chapter 4

### **The Importance of Understanding Dhammakaya Meditation**

This final chapter explains the relevance of the information presented in the previous chapters to Thai society and Thai Buddhism today. More specifically, what is the significance of Dhammakaya meditation in Thai Buddhism today and what changes has Thai society experienced which are reflected in the emergence of Dhammakaya meditation and the associated three movements? Attempting to explain the changes Thai society has been going through over the past century in detail would almost certainly require a separate thesis. However, some of the main points can be addressed without serious degradation to the argument. Although it was not mentioned in the previous chapters, the fact that Dhammakaya meditation is popular at nearly all levels of Thai society is of particular importance in this chapter. Unlike other Thai Buddhist movements which normally appeal to a specific segment of society, and to lesser degrees other segments, the movements surrounding Dhammakaya meditation cut across Thailand's numerous social strata. By explaining the importance of Dhammakaya meditation in the formation of three modern movements and identifying what these different movements offer to their respective followers sheds light on the changes, if any, the different levels of Thai society have been going through. In doing so, a better understanding of Thai society in general can be gained.

#### **Wat Paknam's Followers**

The movement which reaches members of the widest range of primarily urban Thai society is the movement at Wat Paknam. It is the original center of the

Dhammakaya meditation movement, and plays a key role in continuing the movement originally started by Luang Phor Sodh. In many ways it typifies the traditional Thai temple; its neighborhood location along-side a canal, its close proximity to other temples, and its importance in local ceremonies and festivals are a few examples, however its role as the center for a modern form of meditation which departs from traditional Theravada styles of meditation designate it as movement away from existing elements of the Thai Sangha, representing the status quo.

It is certainly the oldest of the three temples, with its age reported as over five hundred years old. It appeals to members from a wide range of Thai urban society, from the poor who go for the temple's welfare services, to the high ranking civil servants, and successful business men and women prospering in Thailand's fast growing economy, and everyone in between. Rural followers of Wat Paknam would have to make a special trip to visit the temple due to its urban location, and therefore constitute a smaller number of followers. They are more likely to participate at a satellite temple where a local monk or meditation master instructs Dhammakaya meditation, and feel some connection to Wat Paknam due to its origin as the center of Dhammakaya meditation. Although the majority of followers tend to be older, it is not unusual to see young people at the temple. The temple is perpetuating the movement started by Luang Phor Sodh by continuing the programs he started, actively teaching Dhammakaya meditation, and continuing the high-level Dhammakaya meditation in much the same way as in the time of Luang Phor Sodh.

### **Wat Phra Dhammakaya's Followers**

The temple appealing to the most limited range of society, but with possibly the largest following is Wat Phra Dhammakaya. This movement represents a shift away from elements contained in traditional Thai Buddhism which were deemed inappropriate to, and having no place in Thailand's modern society. Followers are

primarily Bangkok resident university graduates, as the leaders of Wat Phra Dhammakaya made a concerted effort to appeal to this segment of society. This is not to say that only Thai society's upwardly mobile members are welcome at the temple. A visit to the temple for Sunday services would reveal members from a wide range of society; young and old, rich and poor. However, the active participants in the temple's growth and fund raising activities are the wealthier, better connected followers.

An article by Edwin Zehner provided a decent explanation of Wat Phra Dhammakaya's points of attraction mentioning the clean, quiet, and orderly appearance of the temple as attracting numerous followers.<sup>1</sup> But he left out one of the most important aspects I mentioned briefly in chapter three; convenience. It is the one treasured feature desired by urban dwellers in any part of the world, and Bangkok is no exception. The temple holds its services on Sundays when schools do not have classes, and most businesses are closed. Major events are always scheduled on national holidays when schools, government offices, and businesses are all closed, making it easy for followers to participate. The temple's location, while not centrally located, is not difficult to reach for followers with their own cars, and even runs a helpful bus service from many points of the city. Air conditioned city busses traveling from the city center even reach within a few kilometers of the temple, from where additional local transportation is quite easily accessible. At the temple, large parking areas with courteous attendants make parking trouble-free, and as described in the previous chapter, acts of merit making can be done on the way from the parking area to the main assembly hall. Sunday services begin late in the morning and end early in the afternoon, allowing followers a leisurely pace during the entire day. The services are systematized, brief, and regular, incorporating a short sermon, various announcements of temple activities, a Dhammakaya

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<sup>1</sup> Zehner, pp 412-5

meditation session, all of which ends at approximately 11:30 allowing time for followers to offer the monks' noonday meal. Following the services lay-members are welcome to partake of the temple's complimentary lunch. All of these elements combine to make participation in regular temple activities as easy and convenient as possible. The services are much more similar to a Christian church service than traditional Thai Buddhist temple activities.

### **The Followers of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram**

Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram also appeals to a many levels of society, although not as broad a range as Wat Paknam. This movement is a concerted attempt to protect Dhammakaya meditation from harm incurred as a result of bad publicity generated by Wat Phra Dhammakaya. By its inherent nature opposing Wat Phra Dhammakaya, it represents a move back towards the *status quo*, and more traditional elements of Thai Buddhism. The segments of society absent from this temple appear to be the elderly poor. The reason for this is probably due to the temple's location in Rajburi Province, approximately 93 kilometers from Bangkok, which makes it inconvenient for elderly poor people to reach. On the other hand, it is more accessible to rural members of society who might not otherwise be able to have access to a temple teaching Dhammakaya meditation. Phra Ajahn Sermchai estimates approximately thirty percent of his followers come from rural areas, with the remaining seventy percent coming from Bangkok. The reason why a temple in a rural location has such a large number of urban followers is because of the meditation training provided at Wat Saket in Bangkok three times a week. Normally followers practice meditation there, and go to the temple in Rajburi for special ceremonies or occasions.

Although it shares followers and administrative roles with Wat Paknam,<sup>2</sup> Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram has its own dedicated followers. These are primarily people who believe in Phra Ajahn Sermchai's efforts to propagate the "right" Dhammakaya meditation system, and include former followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who have joined Phra Ajahn Sermchai for their own reasons. They are primarily medium and high ranking civil servants and successful business people, and support Phra Ajahn Sermchai's efforts in promulgating Dhammakaya meditation by teaching monks and interested lay persons. Phra Ajahn Sermchai has also taken active steps to promote Dhammakaya meditation in all sections of Thailand via his "Homeward-bound" tours, during which meditation masters accompany monks returning to their local temples to instruct interested natives, and generate local support for the meditation technique.

#### **Movement Analysis; Wat Paknam**

Analyzing these movements reveals some of the changes Thai society and Thai Buddhism have been experiencing during a large part of the twentieth century. Wat Paknam under Luang Phor Sodh's abbotship began a movement of meditation reform, with accompanying ancillary reforms, such as having food prepared at the temple kitchen to allow monks more time to study. Clearly his dissatisfaction with traditional meditation techniques, and establishment, or rediscovery, of the systematized Dhammakaya meditation technique was the fundamental reform. This reform was also accomplished very cautiously, reflecting Luang Phor Sodh's knowledge of the conservative nature of the Thai Sangha, and reforms were traced back directly to the Buddha to avoid charges of heresy. Throughout the 1930's and 1940's, this movement grew slowly, but steadily, primarily by word of mouth, es-

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<sup>2</sup> The Abott and Assistant Abott serve as co-vice presidents of the temple's foundation. Phra Ajahn Sermchai, p 3.

essentially the same manner as traditional movements. Although the coup replacing the absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy took place during this time, and the organization of the Thai sangha governing body was subsequently changed to reflect the new constitution, most monks and temples were unaffected by these changes. Sulak Sivaraksa says succinctly "In 1932 the people did not really participate in the change to democracy."<sup>3</sup> Wat Paknam with Luang Phor Sodh as abbot was no exception. The meditation movement continued on as it had, and this served as a reflection that political changes taking place in Thailand were not directly affecting the day-to-day lives of most people. Thai society was changing slowly through the end of World War Two, and on to the beginning of the era of American involvement in Thailand stemming from its concerns of communism in the region.

Luang Phor Sodh's passing away in 1959, correlates, approximately with the coming to power of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, who in 1958 had seized power in a coup. Prime Minister Sarit's close ties with the United States, and desire for foreign investment in Thailand, combined to speed up Thailand's industrialization. Although it is debatable whether this can be labeled the beginning of the development or the destruction of the country, there is no question that Thai society began experiencing rapid changes, some of which continue today, such as difficulties encountered in changing from an agriculture-based economy to an industrial-based economy.

### **The Dhammakaya Foundation**

As the death of Luang Phor Sodh brought into the open among some followers questions concerning control of Dhammakaya meditation, which reportedly led

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<sup>3</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, "Crisis of Siamese Identity" in *Searching for Asian Cultural Identity*, Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, Sathirakoses-Nagapradit Foundation, 1991.

to the departure of Khun Yai Chan and her young followers to their own meditation institute, which later became Wat Phra Dhammakaya. In the ten years from the time of Luang Phor Sodh's death until Khun Yai Chan and her students left Wat Paknam, they had been actively propagating Dhammakaya meditation as members of the Dhammaprasit Foundation, founded in 1960.<sup>4</sup> This time correlates to the beginning of rapid industrialization and change for Thailand, and clearly influenced the future leaders of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, who were university students at the time.

The Dhammakaya Foundation's growth in the 1970's was not spectacular. What was important for the foundation early on was establishing forward-looking goals and objectives which would make their movement appealing to the modern members of society. By 1970 the young leaders of the movement, namely the abbot and future assistant abbot, aged 26 and 29 respectively, could see the need for Thai Buddhism to adapt in order to keep pace with the changing society; what seemed old-fashioned and ill-fitting a modern society would not be included in the new temple. Apparently the changes which affected them the most were those concerned with modernization, and this became the cornerstone of their movement. It is significant that the first objective listed on the foundation's charter is "To disseminate Buddhism through the use of modern media; television, radio, the press and any other possible modes of communication."<sup>5</sup> This makes their claim of leaving Wat Paknam due to the awkward situation involving Khun Yai Chan as "heir to the teaching" appear questionable. If in fact they were concerned with maintaining Dhammakaya meditation in the original manner of Luang Phor Sodh, one would expect to find it listed as one of the foundation's objectives. However, of the seven objectives listed, not one mentions the meditation system of Luang

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<sup>4</sup> Progress Report, p 4.

<sup>5</sup> Campaign pamphlet.

Phor Sodh. "Spreading the (Dhammakaya) meditation teaching"<sup>6</sup> was the original objective of the Dhammaprasit Foundation while at Wat Paknam. Apparently this objective was lost in the move from Phasi Charoen to Phatum Thani.

The point I wish to make here is that the leaders of the Dhammakaya Foundation, from its very beginnings, crafted their movement to meet the needs of the emerging "modern class" of Bangkok, as much as, if not more than to perpetuate Dhammakaya meditation. I would also like to clarify the term "modern class," which applies to Wat Phra Dhammakaya followers better than "emerging middle-class," or "nouveau-riche" which have been used in the past, but are too broad, and inaccurate.<sup>7</sup> The Dhammakaya Foundation was started by a group of young college students and their elderly meditation master, caught up in the beginnings of Thailand's rapid industrialization. They experienced the changes Thai society was going through, and acted to meet the perceived needs of others caught up in the same changes. Clearly, the leaders saw elements proclaimed as "modern" as those to be embraced, not rejected, and their movement was designed accordingly. To simply state that the movement appeals to the middle-class ignores the very important high-class, who might also be impressed with the modern outlook of the temple, and thereby become followers. Included in this high-class are families with 'old money' who could not be called "nouveau-riche". Also excluded from this description are the many lay followers who volunteer to work for the temple for very little money. Both of these groups comprise important followers, and the best way to describe them is "modern" (which is how they would likely describe themselves). They perceive of themselves as modern, and yet still Thai, which counters accusations by some critics who declare modern elements of society simply as foreign. Edwin Zehner explains:

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<sup>6</sup> Progress Report, p 2.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, p 136, Zehner, Jackson, p 216.



Through liberal use of the national flag, the inclusion of military cadets in most public ceremonies, and group meditation practices purportedly conducted for the benefit of the entire nation, the movement wraps itself figuratively in powerful national symbols in such a way as to present itself as "The New Hope for the Thai Nation."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation**

The degree of financial success Wat Phra Dhammakaya has achieved has surprised many, including possibly the founders themselves. The initial goals of the Dhammakaya Foundation mention nothing of the World Dhammakaya Center, only "building and maintaining Wat Phra Dhammakaya."<sup>9</sup> It appears that as the economic conditions of Bangkokians improved throughout the 1980's, so too did those of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. So much so, that once the temple and its surrounding dhutong grounds were completed, additional goals for the World Dhammakaya Center were established. Present plans for the center now place the actual temple and duthong grounds in such a location as to make them appear as an appendage which was added quite haphazardly.

This economic success, and the methods they employed to achieve it, while expanding their empire also earned the movement criticism. And in the same way that Luang Phor Sodh's behavior brought investigation and criticism of Dhammakaya meditation shortly after he was appointed abbot of Wat Paknam, the movement suddenly found itself defending not only its financial dealings, but the meditation technique as well. This prompted some concerned followers of Wat Paknam to establish the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation, and open the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Institute, a section of which eventually became Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram. As explained in chapter three,

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<sup>8</sup> Zehner, p 425.

<sup>9</sup> Campaign pamphlet.

while this movement is smaller, it is concerned almost exclusively with Dhammakaya meditation. The three objectives of this foundation are, briefly; to teach Dhammakaya meditation, to train Dhammakaya meditation masters-/instructors, and to maintain the "right" Dhammakaya meditation practices.<sup>10</sup>

Although the temple in Rajburi hosts various attractivities and the grounds are attractive and well kept, it does not offer its members the same conveniences as those of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. The movement's almost exclusive concern for Dhammakaya meditation, and its emphasis on monks' training and study as opposed to miscellaneous pursuits of lay-persons help ensure its size will remain modest. This is a movement for those in society who are interested in practicing and propagating Dhammakaya meditation, whether they consider themselves modern or middle-class is of little significance. In many ways this movement acts as a satellite temple to Wat Paknam, however, the emphasis which followers place on countering the negative publicity Dhammakaya meditation has received from the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya serves to provide an added sense of purpose and belonging.

### **Dhammakaya Meditation in Thai Society**

It is appropriate here to summarize the importance of Dhammakaya meditation in Thai society. The importance of Dhammakaya meditation is its role in the formation of three Buddhist movements in Thailand over the course of the twentieth century. It is also found at all levels of Thai Society, and although all three movement centers are essentially urban based, efforts have been made to spread Dhammakaya meditation to all parts of the country and internationally as well. Dhammakaya meditation has many followers but it also has many critics, and both seem to have been around since the time the system was rediscovered by Luang Phor Sodh early this century. To summarize the system itself would lead to the conclu-

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<sup>10</sup> Phra Ajahn Sermchai, p 74.

sion that it is a meditation technique which provides quick advancement, and equally important powers or supernatural abilities to go along with the rapid achievement. And as explained earlier, it is a change from traditional Theravada meditation, which normally does not boast of empowering the practitioner with a variety of powers or abilities.

Wat Paknam is still a very popular temple, and is considered by followers to be the center of Dhammakaya meditation. It is still largely traditional, holding services on wan-phra, the Thai holy days which fall according to the lunar calendar, and not the business calendar. Although the Bangkok metropolis has engulfed the temple, it continues to grow by raising funds in traditional ways such as sales of amulets, and buying extremely valuable land next to the temple. It represents an anomaly among popular Thai Buddhist movements in that it has survived, and prospered after the passing away of its founder. The magic of the meditation system and amulets charged with power from the system continue to attract the attention of people from a variety of demographic backgrounds.

This largely holds true for followers of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram. While occupying itself with the task of perpetuating Dhammakaya meditation, through training, and safeguarding the "right" technique, it attempts to make itself attractive to as wide an audience as possible. By opposing some of Wat Phra Dhammakaya's more sensational aspects, this movement has been able to appeal to the more conservative elements of a modernizing Thai Society.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been described as a place where magical rituals and things such as amulets could not be found as they represented the elements of traditional Thai Buddhism which did not suit the tastes of Thailand's modern young people.<sup>11</sup> But a closer look into the temple and the meditation system reveals that these things are still in place, but they have been "modernized." Having heard

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<sup>11</sup> Zehner, pp 408, 417, Taylor, 1990, p 152.

about the movement's dislike of such things, and listening to one prominent monk from Wat Phra Dhammakaya refer to Wat Paknam as "that amulet market" once, I was more than a little surprised when, on my next visit to the temple, I received a Wat Phra Dhammakaya amulet after visiting with the assistant abbot. There is really no other way to describe the coin-shaped object; about one inch in diameter with a Dhammakaya image on one side, and the face of Luang Phor Sodh on the other, and coated with some type of gold-colored plating. Along with the amulet came instructions for how to use it to acquire things you might want, or for safety during a voyage, etc. Also at the temple, small crystal balls, and images of Luang Phor Sodh are worn around followers' necks, the place one commonly sees Thai people wearing amulets. The magic is contained in the meditation system, which has been popularized, and fits conveniently into most temple services. A good example of modern magic, mentioned briefly earlier, is the use of Dhammakaya meditation to make merit by offering food to the Buddha in Nirvana. It incorporates the traditional practice of giving alms, but adds a new, and powerful idea; that of bypassing the monk to gain merit, and receive merit from the Buddha himself.\*

The best explanation for these events is that old beliefs die hard, and it is very difficult to take something that people feel strongly about, such as amulets and magic associated with meditation, and simply declare they have no place in the modern world. Of course they have a place, but like the temporary ordination system for students and merit-making activities, they have been modernized, made

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\* When I asked Phra Ajahn Sermchai about this practice he said that it was an illusion created by using high-level Dhammakaya meditation. The food and offerings appear as if they are going to the Buddha in Nirvana, but they actually cannot get in. It appears as if they do the same way a far away object seems close when viewed through a telescope, but the closeness is merely created by the telescope. In this case, high-level Dhammakaya meditation is the telescope used to create an illusion. This also answered my question of why the Buddha would need food in Nirvana?

convenient, and institutionalized. Another example is the promise of receiving land and wealth in a future life, for donating money for Wat Phra Dhammakaya to purchase land around the temple. Taylor cites this as "Thammakai's unabashed materialism,"<sup>12</sup> but it is merely applying the traditional belief that land donated to a temple, or even assisting in the construction of a temple, will assure one will have land in the next life. In the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, it has simply been modified to fit their goals. Though they declare practices such as fortune telling and tattooing by monks as backward, they are still a long way from tossing Buddhist images on the pyre in the manner of Zen monks.<sup>13</sup>

The meditation system and accompanying magic are still important to followers, although the meditation system itself does not seem to be the most important element the temple offers to followers. The most important elements of the movement are those concerned with reaching the new modern members of society, its outlook and appearance, and modern conveniences. The meditation system itself acts as an added benefit gained by followers coming to the temple's regular services, while providing an important legitimizing element for the temple in that it is being used to cure the universe of evil by destroying Mara. If followers were interested solely in Dhammakaya meditation they would more likely go to Wat Paknam, or Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram, temples more directly, and deeply involved with meditation.

This is not saying the meditation system is not important to followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, or the movement itself. Dhammakaya meditation and Wat Phra Dhammakaya are inter-related in such a way that neither could exist without the other. If the convenient, modern appearing and forward looking temple existed without some worth-while goal, such as becoming the center of Buddhism in the

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<sup>12</sup> Zehner, pp 408, 417, Taylor, 1990, p 152.

<sup>13</sup> Kapleau, p 321.

world, it would have difficulty infusing its followers with necessary zeal. And as being able to conduct the most potent form of high-level Dhammakaya meditation is the ultimate goal of the World Dhammakaya Center, the meditation technique is a key element of the temple. Conversely, if the "popularized" meditation technique was made available to followers without the conveniences, and pleasing surroundings, it would likely fail to attract significant attention.

What is most significant about Dhammakaya meditation in Thai society is the role it has played in the formation of three popular movements, and the role it continues to play in the different aspects of the movements. From its very inception it presented a contrast to traditional meditation practices in Thailand, but was made legitimate by its founder aligning it with the Buddha himself. Although it became the object of criticism by Luang Phor Sodh's detractors, it also reportedly allowed him to remain free from official censure, which in turn helped his popularity and movement grow. The meditation technique was the key in the movement continuing, and prospering after the death of its founder. An unparalleled accomplishment, and as yet unrepeated by other movements in Thailand. This involved the technique being altered to meet the needs of modern Thai Buddhists when the country was caught in the throes of change from an agriculture based economy to an industrial based economy. And when threats of censure reappeared, the meditation technique again became the catalyst for another movement to generate, in order to safeguard the technique.

These activities surrounding one meditation technique necessitate a sound understanding of the technique so as to better appreciate it against the complex predicament of Thai Buddhism rapidly approaching the next millennium. Understanding what it offers to its varied followers at its different movements allows better cognizance of the situation of Thai Buddhism today, and in the future.