

# FOLLOWING THE BUDDHA'S PATH: THE BUDDHA'S LIFE STORY AS THE MODEL FOR NARRATING THE LIVES OF PHRA KECHI ACHAN (MONKS WITH MYSTICAL POWER) IN CENTRAL THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article aims at studying the narratives of Phra Kechi Achan, (monks with mystical power) in central Thailand. Four monks' life narratives, two from the Vipassana group and two from the Vidayagom group, are used as case studies. The study reveals that the narratives of all monks follow the structure of the Buddha's life due to the Buddhist tradition of using the Buddha's life as a paradigm to compose religious persons' stories. However, the miraculous power of each monk is highlighted in his narrative. There is both miraculous power as found in the Buddhist canon and as influenced by Thai cultural beliefs and practices.*

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## Introduction

There are many Buddhist narratives in Thailand, including various versions of the Buddha's life, as well as accounts of the Buddha's relics and of important Buddha images. Biographies of *Phra Kechi Achan*, monks with mystical powers, are also popular, especially in Central Thailand where many of these monks lived. Some of these monks focused primarily on meditation, such as Luang Pu<sup>3</sup> Canta Davaro/หลวงปู่จันทาถาวโร of Pa Khao Noi temple/วัดป่าเขาน้อย in Phichit province, and Luang Pho Jaran Thitadhammo/หลวงพ่อจรรย์ ฐิตธมฺโม of Amphawan temple/วัดอัมพวัน in Sing Buri province. Other monks, such as Luang Pho Ngoen/หลวงพ่อเงิน of Bang Khlan temple/วัดบางกลาน in Phichit province, and Luang Pu Suk/หลวงปู่สุข of Pakkhlomgkhamthao temple/ วัดปกคคลองมะขามเต่า in Chainat province, focused on the occult sciences.

These narratives describe the monks' mystical practices and the sacred objects they created. For example, the biography of Luang Pho Nogen reports that one day while *Luang Pho* was sitting watching his attendants make an iron collar for an elephant. *Luang Pho* got up and dropped his yellow robe in the fire. Miraculously, the fire did not burn the robe. His attendants who saw this miraculous event took the robe and tore it into many pieces. They wore pieces of this robe around their necks as amulets (Buri Rattana n.d.:77–78). These miraculous events frame the questions for this article: should the

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<sup>3</sup> The words *Luang Pu* ('big paternal grandfather'), *Luang Ta* ('big maternal grandfather'), and *Luang Pho* ('big father') are pronouns used for addressing or referring to senior and venerable monks.

narratives about mystical monks be seen as Buddhist narratives or are they, rather, narratives of occult sciences, full of mystical practices?

This article uses Reginald Ray's notion of the Buddha Sakyamuni's life as a paradigm to argue that the Buddha's life story serves as the template for these accounts of monks with mystical power (Ray 1994). I would also argue that these accounts incorporate Thai cultural beliefs, especially the mystical power found in the cult of amulets.

### **The relationship between the Buddha's life, his disciples' lives and the lives of important Buddhist monks**

Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka explains *Buddhapravati* 'the Lord Buddha's life' in his *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Glossary of Buddhist Terms), as divided into three periods:

The Lord Buddha's life as divided in the exegesis can be separated into three major periods: 1) *Durenidana*, the narratives of his past lives as a Bodhisattava to his incarnation in the fourth land of heaven, *Dusita*; 2) *Avidurenidana*, the narratives from his death in *Dusita* to his enlightenment ; 3) *Santikenitana*, the narratives from his enlightenment to his attainment of nirvana. (Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka 2003: 162)

*Phra Dhammapitaka* provides the classical account of the structure of the Buddha's life or, in Ray's terms, "the paradigm of life" (Ray 1994). The life history of Gautama Buddha follows the paradigmatic structure of the lives of all Buddhas. Ray's analysis parallels that of the early exegetes. His analysis divides the Buddha's life into

two periods: pre-realization and post-realization and breaks each period into a number of stages (see the table below) (Ray 1994: 48–58).

Ray's analysis of the events in the Buddha's life is as follows.

#### **Pre-realization:**

- 1) Crisis in Gautama's life
- 2) Personal spiritual longing that translates into a strong sense of religious; vocation
- 3) The formal renouncing of the world
- 4) The taking up of the wandering, renunciant life, defined by an ascetic mode of dress, sustaining, and dwelling
- 5) The seeking and the finding of a teacher or guru
- 6) The formation of aspirations and taking of vows in connection with the quest
- 7) The intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest and
- 8) Personal realization of enlightenment

#### **Post-realization:**

- 9) Recognition of the Buddha's enlightenment
- 10) Self-declaration of enlightenment
- 11) Compassion as the central component of the Buddha's enlightened personality
- 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surrounding the Buddha's person<sup>4</sup>
- 13) Possession of supernatural power
- 14) The receiving of *dassana*

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<sup>4</sup> From the birth of Lord Buddha to his nirvana, supernatural phenomena occurred spontaneously; for example, an earthquake happened whenever the Lord Buddha performed an extraordinary feat. (Ray 1994: 51)

- 15) A cult with characteristic features that develops around the Buddha
- 16) The teaching of both humans and supernatural beings
- 17) The acceptance of close disciples and lay followers
- 18) The lack of scholarly concerns and textual study in the Buddha's teaching and practice
- 19) Only oral teachings
- 20) The making of conversation
- 21) The defeat of evil beings
- 22) Association with the lowborn and disadvantaged
- 23) The Buddha's nonconformity with traditional religious practices and his critique of social and religious conventions
- 24) The Buddha criticized and even persecuted for his sanctity, unconventionality, or explicit critique of current practices
- 25) The danger of the numinous power of the Buddha
- 26) The Buddha as a principal reference point of the dharma for his followers
- 27) Possession of a body that is supermundane in some way
- 28) Longevity and the capacity to live even to the end of the *kalpa*
- 29) Association of the Buddha with millennial expectations
- 30) Anticipation of death
- 31) Extraordinary death
- 32) Ritual disposition of the body of the Buddha
- 33) The Buddha's remains enshrined in a stupa
- 34) The association of the Buddha with one or more sacred places
- 35) The development of characteristic texts, in particular, the sacred biography and the teachings of the Buddha

In the narratives of the Buddha's life, the pre-realization period consists of only eight events, while there are thirty-five events in the post-realization period. The accounts of the Buddha's life emphasize the importance of the post-realization period because this period provides the core teachings of the Buddha and emphasizes his role as the great teacher of his disciples and lay followers.

Ray goes on to analyze the lives of male and female Buddhist *Arahants* (saints). The narratives in his analysis can also be divided into the same pre- and post-realization periods. While the number of events in the pre-realization period vary, there are always thirty-five events in the post-realization period. This shows that these narratives are explicitly modeled on the life of the Buddha (Ray 1994: 80–95).

This structure also influenced the biographies of monks who lived in Thailand in the recent past. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah (1984), in his analysis of the lives of the students of Luang Pu Man Puridatto/หลวงปู่มั่น ฐิริทศโต, argues that these narratives follow the same plot and the same structure as those of the Buddha's disciples found in the *Apadana* and the *Avadana* (Tambiah 1984: 21–23).

Similarly, Taylor's analysis of Luang Ta Maha Bua Yannasampanno's/หลวงตามหาบัว ญาณสัมปันโน biography of Luang Pu Man, states that, "Man's life story then becomes symbolically and semantically related to the classical conventional hagiographies of the Buddha and exemplary Buddhist saints" (Taylor 1997: 292). He suggests that Luang Ta Maha Bua was familiar with the narratives of the Buddha's life and that:

. . . well-known Thai texts such as the *Pathamasambodhikatha* written by the prince-monk Paramanuchitchinorot (1790–1853) and the

later *Putthaprawat* written by another prince-monk Wachirayaan (1859–1921) may have been conscious or unconscious sources of inspiration for the narrator. . . Both texts are used in the national ecclesiastical *dhamma* courses (*nak tham*) with which Mahaa Bua would have been familiar, having spent the first seven years of his monastic career as a scholar (*pariyat*) monk. (Taylor 1997: 292)

Taylor goes on to suggest that Maha Bua was also influenced by the narrative structure used in journals about *phra khrueng* (small Buddha amulets) which recount stories of monks with mystical power and their practices (Taylor 1997: 290).

For both Ray and Taylor, the accounts of the Buddha's life provide the paradigmatic structure for the creation of important Buddhist-figure narratives.

### **Comparison of the narrative structure of the Buddha's life and that of the lives of Thai *Phra Kechi Achan***

The narrative structure of the Buddha's life continues to influence the accounts of monks with mystical powers living in contemporary Thailand. This argument will be supported by the analysis of the narratives of the lives of Thai contemporary monks. Narratives about monks in Central Thailand are selected for analysis in this article. The first two case studies, *Phra Bhikkhu Phraya Norarattanaratchamanit*/พระภิกษุพระยานรรัตนราชมานิต and *Luang Pu Si*/หลวงปู่สี, who acquired their mystical power through meditation, are classified as the *Vipassana* group. *Luang Pho Pan*/หลวงพ่อปาน and *Luang Pho Wong*/หลวงพ่อวงศ์, who acquired their power from occult sciences, are classified as the

*Vidayagom* group and have been selected as the other two case studies. A comparison of these two groups shows that the narrative structure remains the same regardless of the source of mystical power.

### ***Phra Bhikkhu Phraya Norarattanaratchamanit (Dhammavitakko Bhikkhu), Debsirindravas temple***<sup>5</sup>

Before he was ordained as a monk, Truk Chintayanon served in the court of King Rama VI (1910–1925). He started as a royal page but rose to become a privy councilor to the King. After King Rama VI passed away, he was ordained as a monk at Debsirindravas temple/วัดเทพศิรินทราวาส where *Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacarya (Charoen Yanavaro)*/สมเด็จพระพุทธโฆษาจารย์ เจริญ ญาณวโร served as his preceptor. His monastic name was *Dhammavitakko Bhikkhu*/ธมมวิตกโก ภิกขุ) or *Phra Bhikkhu Phraya Norarattanaratchamanit*, often called “Chao Khun Nor/เจ้าคุณนร.”<sup>6</sup>

Chao Khun Nor was known for the seriousness of his meditation practice and his unwavering concentration (Yongyut Wiriyaatthangkun 1995: 57–58). Unlike the meditation monks that Tambiah (1984) discusses, he was not a forest dweller.

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<sup>5</sup> Information concerning the life of this monk is from Yongyut Wiriyaatthangkul's *Chao Khun Nor (Dhammavitakko Bhikkhu)* (1995).

<sup>6</sup> The word *Chao Khun* in front of the names of the monks signifies the high rank of the monk in the Thai *Sangha*.

Table 1: Comparison of the narrative structure of the Buddha's life and the life of Chao Khun Nor

| Sequences   | The Buddha's Life  | Chao Khun Nor's Life  |
|---|--|---|
| Pre-realization   | 1) Crisis in Gautama's life  | The death of King Rama VI.  |
|   | 2) Personal spiritual longing  | Understanding the impermanence of lay life.   |
|   | 3) The formal renouncing of the world  | Ordained to dedicate merit to King Rama VI.   |
|   | 5) The seeking and finding of a teacher or guru  | Residing at Debsirindravas temple to study dharma with Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacarya (Charoen Yanavaro).   |
|   | 6) The formation of aspirations and taking of vows in connection with the quest              | Resolving to eat only vegetarian meals in private, not traveling outside of the temple except for alms rounds, and living without electricity in his dwelling.  |
|   | 7) The intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest | Using round objects and skulls as meditation objects.   |
|   | Post-realization   | 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surround the Buddha's person   |
| 13) Possession of supernatural power                                    |  | The water from cleaning his feet was believed to cure illness.<br>Knowing from his insight that a monk would play a violin, Chao Khun Nor stopped him before he could violate the <i>Vinaya</i> (rules of monastic discipline).<br>He foresaw the problems that a woman would face because of her sexual desire.<br>He appeared in a taxi to warn the driver so he could avoid arrest.<br>He appeared in an American man's dream and cured his migraine headache. |
| 15) A cult with characteristic features that develops around the Buddha |  | Laypersons believe in the sacredness of his feet-cleaning water, small Buddha amulets, and sacred pebbles.<br>There are specific words and methods to politely request small Buddha amulets from him to worship.  |
| 19) The communication of teachings in an oral form                      |  | He gave many sermons to his disciples.  |
| 22) Association with the lowborn and disadvantaged                      |  | He did not accept invitations to meals outside the temple so that other monks who did not have his resources could receive  |

| Sequences | The Buddha's Life  | Chao Khun Nor's Life   |
|-----------|--|--|
|           |  | meals.<br>He warned the taxi driver out of compassion since the driver did not have any money.   |
|           | 30) Anticipation of death  | He informed the Queen of his impending death.<br>Before his death, he asked his nephew to collect pebbles to make occult memorial objects.<br>Knowing his death was near; he refused to hold a religious service in the Buddhist chapel. |
|           | 32) Ritual disposition of the body of the Buddha by cremation    | His cremation was royally sponsored.   |
|           | 33) The Buddha's remains enshrined in a stupa                    | His cremated remains are enshrined in Debsirindravas temple.   |
|           | 34) The association of the Buddha with one or more sacred places | His dwelling is preserved and his portrait hangs in Debsirindravas temple.   |
|           | 35) The development of characteristic kinds of texts             | There are various versions of his biography.   |

According to the table, Chao Khun Nor's life structure had five pre-realization events and ten post-realization events, paralleling the structure of the life of the Buddha. His pre-realization events express the conventional process of "becoming a Buddhist monk," which starts from a concern for *Dukkha* 'suffering' in householders' lives leading to the seeking of spiritual freedom, trying to find some experts and seriously practicing meditation. After the time of ascetic retreat in the post-realization period, miraculous power is conventionally accepted, followed by the miraculous deeds of helping people and, finally, the cult of each *Kechi Achan*.

#### Luang Pu Si, Tham Bun Nak retreat<sup>7</sup>

Luang Pu Si is the monastic name of *Li* (ā) who was born in Ban Nong Ha, in Rattanaaburi district of Surin Province. He was born at the end of King Rama III's reign (1824–1851) and passed away in the reign of King Rama IX (1946–present). He was a forest monk and, as with many forest monks, he went on pilgrimages into forested regions and later on stayed at Tham Bunnak Retreat/สำนักสงฆ์ถ้ำบุญนาค, in Nakhon Sawan province for the rest of his life (Ray 1994: 293). He was a friend of Luang Pu Man Puridatto with whom he shared many dharma-practicing experiences. Luang Pu Man is seen as the

<sup>7</sup> The narrative of *Luang Pu Si* is from Chanin Deenan and Chakkaphop Charoenrat's *Biography, Obligation, Practices, and Miracle: Luang Pu Sii Chandasiri*.

great teacher of many forest monks (Pathom and Phattara Nikhamanon 2002: 10) and taught many dharma-practicing monks, such as *Luang Pu Waen Sucinno*/ หลวงปู่แหวน สุจิณฺโณ and *Luang Pu Butda*

*Thawaro*/หลวงปู่มดตา ถาวโร (Chanin Deenan: 7). For these reasons, Luang Pu Si is placed in the meditation group of monks who have mystical powers.

Table 2: Comparison of the narrative structure of the Buddha's life and Luang Pu Si's life

| Sequences        | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pu Si's Life   |
|------------------|--|--|
| Pre-realization  | 1) Crisis in Gautama's life  | He became bored with his life as a hunter and a soldier and came to see that lay life had nothing to offer.  |
|                  | 2) Personal spiritual longing  | He was ordained as a novice while still a young man. <sup>8</sup> He left the temple to become a civil servant. He had the intention of ordaining later as a monk in hopes of achieving enlightenment.   |
|                  | 3) The formal renouncing of the world  | He became a fully ordained monk.   |
|                  | 4) The taking up of a particular wandering   | After ordination, he went on a pilgrimage.   |
|                  | 7) The intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest | On his pilgrimage, he continuously studied the sacred teachings.   |
|                  | 8) Personal realization of enlightenment   | He achieved enlightenment while meditating in the forest.  |
| Post-realization | 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surround the Buddha's person                          | A wild elephant prostrated himself at Luang Pu Si's feet.<br>A deity warned him that an impending flash flood would wash his dwelling away.<br>Two Bengal tigers lay down in front of him with no intention of harming him.  |
|                  | 13) Possession of supernatural power   | He could shorten roads, thus making it possible for him to meet his monk friends.<br>He could teach laypeople in different locations at the same time.<br>He took the cloths he used for cleaning betel juice from around his mouth and tied them around the necks of animals in the temple area. These cloths protected the animals from all threats and harm.<br>He knew from his insight who was coming |

<sup>8</sup> When Luang Pu Si was a novice, he learned magic incantations from *Somdet Phra Budhacarya (To Prommarangsi)* สมเด็จพระพุทธอาจารย์ โต พรหมรังสี, who had the monastic rank of *Phra Debkavi*.

| Sequences | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pu Si's Life   |
|-----------|--|--|
|           |  | <p>to meet him.<br/>                     He could communicate telepathically with his disciple, Luang Pho Rue Si Ling Dam/ หลวงพ่อฤๅษีลิงดำ.<br/>                     Fire would not burn his betel quid.<br/>                     His betel quid protected a lay woman from thieves.<br/>                     A person who had one of these magical betel quids could not receive injections. The needle would always break.<br/>                     A car that he had blessed and anointed was in a crash; the car was badly damaged but the driver and passengers were not harmed.</p> |
|           | 15) A cult with characteristic features that develops around the Buddha                    | People buy his betel quid, small-Buddha images, auspicious objects made to worship as amulets.   |
|           | 16) Teaching both humans and supernatural beings   | <p>He taught laypeople who lived along the path of his pilgrimages.<br/>                     Deities asked him to preach.<br/>                     Hungry ghosts (<i>preta</i>) asked him for donations.<br/>                     He taught the naga, Chao Pu Phu Kesa.</p>  |
|           | 17) The acceptance of close disciple and lay followers                                     | He had many disciples including Luang Pu Waen Sucinno, Luang Pu Butta Thavaro, Luang Pho Phrom/หลวงพ่อพรหม วัดช่องแค of Chaong Khae temple, and Luang Pho Rue Si Ling Dam.   |
|           | 18) The lack of scholarly concerns and textual study in the Buddha's teaching and practice | He taught meditation to lay followers.   |
|           | 19) The communication of teachings in an oral form   | He directly taught many disciples.   |
|           | 20) The making of conversation   | He engaged in discussions with many monks, such as Luang Pho Klan of Prayat temple/หลวงพ่อกัน วัดพระญาติ and Luang Pu Suk of Pakkhlommakhamthao temple.  |
|           | 22) Association with the lowborn and disadvantaged   | He helped laypeople who asked for his assistance.  |
|           | 30) Anticipation of death  | He foretold his death and that Luang Pho Rue Si Ling Dam would see to his corpse.  |
|           | 31) Extraordinary death  | His body did not decay and there were no putrid smells; in fact, the body was fragrant.  |

| Sequences | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pu Si's Life  |
|-----------|--|---|
|           | 33) The Buddha remains enshrined in a stupa                      | He was not cremated; his body is kept at the Tham Bun Nak priest house. A statue of him is there as well. |
|           | 34) The association of the Buddha with one or more sacred places | The priest house is a memorial to him.  |
|           | 35) The development of characteristic kinds of texts             | There are biographies of Luang Pu Si.   |

From Luang Pu Si's life, it is found that he had six pre-realization events. His most distinct events are "(4) the taking of a particular wandering and (7) the intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest. These two significant events lead to the 8) Personal realization of enlightenment." Moreover, he had thirteen events in the post-realization period. It is assumed that because Luang Pu Si was "a traditional forest monk," similar to the Buddha, the Buddha's life story and his are comparable.

#### **Luang Pho Pan, Bang Nom Kho Temple <sup>9</sup>**

Luang Pho Pan of Bang Nom Kho temple (วัดบางนมโค) is famous for his magical power. He was born in the reign of King Rama V, in Bang Nom Kho village, Ayutthaya province. People believe he was a Bodhisattva and undertook meritorious acts to help others. Although he is categorized in the occult-science group, he also meditated and went on forest pilgrimages. His biography is interesting because it blends the characteristics of both kinds of monks.

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<sup>9</sup> Information concerning the life of Luang Pho Pan is from Damrongdharm (2009)

Table 3: Comparison of the narrative structure of the Buddha's life and Luang Pho Pan's life

| Sequences        | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pho Pan's Life  |
|------------------|--|---|
| Pre-realization  | 1) Crisis in Guatama's life  | When he grabbed his nanny's breasts and touched her thighs, he felt that her body was not different from his. He was grieved by this realization and decided to ordain.   |
|                  | 2) Personal spiritual longing  | He wanted to learn occult sciences from many teachers.  |
|                  | 3) The formal renouncing of the world  | He was ordained at Bang Pla Mo temple.  |
|                  | 4) The taking up of a particular wandering   | He went on a pilgrimage, seeking teachers.  |
|                  | 5) The seeking and the finding of teacher or guru  | He studied under Luang Pho Sun of Bang Pla Mo temple/หลวงพ่อดูน วัดบางปลาหมอ, Luang Pho Niam of Noi temple/หลวงพ่อเนียม วัดน้อย, Phra Achan Chin of Chao Chin temple/พระอาจารย์จีน วัดชาวจีน, and Phra Achan Poem of Sa Ket temple/พระอาจารย์เพ็ญ วัดสระเกษ.      |
|                  | 6) The formation of aspirations and taking of vows in connection with the quest              | He was industrious in learning the Pali language.<br>He persevered in his desire to learn occult sciences from Luang Pho Niem of Noi temple, even though Luang Pho Niem scolded him and initially turned him away.  |
|                  | 7) The intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest | He learned the <i>Apokasin</i> system of meditation where the practitioner stares at water to focus his concentration.  |
|                  | 8) Personal realization of enlightenment   | He meditated until he could see the morning star gem Buddha image.<br>He also meditated until the water he was concentrating on changed to the color of the morning star.   |
| Post-realization | 9) Recognition of the Buddha's enlightenment   | Luang Pho Sun, his teacher, guaranteed his occult sciences.   |
|                  | 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surround the Buddha's person                          | During one pilgrimage, a wild elephant charged him, but a second wild elephant rushed to protect him.<br>When he was on the way to pay homage to the Phra Phuttachai (the shadow of the Buddha relic), the relic flew to him to demonstrate its miraculous power. |

| Sequences | The Buddha's life   | Luang Pho Pan's Life  |
|-----------|---|---|
|           | 13) Possession of supernatural power  | He knew various powerful spells including ones for curing diseases, destroying black magic, turning fish into leaves, and scooping water.<br>He could foretell the deaths of his disciples.<br>He saw the Buddha create Phra Phutthachai relic, even though this happened in the Buddha's lifetime. |
|           | 15) A cult with characteristic features that develops around the Buddha     | He taught numerous spells to his followers including ones that caused wealth, one for miraculous power, another for great power, and another to attract great wealth.<br>Lay followers believe that his small Buddha amulets and auspicious objects are sacred.                                     |
|           | 16) The teaching both humans and supernatural beings                        | Deities attended him.   |
|           | 19) The communication of teachings in an oral form                          | He directly taught many disciples.  |
|           | 20) The making of conversation  | He discussed dharma with a spiritual hermit and a spiritual nun.<br>He also discussed dharma with noble monks in Khang Khao cave.   |
|           | 22) Association with the lowborn and disadvantaged                          | He cast magic incantations to cure ill people and to help people in trouble.  |
|           | 25) The danger of the numinous power of the Buddha                          | Luang Pho Pan removed black magic and cured a person that a shaman had cursed. The shaman was angry with Luang Pho Pan and cursed him. However, the evil curse affected the shaman, not Luang Pho Pan. The shaman had to seek help from Luang Pho Pan.  |
|           | 26) The Buddha as principal reference point of the dharma for his followers | He directly taught magic incantations to many monks.  |
|           | 29) Association of the Buddha with millennial expectation                   | He is believed to be a Bodhisattva <sup>10</sup> and to have taught an elephant that was also a Bodhisattva.  |

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<sup>10</sup> A *bodhisattva* is a being who has dedicated himself or herself to attaining enlightenment. In the Tipitaka, the word *bodhisattva* is used exclusively for the Buddha before his enlightenment (Dayal 1975).

| Sequences | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pho Pan's Life   |
|-----------|--|--|
|           | 30) Anticipation of death  | Three years before his death, he predicted to his lay followers that he would pass away at 6 p.m. on the 14 <sup>th</sup> waning moon of the 8 <sup>th</sup> lunar month.<br>Before passing away, he gave one last teaching. |
|           | 31) Extraordinary death  | He passed away while in a deep meditative trance.<br>At that time, people saw his soul fly to Dusita heaven.   |
|           | 32) Ritual disposition of the body of the Buddha, by cremation   | Rituals were held to manage his body, but there was no cremation.  |
|           | 33) The Buddha's remains enshrined in a stupa                    | His bones are kept at Bang Kho Nom temple.   |
|           | 34) The association of the Buddha with one or more sacred places | The Bang Kho Nom temple is a memorial to him and a center for ceremonies and rituals related to him.   |
|           | 35) The development of characteristic kinds of texts             | Many versions of his life are published.   |
|           | Others evidence  | He tested his mystical powers with a mystical Arahant.   |

From the table above, it can be said that, of the monks in this study, Luang Pho Pan's life is the most comparable to the Buddha's. He had eight pre-realization events and seventeen post-realization events. The significant similarities are; firstly, Luang Pho Pan was not only a monk who studied the occult sciences, but also a forest monk, so his life contained both the events of observing religious precepts and events of miraculous deeds. Secondly, he was regarded as a Bodhisattva, a member of the *Buddavamsa* (set of several Buddhas). That was why his life narrative was intentionally composed to be "very similar" to that of the Gautama Buddha, one of the models for other Bodhisattvas.

### Luang Pho Wong of Ban Khai Temple<sup>11</sup>

Luang Pho Wong of Ban Khai Temple/วัดบ้านคำข is a monk famous for his mystical powers. He was born during the reign of King Rama IV, in Nong Ta Sieng village, Ban Khai district, Rayong province. Unlike Luang Pho Phan, the other monk in the occult sciences group, Luang Pho Wong, did not go on any pilgrimages and was not a forest monk; he learned magical incantations and mystical practices without these experiences. In this he is similar to Chao Khun Nor.

<sup>11</sup> The biography of Luang Pho Wong is from Mahitthi Rangsiwararak (2006).

Table 4: Comparison of the narrative structure of the Buddha's life and Luang Pho Wong's Life

| Sequences        | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pho Wong's life  |
|------------------|--|--|
| Pre-realization  | 3) The formal renouncing of the world                                    | He became a monk.  |
|                  | 5) The seeking and the finding of a teacher or guru                      | He learned magical skills from Luang Pho Song/หลวงพ่อสงฆ์ of Lahanrai temple and Luang Pho Kong/หลวงพ่อก้อง, a Khmer monk.   |
| Post-realization | 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surround the Buddha's person      | His body could not be cremated with the usual wood. To cremate him, they had to use the bark of the kхой tree (also known as the toothbrush tree). During the cremation, a mysterious white cock flew over the crematorium and disappeared.  |
|                  | 13) Possession of supernatural power                                     | He had occult skills. Even though he only bathed once a year, his body remained clean.<br>He knew a number of spells, including the danger-protection spell.<br>He could shorten roads and so travel swiftly.<br>He could find buried caches of money when he needed money.<br>He could stop wind and rain.<br>He had clairvoyance and could foresee the future.<br>Every word he spoke came true.<br>He knew astrology. |
|                  | 15) A cult with characteristic features that developed around the Buddha | He blessed bee's wax, <i>takrud</i> amulets, paintings, coins, and portraits of himself. These are believed to protect their owners from harm.   |
|                  | 17) The acceptance of close disciple and lay followers                   | He had many disciples, including Luang Pho Rue Si Ling Dam and Luang Pho Rue Si Ling Khao/หลวงพ่อกุญชีสิงขาว.  |
|                  | 30) Anticipation of death  | He foretold his death and asked his followers to collect bark from the kхой tree for his cremation.  |
|                  | 32) Ritual disposition of the body of the Buddha, by cremation           | His cremation was royally sponsored.   |

| Sequences | The Buddha's life  | Luang Pho Wong's life  |
|-----------|--|--|
|           | 33) The Buddha remains enshrined in a stupa                      | His bones and ashes are kept in the temple for Buddhists to worship. |
|           | 34) The association of the Buddha with one or more sacred places | The temple is a memorial to him.                                     |
|           | 35) The development of characteristic kinds of texts             | His biography is published.  |

According to the table above, Luang Pho Wong had just two pre-realization events and nine post realization events. It is assumed that Luang Pho Wong has fewer similar events because he was a monk who emphatically practiced the occult sciences, not meditation as the Buddha and other traditional Buddhist monks.

All of the monks' life structures show that they follow the Buddha's life structure. The similarity of the two kinds of structure comes from the idea that "Monks (*Bikkhu*) are the sons of the Buddha (*Buddha Putras*)" like the saying in the *Arthakatha Majjhimanikaya Mulapannas* that "Hidden tigers could catch their prayers like *Bukkhus* who were the Buddha Putras went to the forest to persistently practice meditation and reached the ultimate goal" (Mahamakutrajawidyalai 1982: 441b). That is why Buddha's life is the role model for the monks', as if they were in the same family (*vamsa*) and shared the same way of life.

Another reason for the similarity comes from the idea that "the Buddha was the great teacher for all followers, including monks (as it is said in *the praise of the Buddha* or *Buddhagunas*); so the monks' lives should follow the Buddha's.

Nevertheless, the four monks' life structures do not follow all the Buddha's stages. It is assumed that the reason for the difference is that they were just "followers," not the beginner (the Buddha), so some stages like 11) Compassion as the central component of the Buddha's enlightened personality or 28) Longevity and the capacity to live even to the end of the kalpa are not present in their lives.

Moreover, all the monks lived in the "contemporary world" not in the period of the Buddha (*Budhhakala*), so the social context was changed. That is why some stages like 18) The lack of scholarly concerns and textual study in the Buddha's teaching and practice or 19) Only oral teachings do not exist in their lives.

In the next part, the two kinds of miraculous power in the narratives of the four monks will be shown: those that appear in the narratives of the Buddha's life and those that are particular to the Thai narratives, such as testing the power of amulets and spells; speaking words which always become true, and the mystical power of amulets.

### **Similarities in the Buddha's life narrative and those of *Phra Kechi Achans*'**

According to the list of pre- and post-realization events for each *Phra Kechi Achan*, there is a correlation between the

Buddha's life and the four accounts of the lives of the monks with mystical power. Although all the narratives were composed at least 20 years ago, and long after the first literal time of the Buddha's life narrative (542 B.C.), the structure of the life narratives of the *Phra Kechi Achan* follows the Buddha's story. There are several possible reasons: the first is that the structure of the Buddha's hagiography has a deep structure in the Buddhists' mind, so the life narratives of all Buddhist religious persons follow the Buddha's structure whenever the stories are composed; the second is that authors who are familiar with Buddhist knowledge know the Buddha's life narrative quite well, thus they create their work by following the Buddha's narratives.

There is one pre-realization event and eight post-realization events found in all four stories, which are:

*Pre-Realization:*

- 1) Crisis in Gautama's life and the monks' lives.

*Post-Realization:*

- 12) Miraculous phenomena spontaneously surround the Buddha's person and the monks;

- 13) Possession of supernatural power;
- 15) A cult with characteristic features develops around the Buddha and the monks;
- 30) Anticipation of death;
- 32) Ritual disposition of the body of the Buddha and that of the monks;
- 33) The remains are enshrined;
- 34) The association of the Buddha and the monks with one or more sacred places;
- 35) The development of characteristic kinds of texts, in particular sacred biographies of the Buddha and of the monks.

The assumption of having just nine similar events in all narratives is that the documents are from both monks who emphatically practiced meditation and who studied the occult sciences. These two kinds of monks had different lifestyles, so the events in each one's life were not the same. Nevertheless, while only one pre-realization event and eight post-realization events occurred in all four of the monks' biographies, many of the events occurred in some of the narratives of these monks.

Table 5: Comparison of the events in all four monks' lives meditation group occult sciences

| Sequences   | Chao Khun Nor | Luang Pu Si | Luang Pho Pan | Luang Pho Wong |
|---|---------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| 2) Personal spiritual longing, which translates into a strong sense of religious vocation.  | X             | X           | X             |                |
| 3) The formal renouncing of the world.  | X             | X           | X             |                |
| 4) The taking up of a particular wandering, renouncing lifestyle, defined by an ascetic modes of dress, sustaining, and dwelling. |               | X           | X             |                |

| Sequences  | Chao Khun Nor | Luang Pu Si | Luang Pho Pan | Luang Pho Wong |
|--|---------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| 5) The seeking and the finding of a teacher or guru.   | X             |             | X             | X              |
| 6) The formation of aspirations and taking of vows in connection with the quest.   | X             |             | X             |                |
| 7) The intensive practice of meditation, which makes up the substance of the spiritual quest.  | X             | X           | X             |                |
| 8) Personal realization of enlightenment.  |               | X           | X             |                |
| 9) Recognition of the Buddha's enlightenment.  |               | X           |               |                |
| 16) The teaching of both humans and supernatural beings.   |               | X           | X             |                |
| 17) The acceptance of close disciples and lay followers.   |               | X           | X             | X              |
| 18) The absence in the Buddha of scholarly considerations and particularly of textual study; The lack of scholarly concerns and textual study in the Buddha's teaching and practice. |               | X           |               |                |
| 19) The communication of teachings in an oral form.  | X             | X           | X             |                |
| 20) The making of conversation.  |               | X           | X             |                |
| 22) Association with the lowborn and disadvantaged.  | X             | X           | X             |                |
| 25) The danger of the numinous power of the Buddha.  |               |             | X             |                |
| 26) The Buddha as principal reference point of the dharma for his followers.   |               |             | X             |                |
| 29) Association of the Buddha with millennial expectation.   |               |             | X             |                |
| 31) Extraordinary death.   |               | X           | X             |                |

The pattern of events is similar for monks in both groups. This suggests that these monks are seen as sacred Buddhist figures regardless of whether they are renowned for meditation or for knowledge of the occult sciences. They are seen as sacred figures following the model of the Buddha which leads to the cults and ceremonies that surround these powerful monks.

Monks with mystical powers and their narratives are widely accepted in Buddhism in general, and particularly in Thai Buddhism. Several Buddhist texts recount that anyone who meditates and

achieves worldly meditative absorption becomes the possessor of *Vijja* (knowledge) or *Abhinna* (supernatural knowledge) (Chairat Thongsuk 2006: 84).

This knowledge consists of:

- 1.) *Iddhividhi*, the capacity to demonstrate one's power;
- 2.) *Manomayiddhi*, the power demonstration by the heart;
- 3.) *Dibyacaksu*, clairvoyance;
- 4.) *Dibyasota*, clairaudience;
- 5.) *Cetopariyayan*, the understanding of other persons' minds;
- 6.) *Pubbenivasanustiyana*, the capacity of recalling one's past life (Chairat Thongsuk 2006: 86).

The Buddha and all the male and female *arahants* possessed all six forms of supernatural knowledge. Other persons can meditate and achieve some level of supernatural knowledge; however, they cannot reach the level of the Lord Buddha and his disciples (Chairat Thongsuk, 2006: 85).

However, the practice of miraculous power is unaccepted. *The Vinaya Pitaka* states: "Look here! All *Bhikkhu*, you should not demonstrate mystical power which is extreme dharma of human beings to laypeople. Anyone who does so breaks one of the minor rules of monastic discipline" (Mahamakutrajawidyalai 1982: 152a). It is assumed that since demonstrating mystical powers to laypeople only breaks one of the minor rules of monastic discipline, it is not considered a serious offense. Monks who do so merely need to confess their error.

Consequently, the authors of these biographies do not see any major problem with reporting the occurrences of mystical powers. They report that the monks did not intend to perform miracles to claim enlightenment, but rather that these sorts of miracles occurred spontaneously because the monks were enlightened. These monks wanted their lay followers to focus on the

Dharma, rather than being distracted by miracles. The biographers of Luang Pu Si report that:

When his followers asked him about miraculous power, *Luang Pu* would pretend to lie down to sleep and did not answer their questions. However, whenever they asked him about Dharma, he would explain it clearly. This is because he did not want his followers, especially his disciples, to become obsessed with miraculous power, but to pay attention to their meditation practice. (Chanin Dinan: 118)

The statement above is used as "an excuse" for having supernatural events in the *Phra Kechi Achans'* life narratives. It seems that the *Phra Kechi Achans* were not concerned with their miraculous power or the supernatural phenomena around them, so they did not violate the Buddha's rules (*vinayas*).

### **Influence of Thai cultural beliefs and practices in the Phra Kechi Achan's life narratives**

In the four *Phra Kechi Achans'* life narratives, the following miraculous powers are found only in Thai belief:

1. Escaping from danger/ Invulnerability—For example: the story of a taxi driver who was protected from arrest by Chao Khun Nor's spiritual body; the bee's wax and other amulets blessed by Luang Pho Wong that could protect laymen from danger; Luang Phu Si's used cloth and amulets could protect his followers.
2. Having the "forever true" sayings—For example: Luang Pho Wong foretold that

one of his laymen would become paralyzed, which became true.

3. Curing patients with sacred spells and herbs—For example: Luang Pho Pan could cure people with his magical spells together with herbs; Chao Khun Nor's amulets cured a woman from insanity.

4. Overcoming evil spirits—For example: Luang Pu Si won over the evil naga's mind; Luang Pho Pan won over the evil spirit in the forest.

5. Having superior power—For example: Luang Phu Si and Luang Po Pan could make wild elephants bow down their heads.

The kinds of miraculous power mentioned above are repeatedly found in Thai traditional narratives. The heroes and heroines in Thai fairy tales, myths and legends usually have miraculous power to escape from danger as in the case of *Phra Sang* in the story of *Sangthong*; to have with sacred sayings, as in the case of *Phra Ruang* in *Phra Ruang myth*; to cure patients with sacred spells and herbs as in the case of *Prince Chanthakhorop* who was rejuvenated by a hermit in the story of *Chanthakhorop*, to overcome evil spirit like many heroes who killed monsters and to have superior power like *Khun Phaen* in *The Sepha Story of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*.

One of the reasons for having these particular miraculous events is because of the influence of 'unorthodox' thoughts in Thai society. Chalatchai Ramitanon, the author of *Spirits of the Local Rulers (Phi Chao Nai)*, describes the phenomenon of "local Buddhism" that "Another level of Buddhism is involved with miracles, supernatural powers, magic incantations,

sins-merits, hell, heaven, etc. This kind of Buddhism is significant and it is believed and practiced by a large number of local Thai people" (Chalatchai Ramitanon 1984: 10).

Moreover, certain evidence has been found that in the period 1057-1157, some Theravada Buddhist beliefs in Thailand were influenced by Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu belief in concerning miracles and supernatural power (Aphiwat Aranyaphum 2005: 18); thus it can be assumed that this belief may have had an impact on Thai society at that time. Given the influence of these beliefs, it is not surprising that the *Phra Kechi Achan's* life narratives contain many miraculous events.

Another reason that monks with mystical powers and their amulets are popular is that these beliefs and practices have been part of Thai culture for a long time. Stories about people and objects with mystical powers are a favorite subject in Thai literature and poetry. In *Sepha Rueng Khun Chang Khun Phaen* (2001: 444), a popular folk literature, it is mentioned that *Phlai Ngam*, the hero of the second episode, has the knowledge of various kinds of Thai occult sciences such as amorous spells, magic incantations for making oneself invisible, hypnotizing people, remaining invincible and unharmed by weapons, subduing the ghost or spirits, etc.

Furthermore, it may be that Thais' perceive *Phra Kechi Achans* as local heroes, and accordingly they could have miraculous power, like the heroes in Thai traditional narratives do.

In addition, stories about mystical powers and sacred religious matters occur in a

wide range of literature in Central Thailand. They can be found in myths, legends and even fairy tales. For example, the legend of Luang Pho Sothon recounts that the three images, Luang Pho Sothon, Luang Pho Wat Rai Khing, and Luang Pho Ban Laem, demonstrated their miraculous powers by floating upstream together (Saipan Puriwanchana 2005: 12–13).

Almost all of the miraculous powers of the Thai *Phra Kechi Achans* are related to their sacred spells (*khathas*), amulets or other sacred objects. One of the assumptions of this phenomenon is that the Thai people have some spiritual need for magical objects that can give them wealth without hard work, and can help them get well from any serious illness and protect them from all kinds of danger. Accordingly, the belief in monks with miraculous powers who can bless magical objects corresponds to this need. In addition, there is an amulet cult that leads people to the belief that the blessed magical objects contain miraculous power because the blessing of amulets is “the process of transferring miraculous power from miraculous monks to whatever they made” (Tambiah 1984: 243).

However, it is possible that all miraculous stories, especially those of the amulets and magical objects, are ‘advertisements’ for commercial amulets. Books on amulets used as sources for this article discuss ‘amulets for sale’ of each monk, and perhaps the miraculous stories are emphasized for this reason.

## **Conclusion**

This article demonstrates the usefulness of applying Ray’s analysis of the stages of the Buddha’s life to the narratives of monks attributed with mystical power.

Although the events of these monks’ lives differ in many ways from the Buddha’s life, it is clear that the narrators used, consciously or not, the Buddha’s life as the model for their narratives. This suggests that the narrative of the Buddha’s life serves as an archetype for other sacred biographies. This paradigm is, however, flexible enough to allow Thai authors to incorporate Thai beliefs and practices, which in turn provides the basis for the cults that surround monks with mystical powers in Thailand today.

The structure of the narratives of the Buddha’s life is replicated in the narratives of the lives of these monks with miraculous powers. However, the content of the narratives incorporates elements that reflect Thai values and beliefs. These particular Thai beliefs, especially those concerning miracles and the power of amulets, create and strengthen the cults surrounding both these monks and the objects they have created. Biographies of monks with mystical powers are published commercially, appearing as regular features in magazines related to amulets or as separate volumes. The commercial aspect of these publications may also play a role in creating and developing cults around amulets associated with particular monks.

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