

DOING THE BUSINESS OF FAITH: THE CAPTALISTIC DHAMMAKAYA MOVE- MENT AND THE SPIRI- TUALLY-THIRSTY THAI MIDDLE CLASS¹

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Abstract

Dhammakaya, an active, affluent and expanding Buddhist religious movement, became a focus of public attention and media scrutiny in the last quarter of 1998 due to its controversial prac-

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Seventh International Conference on Thai Studies, held at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, July 4 - 8, 1999. The author would like to thank the Thai Studies Section for providing financial support for the trip. I would like to express heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Suwanna Satha-anand of the Philosophy Department, Chulalongkorn University, for her stimulating ideas and comments as well as her encouragement, hospitality and continuous support. I am also indebted to Dr. Sunait Chutintaranond and Dr. Therayut Banomyong of the Thai Studies Section, Chulalongkorn University, for their full support, both morally and financially. Last but not least, thanks also go to Dr. Chaiwat Satha-anand and Dr. Kasian Tejapira of the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, for their advice and moral support.

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tice of dogged solicitation for donations to build a grand Maha Dhammakaya Jedi Structure worth nearly one billion US\$, in the face of severe economic recession. Some Buddhist monks and scholars, both orthodox and radical, attacked the movement as a distortion and commercialization of Buddhism. If the Dhammakaya movement offers a novel religious package as alleged by some critics, it is worth examining why this consumer product has gained an upsurge of popularity among urban middle classes in modern Thai society. This paper argues that even though capitalistic as the Dhammakaya has been viewed, it is ironically one of the most successful resurgent Buddhist movements in contemporary Thailand. It offers the urban middle classes an alternative path to realize their novel vision of Buddhism and construct their new identity. The popularity of the movement, in turn, manifests the failure of the Sangha in coming to terms with changing Thai society. The first section of this paper discusses how Buddhism has been transformed in the process of modernization. In the second section, I examine the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya as a new religious movement in contemporary Thailand. The last section discusses the Dhammakaya controversy and its implications.

Introduction

We want to be a religious establishment for the new generation. What's wrong with that? We are not going to look like small wooden temples which attract only those seeking lottery numbers and not those wanting to find substance in religion.

Manit Rattanasuwan, former advisor of the Bangkok Governor and owner of a property project undertaken with Wat Phra Dhammakaya (The Nation, Jan 25, 1999)

Dhammakaya,³ an active, affluent and expanding Buddhist religious movement located at Wat Phra Dhammakaya near Bangkok, has been a focus of public attention and media scrutiny since the last quarter of 1998. This is due mainly to the movement's controversial practice of dogged solicitation for donations to build the grand Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, at an estimated cost of nearly US\$1,000,000,000, regardless of the fact that Thailand was then in a state of economic turmoil. The movement has thus been attacked as a distortion and commercialization of Buddhism by some monks and Buddhist scholars. The controversy has led the Sangha and state authorities to seriously investigate the Dhammakaya temple.

Whatever the accusations are, it is interesting to examine the social underpinning of Dhammakaya's unparalleled

success in gaining popularity particularly among the urban middle class during the past three decades of 'modernized' Thai society. This paper, therefore, attempts to discuss the rapidly-expanding Dhammakaya Buddhist movement, placing it in the context of the wider social transformation of modern Thai society. This paper argues that even though Dhammakaya has been viewed as capitalistic, it is paradoxically the most successful resurgent Buddhist movement -at least, measured by the number of followers- in quenching the spiritual needs, fulfilling the psychological void and creating a new identity for the newly-emerging urban middle class. In this regard, the achievement of the movement is, in turn, a manifestation of the failure of the Sangha to come to terms with social change in Thai society.

This paper will discuss, firstly, how Buddhism has changed in the transformation process from traditional to modern society. Secondly, the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya as a new religious movement to cope with the changing society i.e. what it has done to fulfill the needs of the newly-emerging middle class in Thailand, will be examined. Thirdly, the recent Dhammakaya controversy and its implications for Thai Buddhism will be discussed.

The Reconciliation of Buddhism with Modernization

In traditional Thai society, the temple or wat was an indispensable component of a community. As Richard A. O'Conner argued, traditionally the wat is the moral, social and symbolic center

³ There are three religious groups promoting Dhammakaya meditation, namely Wat Paknam, Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Luang Phor Sod Dhammakayaram, all of which derive their teachings from the same source i.e. Luang Phor Sod, a former abbot of Wat Paknam who claimed to have rediscovered Dhammakaya meditation. However, the focus of this paper will be limited to the Phatumthani-based Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

of a community, and certainly a village needs a wat to be complete. (O'Connor 1993:331) Thai Buddhism was heterogeneous and decentralized. More importantly, it was inherent in people's cosmology and laid the foundation for the Thai social structure, without which the society could not function. People in the past were inclined to regard Buddhism simply as their culture rather than a distinct religion. As Robertson noted,

The fact of the matter is that the concept of religion was alien to the East when it was first brought from the West, although since the late nineteenth century much attention has been devoted to reconciling Western conceptions of religion with Eastern notions of apparent family resemblance'. In the process there has been a strong tendency for some Eastern societies to feel constrained nevertheless, to use the category of religion to reinterpret their traditions of thinking about 'way of life'. (Roberson 1993:15)

With the influence of Western colonial powers in the late nineteenth century, Siam was coerced to begin the project of nation-building and modernization which led to the consolidation of the Sangha. In so doing, it subsequently changed the structure of Thai Buddhism from, to use O'Connor's words, 'a wat-localized to a Sangha-centred religion'. Thai Buddhism became homogeneous and centralized, less local but more national. Furthermore, it is important to note that, as O'Conner argues, Thai Buddhism also changed its social

function from the practice conditioned by social place to beliefs freely chosen. (O'Connor 1993) In other words, Buddhism changed from 'a way of life' to 'a sphere of life'. (see Robertson 1993:15) It became merely a choice among many other religions offered for shoppers to purchase and consume in the competing sphere of a liberalized market. Within Theravada Buddhism itself, a number of religious movements have also continuously emerged to compete in the 'business of faith'.

Plenty of evidence shows that, having undergone the process of modernization and industrialization influenced by rational and Western-influenced ideas, religious beliefs and practices have by no means become less plausible nor have they lost social significance in Thailand. As Bellah noted 'secularization does not mean the disappearance of national religion, and... in the process of modernization, religion may appear in many 'new guises'. (cited in Taylor 1993: 65)

Thai society has gradually transformed from close-knit community-based structures to the impersonal urban structures of societal relationships and controls. Individuals have encountered a new social reality of modernity, which, explained Clammer, makes life increasingly abstract, routinised and reduces the possibility of genuine human encounters and removes mystery from the universe. (Clammer cited in Goh 1999:90) Living in this sort of environment, individuals are inclined to feelings of alienation, isolation and powerlessness. This then leads to the individual's search for the meaning of his/her existential self,

hence, religion, as a source of psychological gratification, comes to the fore again. The rise of the Dhammakaya movement best exemplifies this point.

Quenching the Thirst of the Newly-Emerging Urban Middle Classes

With the rapid process of economic development, industrialization and urbanization, traditional communities, where temples perform a central role in the world of close, emotional, face-to-face ties, have been undermined. The number of urban inhabitants has accelerated alongside the unprecedented growth of urban society. These dislocated urbanites thus aspire to 'a surrogate community' which provides them with a new sense of psychological and moral identity, and hence the temples are expected to play a new role.

Nidhi Ewsriwong, a leading Thai historian, argues that Thai Buddhism governed by the Sangha authority traditionally communicated with a simple two-class division in Thai society; the royal/elite ruling elements and the peasantry. (Nidhi 1994:104) The modernization process brought about the emergence of a new disjunctive middle-class. The inability of the Sangha and conventional temples to come to terms with problems of the middle class in the modern world has frustrated them. Taylor argues that, "the new disjunctive bourgeoisie are seemingly ill-fitted to the persisting social structure and political order and instead have attempted to carve out a niche for itself, one that is reflective and responsive to their particular needs and 'streamlined' religious

vision." (Taylor 1990, p.153)

It was under these social circumstances, that the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Center (Soon Phutthachak Patibattam Phra Thammakai) was founded in 1969 under the leadership of two Kasetsart University graduates, Chaijabun Sitthiphon (Phra Dhammachayo-the abbot) and Phadet Phaungsawat (Phra Dhattachiwoo-the deputy abbot) and with the support by Khun Yai Chan Khonnokyung, a disciple of Luang Phor Sod. The center was later granted official registration as Wat Phra Dhammakaya by the Royal Thai Government's Department of Religious Affairs in 1978. Since then, the temple has expanded in incredibly terms of the number of followers as well as the temple's lands and assets. The leaders dream of building the temple into the greatest center of Buddhism in the world, based on the strong support of the urban middle class.

The Quest for a Utopian Community

Many Dhammakaya followers had been disillusioned by mainstream temples that thrived on giving lottery numbers or performing other senseless rituals. Why (should we) destroy a good alternative? asked Leelawadee Watcharo-bon, former beauty queen and actress.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya is set in serene, shady grounds. At the center is a simple, elegant modern-looking white ubosot (convocation hall) set amidst lush gardens, snaking streams, and refreshing fountains. On entering the temple com-

pound, one has an impression of cleanliness, order, purity and peace. This is in stark contrast to many conventional temples in Bangkok, where the commotion of temple business i.e. fortune-telling, lottery numbers-dispensing, amulet-selling, merit-making rituals, pervade the general atmosphere of the temple compounds. When the attack against the Dhammakaya movement reached its peak early this year, the temple's followers sent letters to editors of some newspapers, elaborating why they decided to take spiritual refuge in this temple despite all the scathing criticism.

Chawiwan Supakijchanusorn, a Dhammakaya adherent, wrote in her letter to *The Nation* in response to *The Nation*'s harsh criticism of Wat Phra Dhammakaya:

I want to live in an ideal world and the Dhammakaya Temple is the place, because it is where everyone respects, forgives and is polite to one another. Everyone smiles and helps each other. It is where people uphold the five precepts and morality. (The Nation, Jan 5, 1999)

In another quotation from a Dhammakaya publication, Anan Atsawapokin, the president of the Land & House Public Company Limited and the owner of a property project undertaken with Wat Phra Dhammakaya, said:

What impresses me most is the characteristics of people in the temple. I am so overwhelmed when I look in their eyes, and watch their carriage and behav-

ior. The temple's personnel are those who are ready to devote themselves to others. It's a feeling that is difficult to explain, but I've found the people I have been searching for. (Deeply Delving into Wat Phra Dhammakaya, p.82)

Wat Phra Dhammakaya substitutes for the traditional communities, which have been undermined in modern Thai society. It provides the middle class with, to use Malcolm B. Hamilton's term, 'a part-time quasi-community expressing a partial utopianism'. (Hamilton 1995, p.207) What is gained from participating in the movement is a sense of community, close bonding and friendship, all of which are scarce in urban society.

Apart from psychological dependence, concrete mutual help in daily life is also crucial. Close relationship in a like-minded community generates trust among followers. By way of illustration, a businessman follower, whose name was not identified, can be cited. This story was told by his friend, Khun Poj, who asked him to make a donation for a personal Dhammakaya image.⁴ Khun Poj says:

My friend made a donation for a personal Dhammakaya image. Soon after, he met a generous businessman who is a Dhammakaya adherent and the owner of a big housing project.

⁴Those who make a donation for Bht 30,000 (about US \$800) will have his or her personal Dhammakaya image enclosed within the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya in exchange for the donation.

He and my friend happened to sit near one another one day. After talking to each other for a while, that generous guy unexpectedly decided to contract out the job of installing sanitary facilities in his housing project to my friend's company. It is a very big project, which could earn my friend a lot of money. My friend later told me that making merit at Wat Dhammakaya is really worthwhile. I thus told him that it is certainly a result of your merit.
(Tawin, 1995, pp.8-9)

A big housing project has been initiated in response to the dream of many disciples to build a Buddhist community. Manit Rathanasuwan, a religious businessman and former advisor of the Bangkok Governor, has run a condominium project called Muang Keaw Manee. Muang, in Thai, means city, while both Keaw and Manee mean crystal. A Crystal ball is the symbol of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. According to the Dhammakaya meditation method, a crystal ball can be visualized at the center of one's body when a certain stage of Dhammakaya meditation has been achieved.

An advertisement for this project is found inside the front page of the *Kallayanamit* Dhammakaya's monthly magazine. (*Kallayanamit*, Vol 10, No.113 May 1995) Across the top of the page lies the persuasive headline: "Let's live near the temple", followed by a fantastic description:

Have you ever dreamt of a peaceful place near the temple where you can spend time happily with your close Kallayanamit (true friends) and where you could make an offering to monks every morning and practice meditation every evening? Now, your dream will come true at the Muang Keaw Manee.

The building is neo-classic in design, decorated with luxurious furniture imported from Finland. At the top of the building is a high-ceilinged room used for practicing meditation; from there one can view the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya. Moreover, the project provides a recreation center, comprising a 200-seat modern seminar center, sauna, exercise room, swimming pool and, more interestingly a 'Dhamma Theater', together with a shopping arcade featuring minimarts, restaurants, hair salons, laundry shops, clinics, bookstores, etc.

This is a perfect utopian place in line with bourgeois taste. Chaiwat Satha-anand argued interestingly that 'modern economy is spiritualized using religious injunctions and idioms, while religion is being commoditized when utilized as an appendix to business transactions.' (Chaiwat, 1997 pp.2-3) By merging Buddhist ideals with business transactions, the distinction between these two separate realms -- the mundane and supramundane world -- becomes blurred. Holy religious practice has been incorporated into the profane business world.

The emerging bourgeoisie is searching for a venue where their 'new identity' can be differentiated and then asserted. They dislike buying lottery tickets and consulting fortune-tellers in a small and dilapidated temple and regard them as 'nonsense'. Rather, they perceive themselves as pioneering Buddhists in the age of globalization, aspiring to erect a world-class modern Buddhist center and the grand Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya. Their ultimate dream can best be captured by Phra Dhattachiwoo's utterance: "the Catholics have their Vatican, the Moslems their Mecca, we Buddhists therefore await our World Dhammakaya Center". (cited in Apinya, 1993) An analogy could be drawn between this 'think-big' project and a number of extravagant multi-million-baht projects, which flourished in the secular world during the economic boom. While those living in the temporal realm scrambled to become 'a new tiger', those in the spiritual world have also been driven by their ambition to build a global Buddhist empire.

Superstition versus Rationality

Amulets are a key component of contemporary Thai Buddhism, for they are a major source of temples' revenue. They are therefore crucial to the economic survival of the temples. Amulets are given to those who make a donation to the temples. The Thai people believe that an amulet is a protecting entity, which is believed to bring happiness, prosperity, and good life to those who have it. An amulet in itself has no intrinsic use, but its worth comes from its symbolic value and thus people must be confident in its efficacy in order for it

to remain powerful. The Dhammakaya's publications play an important role in repeatedly reinforcing the belief in the power of amulets as well as the good fruit of making merit by, for example, reproducing stories of a miraculous survival after a severe car accident, an unexplainable recovery from malignant cancer and incredible success in business after making merit at the temple, and so forth.

One might think that the middle class adherents, who obtain Western-oriented education,⁵ the foundation of which lies in rational thinking, should no longer believe in the supernatural power of sacred entities. Evidence however shows that this is not the case. It has been argued that the rational mode of thinking can not provide human beings with a satisfactory answer for every question. Social reality becomes more and more complex in the age of globalization; it is beyond the individual's grasp, understanding and control. Thus, individuals feel powerless and uncertain. Having an amulet, one can at least have a sense of certainly and psychological confidence,

⁵ It should be noted that Dhammakaya is the most popular religious movement among university students and graduates. Unfortunately, there is no figure of adherents' educational level provided. However, according to figures provided by Dhammakaya, it is interesting to note that 289 monks out of 652 possess a Bachelor's degree and 22 monks a Master's degree, whereas 316 Ubasikas (female personnel) out of 359 hold a Bachelor's degree, 9 Ubasikas a Master's degree and 1 a Doctorate degree. (Dhammakaya 1999: 26-27) It is evident therefore that the Dhammakaya movement is strategically run by highly-educated people.

no matter if the expectation is or is not finally realized. Spiro argued interestingly that 'although religious ritual may not, in fact, be efficacious for the elimination of poverty, the restoration of health, the bringing of rain, and the like, the belief that it does achieve these ends serves the important psychological (real) function of reducing hopelessness and its attendant anxiety concerning their otherwise impossible attainment. (Spiro 1966:114)

Dhammakaya has repeatedly promoted the supernatural power of amulets as well as other miraculuous occurrences at the temple in order to draw more followers. One of the most controversial photos published in the temple's book is the one portraying the September 6 miracle witnessed at Wat Phra Dhammakaya in September 1998 by a gigantic gathering of meditation enthusiasts. It aroused a number of criticisms. A Chulalongkorn University associate professor, Saowalak Piempiti who attended the mass meditation and witnessed the September 6 "Sun Miracle," explained:

During the event, the sun became like a drawing. It was easy to look at it without protecting one's eyes, she said. Then, the image of Luang Phor Wat Paknam slowly emerged, his saffron robe appearing first. It was not a dream. It was a real experience." (The Nation, Dec 2,1998)

What is fascinating is, in fact, not the explanation of the miracle, but rather the person describing it. It is the testimony

of an associate professor from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand's first and most widely-recognized university. It challenges the general idea that those who acquire high education do not believe, and even look down on, superstition.

The temple has been attacked by Buddhist scholars as making use of the miracle to deceive people. Dhammakaya insists that the miracle did happen despite the fact that we are unable to explain it in scientific terms. In order to justify their faith, the followers further argue that many miracles are mentioned in the *Tripitaka*. For example, immediately after Prince Siddhartha was born, he walked seven steps and could talk. When he was about to attain enlightenment, he could remember past lives and see the past lives of other creatures, and his body shone with a special radiance. (*The Nation*, Dec 9, 1998) To be fair, this seems to be an understandable argument as plenty of stories concerning superstition are easily found in daily newspapers. It seems to fit nicely with Thai society. Hence, why has only Dhammakaya been questioned?

Nevertheless, the Dhammakaya movement must also come to terms with scientific rationality, given that formal knowledge in Thai society has changed from communal-based religious belief to an urban-based scientific one. An article in *Kallayanamit*, Dhammakaya's monthly magazine, regarding the construction of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, exemplifies the point. (Kasemsuk 1998)

Beginning the article by citing a dreadful doomsday prediction, the author states that no astronomer has yet to find a way out of this coming catastrophe. The argument is underpinned by a sophisticated scientific explanation, employing a good amount of astronomical jargon. Mentioning doomsday, the author points out that 'there are large numbers of things that are beyond the capacity and wisdom of human beings to grapple with.' She then tries to introduce an answer, if not the only answer: 'here, we have a solution: the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya'. The great disaster, she further claims, will affect only those who do not observe the five precepts (Sila). To escape the calamity, there are two possible answers: one is to achieve the high level of Dhammakaya meditation (which is rather difficult for ordinary people); and the other is to make donations in order to have the donor's name inscribed in the structure of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, where all victorious entities will reside, as soon as possible.

Referring to a doomsday prediction from an astronomical viewpoint, the author exhibits logic and a familiarity with scientific discourse. Nevertheless, she finds scientific knowledge inadequate, if not hopeless, to save people from this disaster. Consequently, other sources of power must come into play to help humankind; that is, the victorious power of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya, which can be attained only by wholehearted support from adherents. By undermining the legitimacy of science, on which knowledge in the modern world is based, the Dhammakaya discourse creates a substitution for it.

Belief in the supernatural in Thai Buddhism has always been a problematic issue. The true Buddhist might argue that any attempt to gratify psychological dissatisfaction, which is caused by holding fast to worldly happiness, is in contradiction to the Buddha's teachings, for the Buddha taught that life is suffering and impermanence and hence, to be free from all suffering is to completely reject worldly desire and search for nirvana. However, pure text-based Buddhism alone seems unlivable and, in fact, it has never been the dominant mode of belief in Thai Buddhism. The reinforcement of worldly happiness tends paradoxically to ensure the survival of Thai Buddhist institutions. It can also be argued that the idea of world-accepting is more prevalent among the middle class than world-rejecting because it is consistent with, and even strengthens their social position in the hierarchical cosmology.

Commodification of Merit

"We were born to '*sasom baramee*'" which means 'we were born to accumulate merit' is a slogan-cum-ideology of Dhammakaya. Merit-making has long been part and parcel of every Buddhist ceremony and it is the most popular expression of lay religiosity. The Sangha has enjoyed a legitimate position as a 'field of merit' throughout the long period of Thai Buddhist history. According to Yoneo Ishii, a field of merit is defined as a beneficiary of good deeds performed by people for the fulfillment of their desires for heavenly happiness.' (Ishii 1986, p.13) The driving force for merit accumulation lies in the belief of Thai Buddhists that, to use Lucien M.

Hanks' formulation, all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering. ...This hierarchy depends on a composite quality called 'merit' (bun) or 'virtue' (khwaamdii).' (Hanks 1962, p.1247) Thus, Buddhists are expected to make as much merit as they can so as to uplift their social status in a hierarchical society. The transcendence of the cycle of reincarnation, or the attainment of nirvana, is far less relevant to their daily life. Most Buddhists do not think that far and they believe that it is beyond the capability of ordinary people to achieve enlightenment in this life. Some Buddhist scholars e.g. Buddhadasa, have tried to challenge this view. On the contrary, Dhammakaya makes use of this traditional discourse to legitimize their solicitation and wealth accumulation.

Operating under a capitalist mentality, Dhammakaya makes merit calculable so that people will be tempted to make merit. Tapping into a marketing strategy, they preach that 'the more you donate, the more 'merit' you receive.' (*The Nation*, Dec 1, 1998) The tangible benefits of merit accumulation have repeatedly been asserted by the publicity of stupendous stories resulting from the sacred power of accumulated merit.

Furthermore, rewards are given for those who make a donation e.g. giving them amulets, having their names inscribed at the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya. Thus, the adherents will be happy that they receive something in return for their money. Such reminders can signify heavenly happiness, better lives, good

fortune, prosperity, a last chance for survival and all other good things. Yet, by no means can the benefits from such reminders be guaranteed, nor can the results of accumulated merit itself. Merit-making is, Ishii argues, 'strictly a symbolic act'; therefore, 'the actor must be confident of its efficacy.' (Ishii 1986, p.16)

Amulets and other kinds of reminders have no intrinsic use, but their worth accrues from cultural value i.e. their protective power - as long as people believe in them. Kasian Tejapira analyses the logic underpinning the consumption of goods in a capitalistic society thus: "the most important thing being consumed by consumers under consumerism is *not the material objects of commodities* but the *abstract meaning* which these commodities have been made to signify by advertising." (original emphasis- Kasian 1997 cited in Chaiwat 1997:13) Similarly, the Dhammakaya's disciples consume abstract meanings attached to those reminders e.g. Dhammakaya, Buddha, heavenly happiness, Nirvana, etc. but not the object per se.

However, it should be noted that, having encountered heavy criticism by Buddhist intellectuals that such reminders are rather obstacles to achieving real wisdom, the temple is thus reluctant to fully endorse their necessity. An official of the temple, however, argues that 'only a few people have the spiritual strength to do good deeds and expect nothing in return, while most people still need incentives. ...To encourage people to do good, sometimes we need to use tricks.' (*The Nation*, Dec 2, 1998) These business-oriented strategies have been

extremely successful in expanding the movement and increasing the number of disciples. However, Dhammakaya has often been questioned if it is a true Buddhist movement or a business organization in disguise.

Dhammakaya Meditation: New Expression of Lay Religiosity

Dhammakaya meditation, believed to be rediscovered by Luang Phor Sod and originally taught to a limited number of Luang Phor Sod's close disciples, has been popularized since Soon Phutthachak Patibattam Phra Thammakai (Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Center) was founded in 1970. It became an alternative for middle class religious involvement.

Forbidding the traditional ritualistic lay form of Thai Buddhism practiced in other conventional temples which offends the middle classes' modern outlook, the Dhammakaya religious movement offers a new venue of direct participation through practice resembling the Mahayana interpretation of Dhammakaya and Tantric Buddhist visualization of the Buddha in the womb. In meditation, devotees are taught to cultivate their inherent Buddha nature through visualization techniques. (Schober 1995:321) It is claimed that Dhammakaya speeds attainment of nirvana, and that advanced Dhammakaya meditators may visit past lives and other planes of existence, and thereby affect present circumstances. (Zehner 1990:407) It is also said that all meditative practice leads to Dhammakaya and there is no other way to nirvana except

this. (see Suwanna 1990: 400-401) In 1998- I 999, there was a heated debate on the philosophical definition of nirvana. Buddhist scholars argued that nirvana is a state of nothingness and detachment from self, whereas Dhammakaya proposes that it is that of heavenly happiness, which one can attain if merit has been sufficiently accumulated. However, Dhammakaya followers seem not to be bothered by the doctrinal controversy at all. For them, the achievement of nirvana seems beyond their imagination and has little relevance to their present lives. Their concern is rather placed upon the realization of a happy state of mind. Meditation is also beneficial for their life in the worldly realm. Some meditators believe that meditation practice is tremendously helpful for achieving greater success in studies and work because helps enhance their memory and improve their concentration.

Since meditation can be practiced individually, it enables meditators to realize their inner strength. The empowerment of the self is consistent with the bourgeoisie's idea of 'individualism'; that is, the emphasis on the importance of individual choices and interests through freedom. Even though the practice of meditation is individual by nature, Dhammakaya transforms it into a collective form of mediation, which gives those attending the ritual an impression of sacredness and power of collective action. Apinya calls it the 'publicization of a private affair'. (Apinya 1998: 70) The sacred atmosphere at the meditation site, according to Apinya, stirs many people to cry with happiness. (Apinya 1998: 70) Nidhi ar-

gues that “human beings need rituals as an important venue enabling them to have close spiritual communication with holy entities as well as with humankind.” (Nidhi 1994, p. 97) In this regard, the mediation ceremony fulfills the need of the middle class, in both individualistic and collective manners.

The Dhammakaya Controversy

Dhammakaya has always been a controversial movement. It was accused of being a communist movement in the 80's when the storm between left and right ideologies raged. Ironically, since the last quarter of 1998 the Dhammakaya movement has encountered the heaviest attack in its history and one of the major accusations is that it is ‘a capitalist version of Buddhism’. (Sanitsuda 1998) As far as I am concerned, the controversy was sparked when a family member of a Dhammakaya disciple made a complaint on a news program on the ITV channel concerning a family rift caused by one of her family members who is a devoted adherent of the Dhammakaya temple. The media followed the issue and began to criticize the ‘direct sale’ tactic that the temple has used to entice followers to make donations.

It is undeniable that a crucial factor which made this an issue was the economic situation in Thailand during that period; that is, the economic downturn following the Chavalit Administration's decision to float the baht. Most property projects in Thailand were affected and the building of the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya was no exception. Tawin Wattirangkul said that ‘building-

materials for the Maha Cetiya structure are all imported as their quality is higher than those produced in Thailand. Hence, when the baht was floated, the price of materials inevitably shot up. The temple lost a lot of money (for that reason). Thus, those who can wholeheartedly devote their money for the construction will be extremely helpful for Buddhism at this critical time.’ (the *Kallayanamit* Magazine, Jan 1998 cited in *Matichon Sutsupdu*. Vol. 19 No.959, Jan 5,1999 p.1 1) The *Matichon Sutsapda* noted that, while the cost of the project almost doubled the ‘purchase power’ (Kamlung Sua) or ‘merit power’ (Kamlung Bun) was in decline. The temple then attempted to boost ‘purchasing power’ by advertising miracles repeatedly and releasing many types of amulets, e.g. *duud sub* (sucking wealth) and *khra ruay* (dare to be rich), to stimulate people to make more donations. (*Matichon Sutsupda*. Vol. 19 No.959, Jan 5,1999 p. 1 1) As a result, many people were angry with Dhammakaya's solicitation tactics and also unhappy with its investment in the extravagant Maha Cetiya.

The controversy has continued. The House Committee on Religious Affairs made the followers allegations against Phra Dhammachaya, the temple's abbot: 1) the violation of rules on the construction of Buddha statues, 2) the misinterpretation of Buddha's teachings, 3) the promotion of miracles, 4) the commercialization of merit-making, 5) improper conduct by the abbot towards female followers, 6) the accumulation of land, 7) the temple's business empire, 8) financial irregularities related to donations, and 9) the ordination of female novices. (*The Nation*, Feb 18, 1999)

The house committee on Religious Affairs finally concluded its report on the Dhammakaya controversy, recommending the removal of the temple's abbot on grounds of *threatening national security, violating religious principles and undermining the monarchy*. Atthasit Supsit, committee spokesman, said that Dhammachayo's controversial propagation of the faith could erode the foundation of Buddhism, causing divisiveness in the country; that Wat Phra Dhammakaya often cited the monarchy as a pretext for soliciting donations and that their religious violations could tarnish the country's most revered institutions. In the report, the committee proposed that the temple and abbot should urgently correct any misinterpretation of the Buddhist canon; that the abbot should adjust his mobilization of followers and donations to conform with social norms, since prevailing public opinion has been against making unjustified solicitation; and that the temple should be allowed to continue propagating the faith after making the necessary adjustments. (*The Nation*, Feb 25, 1999 -emphasis added) The committee's report was submitted to the Sangha Supreme Council and the House of Representatives. To date, the Sangha Supreme Council has done nothing substantive regarding the matter. It is due mainly to the fact that the Dhammakaya temple has long been a major source of financial support for the Council, which makes it difficult for the Council to examine the issue without fear and favor. The abbot was later sued and then sent to court.

Legal action against the abbot has significantly destroyed his moral author-

ity, for it brings him -- whose power accrues from being in the symbolic, sacred and unworldly realm -- into the empirical and profane world where he is treated merely as an ordinary citizen subject to secular laws. The future of Dhammakaya and how the prosecution process will end remain to be seen.

There are a few points worth making here. Firstly, it is evident that the state authority fears the unparalleled capacity for mass mobilization of Dhammakaya, which could pose a serious threat to the state. The erection of the grand Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya project reflects the think-big mentality of Dhammakaya, which is likely to lead it into trouble. Dhammakaya likens its dream to other extraordinary pagodas, located in many significant places in Buddhist history e.g. India's archaic Saggi Cetiya erected in the reign of King Asoka, Indonesia's Borobudur, and Thailand's Phra Pathom Cetiya. (*Delving into Wat Phra Dhammakaya*, 1998: 74-75) It should be noted that all these great pagodas were initiated by charismatic kings who exclusively merited the right to do so. In this regard, the desire of Dhammakaya to build a grand pagoda arouses the suspicion of loyalty to the present king. The dissatisfaction is reflected somehow in the rejection of applications for royal decorations for followers who make donations to the Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya on grounds that it will do no good for the public. (*The Nation*, Feb 5, 1999)

Secondly, a serious dispute, which could lead to defrocking the abbot, is the embezzlement of the temple's assets. It is reported that some 1,700 rais of land

donated by followers were registered under Phra Dhammachayo's name. He has been forced to transfer land to the temple on grounds that owning too much property violates Buddhist precepts. His reluctance to transfer the land arouses people's curiosity as to his sincerity in the propagation of Buddhism.

Concluding Remarks

The rapid growth of the Dhammakaya movement lies in its capacity to fulfill the psychological needs of the rapidly-expanding middle classes. Modernization has brought about a situation in which there has been, to use Taylor's formulation, 'a dislocation between past cultural values, symbolic systems and present context. Traditional perspectives and ways of ordering the universe are being seen as largely ineffective and possibly even amoral.' (Taylor 1990: 153)

The quest for a new religious identity by the alienated middle classes is a struggle for meaning in the profane modern world. Where there are sincere and devout believers, there have always been wicked people who make use of them. And Phra Dhammachayo might probably be the case. Nevertheless, it does not matter whether the abbot will be defrocked and whether Dhammakaya will be able to continue its movement. Other new religious movements will continue to emerge so long as the Sangha and other conventional religious institutions fail to quench the thirst of the spiritually-impoorished middle class.

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