

Chapter 2

Analyzing the “Dhammakaya Case”

Online

Abstract In this chapter, the hybridization of Thai Buddhism in the contemporary globalization period will be assessed through the so-called *Dhammakaya case*. Dhammakaya will be analyzed as one of the controversial approaches in relation to Hinnayana Buddhist doctrines, using the opinion of two experts on Hinnayana Buddhism—Buddhadasa and P.A. Payutto—as resources. An interview of another intellectual monk, Phra Paisal Visalo, has also been included. This chapter attempts to assess the information discussed on digital social media such as Twitter, Internet, and Instagram related to the Dhammakaya Temple and its abbot. Content and contextual analyses will be conducted. The research findings will be discussed against the background of modernization, Thai Buddhist culture, and digital communication in Thailand.

2.1 Introduction

During the globalization period in Thailand, Buddhist temples, which used to be the hub of moral ethic and academic education, have lost their grip on the Thai educational system, as the Minister of Education took over the monks' role in formal education in the reign of King Rama V or King Chulalongkorn (Educational Management Information System Centre 1998). Buddhist monks have since confined their roles to spiritual guide, and kept themselves busy on Buddhist or Pali studies, social work related to the further amelioration of temples, and ritual services such as giving sermons and praying. (Payutto 2001: 153).

During the contemporary globalization period, Thai Theravada Buddhism has become under scrutiny from the public. Some monks provide services that Buddha did not endorse, such as fortune-telling, making sacred amulets, and giving lotto numbers. (Kitiarsa 2012: 52–54).

In this period, many scandals related to monks have been recorded (Ekachai 2001). Sexual laxity by monks, while professing Buddhism, is illustrated by the following cases: Phra Yantra Amaro Bhikku who fled to the USA after an accusation of his fathering a child with a female follower in 1994; Phra Nikorn

Dhammawatee who was defrocked in 1990 on the grounds of making a female follower pregnant; and Phra Pawana Buddhho who was arrested for raping under-aged hill tribe girls studying under his scholarship program in 1995 (Ekachai 2001: 60, 111). Nane (Novice) Kham and his donation embezzlement news was a big issue in Thai society in 2013–2014, before he fled to live in the USA (Manager online 2013). Recently, news about Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been on the front pages of Thai newspapers. It attracted the attention and action from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI). The ongoing online discussion on social networks and in some mainstream media has been intense.

Consumerism associated with the hybridized form of Buddhism and animism can be seen in the growth of the expensive amulets and talisman industry, which involved famous monks (see Formoso 2000: 99, Suntravanich 2005 quoted in Prachachart 2003: 13). Pluralism of popular Buddhism is exemplified by the emergence of more than 100 cults and sects of animism–Buddhism (Visalo 2003: 176). The Thai middle class has been drawn to three new religious movements: Buddhadasa Bhikku’s, Santi-Asoke’s, and Dhammakaya’s.

Buddhadasa Bhikku revisited the Paticca Samuppada model or the Dependent Origination, which is interpreted as a cycle of physical birth and rebirth in another form of life after one’s death. It provides a new translation of the original Mahanidana Sutta in Pali (palisuttas.com 2015), i.e., the birth and rebirth of me, I, and mine on every moment of thought (nkgen.com 2012). Once we can get rid of “atta” (the perception of self) to become “anatta” (the perception of non-self), then we will reach Nibbana (in Pali) or 5. Nirvana (in Sanskrit) or sunyata (voidness of kilesa or suffering), which is a state of supreme bliss .

Santi-Asoke is a Buddhist sect that declared itself as separated from the mainstream Thai Hinnayana Buddhism in 1975 (Asoke 2008). The Buddhist monks of Santi-Asoke call themselves “samana” and adhere to austere practices emphasizing sustainability in producing organic food, self-reliance, sacrifice, 5 Buddhist Precepts, especially abstinence from gambling and intoxication, and living a simple life (comparable to the Amish communities in the USA) (Asoke 2008).

Last but not least, there is the *Dhammakaya* sect, which has drawn many disciples and built up its one billion US dollar worth mega projects, such as the colossal Dhammakay Cetiya, the grandiose cloister, and the unorthodox Assembly Hall which looks like a spaceship or even a UFO (amusingplanet.com 2016). The pilgrimage should be done in a jungle, not in an urbanized area. Walking on flower petals that believers spread on the street for monks to step on (like walking on a red carpet) is not what Buddha taught (Guinnessworldrecords.com 2015). It has been known for its outlandish marketing strategies to draw donations and financial support from devotees (manager 2015). The sermons of *Dhammakaya* are controversial because it contradicts the dogma of anatta in Theravada Buddhism or Hinnayana Buddhism. Venerable P.A. Payutto or Phra Bhramagunabhorn analyzed the Dhammakaya teachings and concluded that Dhammakaya’s teaching is not in line with neither Theravada nor Mahayana Buddhism (Payutto 2008a). Moreover, Dhammakaya practices its own rites and rituals which deviate from those of mainstream Buddhism.

Dhammakaya has its own Websites and telecommunication means to connect with devotees. Via its digital communication networks, Dhammakaya has gained more popularity among its followers, but at the same time, it has aroused anti-Dhammakaya movements online as well. On January 5, 2016, Patcharawalai Sanyanusin, a writer for the *Life* section of the *Bangkok Post*, reports about Phra Dhammachayo, abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya:

...While I don't think it's reasonable that one should turn their backs on the clergy because they're unhappy with some of its members, I can't help but wonder how certain members who have intentionally committed much more serious offences are still embraced by their followers and the clergy.

The most apparent example is Phra Dhammachayo, abbot of the controversial Wat Dhammakaya who successfully, yet disgracefully, escaped being disrobed for embezzlement, which he was charged with 17 years ago. He's the country's most infamous and influential monk who has long been at the forefront of many scandals. If any of these incidents had involved ordinary monks they would have been expelled from the monastic community almost immediately. The temple has also long been a target of criticism as it earns massive wealth from its greed-promoting donation concept.

However, the temple's worst offence, which has long been condemned by many Buddhist scholars and revered monks, is its attempt to fuse its own theories into Buddha's teachings and spread them far and wide.

Phra Brahmagunabhorn (widely known as Than Payutto), who is locally and internationally recognized for his profound expertise in *Tripitaka* (Buddhist canon), warns that distorted lessons don't only cause Buddhist followers to misunderstand the traditional principles, but also damage the religion at its roots.

After Wat Dhammakaya teachings started spreading in early 1999, the reserved scholar wrote a well-documented book to explain all subjects that the temple discretely twisted.

But the biggest question that has troubled many concerned Buddhists from the beginning is why the monkhood's governing body never came up with a resolute measure to stop the temple's hideous malpractices. When Phra Dhammachayo was accused of embezzling 900 million baht in assets from his temple in 1999, he was never held accountable. At that time, the late Supreme Patriarch Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara instructed the Supreme Sangha Council to defrock him for stealing and distorting Buddhism, but it did nothing as many of its members sided with him.

Finally, the monk returned the assets to the temple and walked away, and the council immediately closed the case and refused to reopen it. It's hard to believe that many high ranked monks are too blind to see the damage being spread by Phra Dhammachayo and the temple instead of using their authority to punish them and fix a growing problem, they turn a blind eye to it.

When news broke that we're going to have a new Supreme Patriarch soon, I was positive that this problem might be given serious consideration. But, I was disappointed at the revelation that more than half of the eight highest ranked priests in the council, who are likely to be candidates for the top job, are thought to have good connection with Wat Dhammakaya.

I don't know whether their relationships have anything to do with its wealth, but I can only say that my little hope is now seeing a dimmer light at the end of the tunnel (Sanyanusin 2016).

The latest news that put Wat Phra Dhammakaya on the front page of newspapers is a scandal about the embezzlement of the credit union funds at Khlong Chan in 2014. It was reported as a court case and an investigation from the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) on Wat Phra Dhammakaya about a multi-million Baht donation from the former President of the Khlong Chan credit union Cooperative to both the abbot and the temple. The question was whether the donation was to be considered as a credit union customers' investment (Bangkok Post 2015a, Nationmultimedia 2015). Finally, in 2015, the Dhammakaya Temple negotiated the return of 684 million Baht back to the credit union in exchange for dropping the lawsuit (Matichon TV on YouTube 2015). The DSI investigation is still ongoing, even though the credit union dropped the charge.

As Thai people are becoming more and more interconnected due to the advance of digital communication, texts and image sharing on certain controversial issues go viral at times. Recent statistics (tech.thaivisa.com 2015) indicate that, of the total of 64.9 million Thais, active Internet users in Thailand account for 23.9 million (37% of the population), active social media accounts 32 million, mobile connections 97 million (mobile Internet users are 17.7 million or 27% of the population), and active mobile social accounts 28.0 million. The Website also reports that Thai active Internet users spend on average 5.5 h a day on their PC or tablet, and 4 h a day on average on their cell phones. Thais spend on average 3 h and 46 min on social media and watch about 2 h and 46 min spent of television.

Thai Internet users represent the middle class, the “target audience” of the Dhammakaya marketing strategies. Realizing that Internet users do not represent the entire population, this author is still interested in investigating how the Thai middle class receives the Dhammakaya and how Dhammakaya has withstood all the critiques and public scrutiny over the years.

2.2 Objectives of This Study

The objectives are twofold: first, to describe general information related to Dhammakaya online; and second, to critically investigate the discussion online about the Dhammakaya case by using qualitative content analyses.

This study is based on the academic analysis of the worldview, value, symbolic representation, and social organization of Wat Phra Dhammaya via information available online.

2.3 Research Questions

- (1) How are Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the abbot perceived among online users?
- (2) How is the online Dhammakaya case a good case in point of hybridization of the Thai religious culture as a result of the politico-economic influences in the contemporary globalization period?

2.4 Methodology

Internet research was undertaken from March 25, 2015, till January 6, 2016. A Google search using specific keywords such as “Dhammakaya” and “ธรรมกาย” was executed. All news online about Dhammakaya—the temple, doctrine, abbot, scandals, and opinions—posted in the cyber world since 2013 was categorized and analyzed.

A Twitter hashtag search for keywords “Dhammy Dhammakaya” and “Naja Dhammakaya” was undertaken in the same time frame. One anti-Dhammakaya Website, one Twitter account, and eight Facebook pages were studied. Discussion about Wat Phra Dhammakaya on pantip.com and blogs were investigated. Also, one pro-Dhammakaya Website was investigated. Interviews of famous monks and Dhammakaya analyses of P.A. Payutto, V. Vajiramedhi, and Phra Paisal Visalo, who are three intellectual Hinnayana Buddhist monks in Thailand, were studied.

2.5 Findings and Discussion

Quantitative content analysis of Dhammakaya search online

From Table 2.1, we can categorize online information related to Dhammakaya Temple into three types: facts, opinions, and news.

Examples of *facts* are the biography of the abbot (Dhammachayo Bhikku), information about Vijja Dhammakaya (the core of Dhammakaya which is a meditation technique), and facts about Dhammakaya founded by Luang Por Sod (born 1884), a famous monk from Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen (Kom Chad Luek 2015).

Opinions and comments are what follows: (1) criticism about the abbot’s lifestyle, his claimed supernatural abilities, such as claiming to know where Steve Jobs’ ghost resides after his death, and whether the abbot is qualified to be a Buddhist monk; (2) negative comments and opinions from scholars, famous monks, and readers on the temple. invasive marketing strategies to gain donations from the public and the accountability and transparency of the temple; (3) 17

Table 2.1 Results of “ธรรมกาย” (Dhammakaya) keyword search on Google (research undertaken on March 27, 2015 and December 26–29, 2015)

Facts	Biography of abbot	Text	003
		Clip	001
	Vijja Dhammakaya (core of Dhammakaya)	Clip	024
	Facts about Dhammakaya	Text	015
Comments/opinions	Criticism on the abbot	Text	002
		Clips	012
	Negative opinions on the temple from readers/scholars/monks	Text	018
	Anti-Dhammakaya	Websites/Webpages/blogs	017
	Positive comment	Text	001
News	News about activities of the Wat (Temple) Phra Dhammakaya	Text	062
		Clip	003
	News about questionable accountability and transparency of the administration related to the temple and the abbot	Text	056
		Clip	004
	News released from Wat Phra Dhammakaya	Text	009
		Clip	001
Total			216

anti-Dhammakaya online pages (Facebook, Webpages, Websites, and blogs); and (4) one positive comment on the temple. Only one out of forty pieces of comments/opinions is positive.

News about Wat Phra Dhammakaya can be identified as (1) general news about the activities of the temple; (2) news on dubious accountability related to the temple and the abbot during the past scandals and the credit union cooperative at Khlong Chan, which is a current one; (3) and news released from the temple.

From the results, 97 out of 216 pieces of information (44.9%) are negative. On Facebook

From a rough estimation of the *comments/opinions* online, around half of the information referred to the former Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra and his followers. That means that the temple was said to be linked with a populist political party.

Dhammy is the colloquial term by which many Thai Internet users refer to the abbot as it is derived from his title, “Dhammachayo”. From Table 2.2, a hashtag search indicates how Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been on Twitter. Three types of information were found. First, *facts*: the biography of the abbot. Second, *comments/opinions* of which 122 pieces are negative toward the abbot and/or the temple. To elaborate, 35 pieces of information were about the personal appearance and lifestyle of the abbot; 50 pieces of information were critiques on the claimed supernatural ability of the abbot (such as seeing Steve Jobs’ life after death, offering food to the Lord Buddha in Nirvana, and describing how holy-beings in heaven are

Table 2.2 Results of googling #ธัมมีย์ ธรรมกาย (Dhammy Dhammakaya), researched on March 27, 2015

Facts	Biography of abbot	Text	008
Comments/opinions	Criticism on the abbot	Text	035
	Negative opinions on the temple from readers/scholars/monks	Text	037
	Negative opinions/VDO clips criticizing the supernatural ability of the abbot	Text/clips	050
	Sermons of the abbot (about rebirth)	Clips	024
News	News about activities of the Wat (Temple) Phra Dhammakaya	Text	007
	News about questionable accountability and transparency of the administration related to the temple and the abbot	Text	031
	News released from Wat Phra Dhammakaya	Text	005
	News about monk status of the abbot	Text	004
Total			193

dressed); and 37 pieces of information were about the temple, such as the criticism of the ability of Nun or Mae Chee Chan Khonnokyoong, whom the abbot reveres, to cast away the nuclear bomb which was directed toward Thailand to Japan during the Second World War. Third, *news*: 31 out of 40 news pieces were about the questionable accountability and transparency relate to the administration of the temple and the abbot regarding the credit union Cooperative at Khlong Chan case.

“Na ja” is the suffix with which the abbot likes to end his sentences when he speaks to his followers, in a similar way an adult would talk to a child. Such a keyword yields much information about Dhammakaya.

From Table 2.3, this hashtag search indicates three types of information: facts, comments/opinions, and news. One fact is about the biography of the abbot, but the other four pieces are about the history of the temple.

About 70 percent of the comments (110 out of 153 comments) are negative. Mostly, negative opinions are on the core teaching of Dhammakaya (or Vija Dhammakaya), which is, in fact, a meditation technique.

Among the news related to Wat Phra Dhammakaya, 28 out of 34 pieces of news were related to the questionable accountability and transparency of the administration of the temple and the abbot.

Anti-Dhammakaya comments and opinions online are posted on several different social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and blogs. Also Websites that launched negative criticism toward the temple were found. On Facebook, the page “Join us to fight against Wat Phra Dhammakaya and stop materialism for the status quo of Buddhism” (2015) consists of images and explanations why this page is against this temple. Next is the Anti-Dhammakaya Federation page (2015). This page asks the temple to stop selling merits (*bun*, in Thai) to pupils and teachers and

Table 2.3 Results of googling # นวฉฐธรรมาภย (Na ja Dhammakaya); research undertaken on March 27, 2015

Facts	Biography of abbot	Text	001
	History of the temple	Text	004
Comments/opinions	Criticism on the abbot	Text	004
	Negative opinions on the temple from readers/scholars/monks	Text	011
	Negative opinions/VDO clips criticizing the supernatural ability of the abbot	Text/clips	007
	Disclosure of Vijja Dhammakaya (negative)	Text/clips	092
News	News about activities of the Wat (Temple) Phra Dhammakaya	Text	001
	News about questionable accountability and transparency of the administration related to the temple and the abbot	Text	028
	News released from Wat Phra Dhammakaya	Text	001
	News about monk status of the abbot	Text	004
Total			153

stipulates that the core of Dhammakaya did not exist in Buddha’s teaching. Other pages are “*Revelation of Dhammakaya*” (2015) which criticizes the behaviors of the abbot as not in conformity with those of a Buddhist monk and that Dhammakaya is a cult; and “Unmasking Dhammakaya” (2015) which disagrees that the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya acts as an astrologer. Another page is called “X-Phra Dhammakaya” (2012). It follows the lawsuit cases of the temple and comments on the information released by the temple that the preaching of the temple does not conform to the Tripitaka (the Buddhist canon in Pali). Moreover, it criticizes the advertisement of chances to get jewelry in heaven if one donates to the temple. It also displays photographs of important politicians, members of the cabinet, and high-ranked government officials who attend ceremonies of the temple. This affirms that the temple has good relations with the polity of Thailand.

A Twitter account found is the “*Anti-Wat Phra Dhammakaya*” (2015). This account posts links to update the followers with the lawsuit case.

Also Websites that are against the performances of Wat Phra Dhammakaya can be found. See, for instance, Coolcial.com (2015). The main aim of this Website is to advocate to Thai youth to disagree with the teaching of the temple. Another one is DMC (2015). This Website allows the anti- and pro-Dhammakaya members to discuss intellectually. One Website that accused the temple of getting involved with politics is alittlebuddha.com (2015).

Also worth mentioning are online media blogs, such as the campaign against Dhammakaya on *Thai Post* online (2015). Blogs that are against Dhammakaya can be listed as (1): “I hate Dhammakaya” (forum.uamulet.com 2015); and (2) “Why

are we against Dhammakaya” from the Pantip Webboard (2015). Offline campaigns against Dhammakaya were reported in Ranong (esanguide.com 2015). That incident happened when Ranong residents protested against the blocking of roads at Wat Phra Dhammakaya for its march on March 2, 2015 (*Bangkok Post* online 2015b).

From contents online, Wat Phra Dhammakaya shares similarities with other Thai Buddhist temples that sell supranatural power (of amulets, of the abbot, of the meditation technique, etc.). It induces more believers to make merits for one’s own wealth gain. These phenomena manifest the Thai hybridized religious culture explained in Chap. 1. However, the differences displayed by Wat Phra Dhammakaya are (1) the promotion of Nibbana as *atta* (self); (2) the promotion that the abbot is the prophet; (3) the massive wealth gain (multi-million Baht) of the temple such as the encroachment of land of the poor to expand the temple and the invasive marketing strategies to sell merits; (4) the good relations with the Phue Thai political party and the members of the Sangha Council, especially the Acting Supreme Patriarch; and (5) as related to (4), the ability to escape huge financial scandals and the abbot from being disrobed.

Let us start from what makes Dhammakaya notorious online.

- (1) The promotion of Nibbana as *atta*: Teaching of the abbot and messages from Wat Phra Dhammakaya online showed that Nibbana (Pali spelling) or Nirvana (Sanskrit spelling) is a land where Lord Buddha lives after he passed away and the abbot could go there in his meditative body to offer food to Lord Buddha. There is a ritual to offer food to the Lord Buddha at this temple.

Discussion online on the *Pantip website* searched on March 28, 2015. Pantip is a famous discussion forum in the Thai cyberspace. Findings reveal that online users are questioning whether Nibbana or Nirvana or the state of supreme bliss is *atta* (in Pali, *atman* in Sanskrit—meaning personality, ego, soul, or self), according to Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s claim, or not.

2.6 Analysis

Payutto (2008b: 95–103) stated clearly that teaching about *atta* does not conform to what Buddha taught. Actually, there is nothing we can hold on to as we all age, go through phases of change, get sick, and eventually die, either of old age, sickness, or accidents. The world keeps changing and nothing is here to stay. Impermanence or transience (*anicca*) is evident. Buddhists know that the Buddha taught that there is “no self” (*anatta*), and that the doctrine of *anatta* has become a dogma and a component of Buddhist identity (May 1984: 93).

The clinging and attachment to “self” can be explained by the doctrine of causal genesis or 3.Dependent Origination (*Paticca Samuppada*). It can be traced through 12 conditioned factors that we fabricate our “self.” Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) explains the 12 factors as the birth of I and mine (or self) causes ignorance to the truth that the world is transient. That ignorance breeds 10 kinds of unwholesome qualities of the mind or *kilesa*: greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*), conceit (*mana*), speculative views (*ditthi*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), shamelessness (*ahirika*), Doubt (*vicikiccha*) and sloth (*thina*) and lack of moral dread or un-conscientiousness (*anottappa*). That mental formations feed consciousness. Consciousness or *vinna* is a part of the five aggregates or *Panca-khandha* which give us the individual illusory of self (or *atta*). The other four aggregates are as follows: matter (*rupa*), feeling (*vedana*), perception (*sanna*), and mental formation (*sankhara*). The five aggregates constitute six-based self-impression: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind. Those organs make sense contact: vision, hear, smell, taste, touch, and perception. Those six senses cause feelings. Then, those feelings cause craving for sensory cognizable objects, which cause attachment or clinging to sensed objects. The clinging to sensed objects feeds the coming into being of self. That causes the birth of “I” and “mine.” This will go on in our trains of thought ceaselessly.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993), who is revered as the most influential Buddhist philosopher in Thailand, and Phra Brahmaganabhorn or Bhikkhu P. A. Payutto, who is widely regarded as the living expert on Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, studied Suttapitaka as the source of doctrinal authority on different occasions. They both refuted the interpretation of the PS model as the cycle of past, present, and future life or re-becoming (Jackson 2003: 90–91). Bhikkhu (2002: 20) stated clearly that “*Paticcasamuppada* (in his own spelling) is a matter of the highest ultimate truth; it is not a matter of morality. There is no self which travels from life to life and no need to say that one cycle of PS must cover three lifetimes, as understood in the language of relative truth.”

Bhikkhu (2002: 19) affirmed that “this life means the cycle of 3.Dependent Origination; the next life means the next cycle of 3.Dependent Origination, and so on.” The cessation of self can happen any moment of practice in our lifetime. From his arduous Pali studies and interpretation of many ancient books, he came up with a new interpretation as seen in the following chart:

2.7 The 12 Causal Links in the PS Model

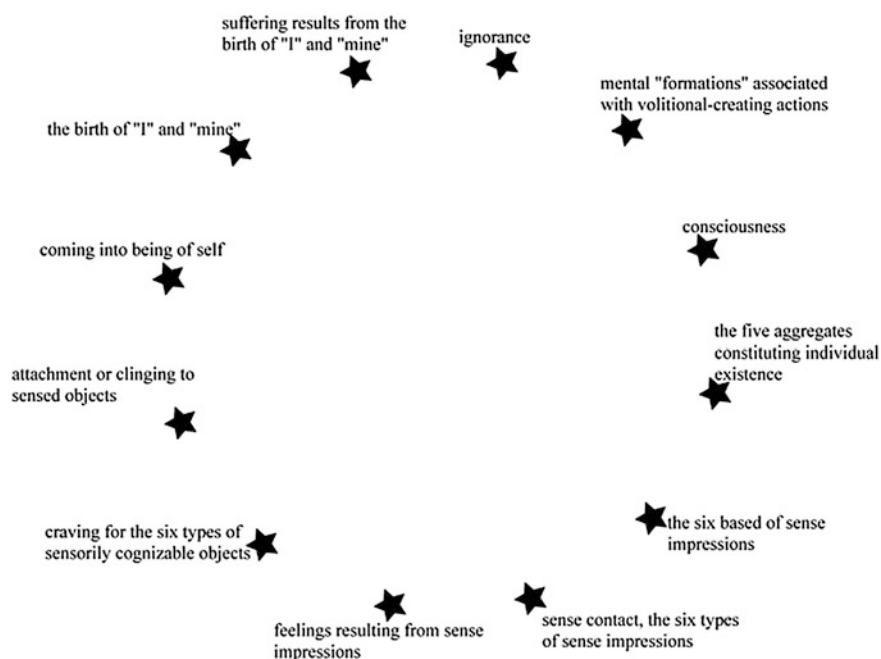


Diagram constructed by Patchanee Malikhao from Jackson (2003:111–119).

“It [PS Model] is a detailed demonstration of how suffering arises and how suffering ceases. It also demonstrated that the arising and ceasing of suffering is a matter of natural interdependence. It is not necessary for angels or holy things, or anything else to help suffering to arise or cease.... The other aspect of [PS Model] is that it demonstrates that there are no sentient beings, persons, selves, we or they here or floating around looking for a next life. Everything is just nature: arising, existing, passing away” (Buddhadasa 2002: 23–24).

This interpretation of Buddhadasa boldly contradicts the traditional interpretation, which has widely mistaken the birth of I, myself, and mine (*atta*) with the birth of a human life and the suffering from the birth of I, myself, and mine (*atta*) with the old age, sickness, and death. Buddhadasa famously stated that “Nirvana here and now,” meaning that one can attain Nirvana in this lifetime as one can be trained to be a selfless person. The ways to the cessation of “the subjective sense of self (or *atta*) together with the self-centered attitudes associated with it,” as Jackson (2003: 116) states, were explained by Buddha as the *four Noble Truths* (Abe 1989: 205–296, Jackson 2003: 132,142, Thomas 1951: 96).

The PS model shows that the becoming of self and the passing away of self are impermanent as long as the mind moves.

From this explanation, *atta* (or self) does not exist in Buddhism. Therefore, there is no *atta* to argue about the state of Nibbana or Nirvana (Payutto 2008a: 105–106).

- (2) The promotion that the abbot is the prophet: This is what online discussants, especially on pantip.com (2015), criticized about. A page on Google Plus is called “*Stop Dhammakaya*” (หยุด!ธรรมกาย 2015). It equates the Dhammakaya as a cult. It criticizes the behavior and clothing of the abbot. Moreover, it denounces the teaching that does not conform to the Buddhist canon.

2.8 Analysis

The claim that Abbot Dhammachayo is a Phra Ton-Thad-Ton- Dham (the Origin of Elements and Dhamma) (Laohavanich 2016a: 5) made Theravadian scholars criticize that Dhammakaya uses the Mahayana Buddhism in the form of Theravada Buddhism for its own financial gain (Scott 2009). Beliefs in Mahayana Buddhism can be explained that all sentient beings can achieve Buddhahood and all have to work compassionately to release other’s sufferings (Buddhist tourism.com 2007). The Ton-Thad-Ton- Dham notion is not quite likely in line with the Mahayana’s beliefs, but in fact, it is in line with the Vajrayana Canon of Tibet which emphasizes the battle between the Army of Light and the Sons of Darkness or Mara and supernatural power (Laohavanich 2016a: 5, 2016b). Dhammakaya already offers different ways of rites and rituals other than those of mainstream Thai Theravada Buddhism, such as the pilgrimage in the urban area, offering food to Buddha in Nirvana land, and procession of Visakha the female disciple of Buddha. The Vijja Dhammakaya or the core of Dhammakaya offers a different path from how Lord Buddha used to attain enlightenment. It is a meditation technique that Luang Por (Rev.) Sod from Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen rediscovered; it is a visualization meditation technique (Scott 2009: 147–148). This technique is one of the 40 plus tranquil meditation techniques known before the emergence of Theravada Buddhism. Lord Buddha was the one who discovered the meditation technique called “insight meditation” or “*anapanasti*—breathing meditation” to kill the *kilesa* or defilements completely by reflecting upon the *trilakkana* (*dhukka*—suffering, *anicca*—impermanence, and *anatta*—non-self) of all beings (Budsas.org 1988). However, the abbot of Wat Luang Por Sodh Dhammakayaram, which is a separate temple from Wat Phra Dhammakaya but originated from Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen, claims that Vijja Dhammakaya meditation technique is an insight meditation as well through the visualization and wisdom technique (Phra Rajyanvisith¹ 2011: 36–137).

¹1 The abbot of Wat Luang Por Sodh Dhammakayaram in Ratchaburi Province.

- (3) Massive wealth gain, land encroachment, etc: Even though Wat Phra Dhammakaya is not much different from the majority of Wats in Thailand that offer magic monks, amulets, holy figurines and statues, mantra, tattoos, etc., the temple was accused of its invasive marketing technique via online and mass communications of the temple. Online users discussed whether the marketing strategies of Wat Phra Dhammakaya conform to what Buddha taught, i.e., the more money one donates to the temple, the more merit points one will gain in life; paying-by-installment merit making to the temple is also accepted; and selling heaven to donators. Furthermore, the temple has had many lawsuit cases because villagers were evicted or the temple encroached on public land for its own expansion.

2.9 Analysis

Mediatization and commercialization of Thai Buddhism, as a result of modernization in the contemporary globalization period explained by Malikhao (2015: 124–143), have continued to feed the sense of self. Malikhao (2012, 2015) reports that Thai religious culture has been affected by the media in a long run (also known as the mediatization process of Thai religious culture), which can be seen in the proliferation of cults, practices, and beliefs. The perception of self feeds instant gratification according to the Paticca Samuppada wheel. Then, craving and lust or wanting to be or wanting not to be arises.

The Thai hybridized religious culture, analyzed by using Servaes' (1999: 12) four interrelated analytical components: a worldview (*Weltanschauung*), a value system, a system of symbolic representations, and a social-cultural organizational system, reveals that Wat Phra Dhammakaya Temple manifests the outlook of modernity but the content is the same old cocktail animism–Brahmanism–Theravada Buddhism. Cleanliness and orderliness of the temple, as a symbolic representation of modernity, can draw many middle-class believers. Marketing strategies to draw in public to make merit by advocating on amount of merit points one gets in life depends on the amount of money one donates to Dhammakaya, the portrayal of heaven, organized activities such as mass pilgrimage, etc. are the “brand” that the temple has been creating for the past 30 years. As Ekachai (2016) reports about the branding image of Dhammakaya:

It focuses on orderliness, cleanliness, and grandeur. This strikes a chord with the middle class and the new rich who believe in supernatural powers but want a temple with a modern look and style to suit their worldly status. The fund-raising groups also give followers a sense of community in a big city, not to mention the business connections that come with it. In short, Dhammakaya answers the needs which the irrelevant clergy fails to do.

Another point of criticism is about the pictures on the catalogue, “the spell-bound charm of heaven,” printed by Wat Phra Dhammakaya about jewelry-adorned accessories the donators will receive when they die and go to

heaven (Dhammachayo 2005). The abbot also talked about these accessories on television (Phu Jud Karn 2015). In this regard, stated Phra Paisal Visalo, an intellectual Thai Theravada monk, this kind of merit making does not happen to polish our greed and cravings at all. To the contrary, it creates more greed and craving. This kind of teaching does not conform to what Buddha taught (Visalo interview in Prachatai.com 2015).

Phra Paisal Visalo (Phu Jud Karn 2015) in his interview with the Phu Jud Karn newspaper indicates that merit-making messages from Wat Phra Dhammakaya do not conform to what Buddha taught.

The right kind of dana in Buddhism (Suppurissadana) comprises (1) giving away clean things; (2) giving away delicate things; (3) giving away at the right time; (4) giving away an appropriate gift; (5) giving away with conscience; (6) giving away often; (7) when giving away, the mind will be crystal clear; (8) after giving away, the mind will be blissful. By the way, giving away material things or dana is only one kind of merit making. Many kinds of merit making do not require money at all, such as adhering to the Five Precepts (abstain from killing, lying, stealing, committing adultery, drinking intoxicants), praying or meditating, listening to sermons/Dhamma, being modest, having a right view. All of the aforementioned merits are much greater than giving away money.

But giving away money to temples, instead of organization for the good course, seems to be habits of Thais in general. This belief that one can accumulate merits to become a richer person in the next life or can be traced back in the Mahapadana sutta or Dhammapada Nisaya, the text used in Northern India (Scott 2009: 29–31). Wat Phra Dhammakaya is not different from other popular temples, but it amplifies this value with the branding of “the more you give, the more you reap in your next life.”

Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s giving away amulets or Buddha image inscribed as “Dood Sap” (inducing assets) to big donors is a symbolic representation of the animistic element of Thai religious culture. Wealth gain of the temple through donation and merit making are part of the sociocultural system of the Thai religious culture. “Gaining wealth if you donate more” is already established as the worldview of popular Thai Buddhists. Wat Phra Dhammakaya just dares say it obviously and promotes these beliefs through their communication channels: the Internet, TV, radio, mailing lists, merit representatives, etc.

However, what Wat Phra Dhammakaya advertised through its own media about the supranatural ability of nuns from this temple who could fly to brush off the atomic bomb heading to Thailand to Japan during the Second World War (2Bangkok.com 2002), and that of the abbot himself who claimed that he could meet Steve Jobs after his death in heaven (2Bangkok.com 2012) and could go to offer food to Lord Buddha in the Nirvana land (Scott 2009: was ridiculed and severely criticized online and in the main stream mass media. These messages come directly from the temple, not from the followers or the mainstream media. That put Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the category of promoting a wrong worldview which was not approved by Lord Buddha.

- (4) Good relations with the Phue Thai political party and the members of the Sangha Council, especially the Acting Supreme Patriarch:

Thai Buddhism institutions have undergone a reform to be under the state control since the reign of King Rama V (Scott 2009: 59). The 1962 Act is a symbolic representation of the hierarchical value that puts the Sangha Council (Buddhist monk body) to govern the monks with the Supreme Patriarch at the top of the chain of command (Scott 2009). Thai Buddhist monks have ranking and titles deferring to the central authority from Bangkok.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya was known to have a good relationship with the former Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party or now Phue Thai (PT) party of the deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. According to the Nationmultimedia.com (2006), the leaders of the political party and the Temple are both shrewd investors, bold to take new risks, fond of modern technology, modernity, and capitalism. Mr. Thaksin was praised by the Temple as a good example of the person who made good merits in the past life and, therefore, he became a billionaire in this life and the Temple began to support a candidate from the TRT party since 2000 (Nationmultimedia.com 2006).

Wat Phra Dhammakaya belongs to the Mahanikaya of Theravada Buddhism. The relationship between Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen was dated back since the ordination of Abbot Dhammachayo whose preceptor is the current Somdet Phra Ratchamangalajarn, the abbot of Wat Pak Nam Phasi Charoen. Monks from Mahanikaya have been invited to attend or preside over ceremonies organized by Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

(5) As related to (4), the ability to escape huge financial scandals and the abbot from being disrobed:

The National Reform Council's (NRC) committee on religious affairs stated that that Abbot Dhammachayo violated the Buddhist monks' code of conduct (Patimokkha) (Bangkokpost.com 2015c). It cited a letter, dated on April 26, 1999, written by the late Supreme Patriarch, His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, who listed two infringements by Abbot Dhammachayo: (1) distortion of Buddhist doctrines which causes conflicts between Buddhist monks; and (2) reluctance to transfer 1500 rais of land which was donated to him by his followers to Wat Phra Dhammakaya (Bangkokpost.com 2015c). The letter was sent to the Supreme Sangha Council (SSC), but the SSC did not defrock abbot Dhammachayo. Again for the scandal of the Khlong Chan credit union, the SSC affirmed on February 10, 2016, that it would not consider pursuing the Dhammakaya case (Thairath 2016).

The Dhammakaya controversy reflects the crisis within the weak Supreme Sangha Council that tolerates any deviation from teaching and practicing Theravada Buddhism. Dhammakaya belongs to the Mahanikaya Order of Theravada Buddhism but it does not promote the core of Theravada Buddhism, such as the Buddhist dogma of anatta. The Sangha did not rule that Dhammakaya is a deviant of Theravada Buddhism. [Another order of Theravada Buddhism is the stricter Dhammayutti-nikaya Order, established during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV); the Dhammayutti monks dress themselves differently and are stricter in their

Dhamma practice but they adhere to the same Buddha’s teaching as the Mahanikaya].

Dhammaya is a good example of networking between the Supreme Sangha Council, high-ranked monks from provinces, a political party, politicians, high-ranked civil servants, and multi-millionaires/investors. Ekachai (2016) in her article, entitled “Supreme Patriarch Row won’t help Clergy” in *Bangkok Post online*, states clearly how Dhammakaya has withstood all the frictions and controversies:

The temple’s close connections with the elders explain why the Sangha Council did not follow through with the late Supreme Patriarch’s ruling against Phra Dhammachayo, on claims of divisive teaching and theft, which could have led to his defrockment.

Its close connections with political and business elites also explain why so many lawsuits against Dhammachaya on public fraud never stick. It is no secret that the key candidate, Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangalacharn, the abbot of Wat Paknam, is close to Dhammakaya. But so are several other members of the Sangha Council.

The wealthy Dhammakaya has no problem pampering the elders who also view Dhammakaya’s expansion overseas as a global expansion of Thai Theravada Buddhism without the Sangha having to lift a finger. Dhammakaya scholarships to monks over the years have also expanded the movement’s support base nationwide. If the next Supreme Patriarch is a Dhammakaya supporter, it is feared the controversial sect will take over the whole Sangha. Distorted Buddhist teaching will be institutionalized and the allocation of the much sought-after clerical ranks will be also decided by Dhammakaya, giving it total control over the clergy.

Phra Paisal Visalo (Phu Jud Karn 2015) affirms what Ekachai reports in his interview that Dhammakaya (affiliated to the Mahanikaya Order) has been inviting senior monks from the Mahanikaya Order and members of the Supreme Sangha Council to its ceremonies for the past 30 years. The relationship is good, and they have common interests. No wonder that those monks have a positive attitude toward the temple. Currently, Somdet Phra Maha Ratchamangkalacharn, from the Mahanikaya Order, is acting Supreme Patriarch and that would give more “soft power” to the temple.

Dhamakaya was counted as one of the morality boost camps by Prachatai.com (2015), which include Santi-Asoke, Col. Chamlong Srimuang (former Governor of Bangkok), Phra Payom Kalayano, and 264 more organizations. These groups were united in protesting against the Thai Beverage Company, the brewer of Chang Beer, to be registered as a public company. Prachatai also speculated that the conservative or morality camps will support the revision of the 2007 draft constitution (especially measures 9, 21, and 22 to strengthen penalties for those who violate Buddhism, Buddhist leaders, or Buddhist institutions). Prachatai argues that these will violate the right of expression of the people in criticizing Buddhism.

2.10 Conclusion

To answer the two research questions, first, Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the abbot were perceived as negative among online users. The temple was perceived as influential and linked with a major political party and the members of the Supreme Sangha Council. As a result, the temple and the abbot survived scandals and accusations. The relationship between the temple and politics, including the Sangha politics, indicates that Wat Phra Dhammakaya possesses “soft power” which makes it withstand criticism and avoid court cases.

Dhammakaya is a good case to study the hybridization of the Thai religious as a result of politico-economic influences. Marketing strategies, such as enticing the public to donate more and more for heavenly life after death, or persuading the public to make merits on the mass pilgrimage in the urbanized areas, and so on, are what the temple has been implementing for the past 30 years. This is obviously a merging of consumerism and Thai Buddhism. Hence, the second research question is answered.

Well noted that when the Phue Thai party was in power, many lawsuits against Dhammakaya were dropped. At the time of writing this article, under the new military government, the DSI is still investigating the case of Dhammakaya, even though the SSC did not want to do anything.

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