

Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>
Volume 19, 2012

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Esoteric Teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakāya

Mano Mettanando Laohavanich¹

Abstract

Thailand's controversial Wat Phra Dhammakāya has grown exponentially. In just three decades, it has come to have millions of followers in and outside of Thailand and over forty branches overseas. The esoteric teaching of meditation taught by the leaders of the community has inspired thousands of young men and women from various universities to sacrifice their lives to serve their Master, something that has never been seen before in Thailand or elsewhere in the Theravāda world. What is the nature of this esoteric teaching? Why is it so appealing to these young minds? These questions are discussed and analyzed by the author, who was one of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's founding members.

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The rise of Wat Phra Dhammakāya as a well-organized urban Buddhist movement is undeniably unique in the history of Thailand. After three and a half decades, the *wat* is now a well-established international center of Buddhist movements. In addition to millions of followers in Thailand, it has over forty branches overseas, two satellite television stations broadcasting in four languages, and plans to construct an international university. All these achievements were possible without governmental support. In fact, they were gained through continuous struggles by the members of the *wat* under the leadership of Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo, taking on public criticism in the media, state interventions, juridical authority, and even injunctions of the top administrators of the ecclesiastical community of Thailand.

Even during the 1970's, the first decade of the *wat*, it was able to attract a huge mass of students to join its activities. Because the Cold War in Thailand was at its peak, the military highly suspected that the *wat* was involved with communism. The second decade saw a massive expansion of the community into neighboring areas. Thousands of acres of land were purchased for wide scale expansion of its physical territory, incurring protests and demonstrations from local farmers. The third decade saw the *wat's* involvement with grandiose financial investments, massive fund raising, and scandal over its mysterious administration. No Buddhist community in Thailand hit by similar scandals has managed to do more than just to survive, but Wat Phra Dhammakāya has continued to thrive.

Critics of the monastery often focus on the power of the financial management of the *wat* and the administration skills of its leaders as the source for its achievement. Its teaching of *Dhammakāya* meditation is simply judged as unorthodox. However, those with experience in the community know that the authority of its leadership is based on the charisma of Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo which is in turn endorsed by

the myths of esoteric teachings of *Dhammakāya* meditation. Legends about him and esoteric anecdotes he selectively delivers to his core followers are the foundation of his identity. Consequently, his words are taken as commandments.

Some of these legends, stories of miracles, and esoteric teachings are parts of the original teaching of the late abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen (Phra Monkhol-thep-muni), passed along by Phra Dhammajayo. When they are combined with the community discipline employed by the leadership of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, they create what may be the most charismatic Buddhist leadership that has ever existed.

I was once an insider and one of the leaders in the board of administration of the *wat* who in 1989-90 successfully reformed the structure of the organization. I am also a scholar of Buddhism and the history of world religions. This gives me a unique perspective but also makes me take extra care in what I am about to present. I believe there is academic value in bringing to the attention of international scholars and theologians the esoteric teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, which is apparently a new body of knowledge. Nevertheless, I have also realized the burden of impartiality that I should take as a scholar and the necessity to move away from prejudice and bias, pros and cons, in the issues which have deeply affected the course of my own life. This paper is, therefore, written with the intention neither to discredit nor to support Wat Phra Dhammakāya and its leadership, but to present the content of teaching which once I so deeply shared with other members of the Dhammakāya community in a way as impartial and objective as possible.

Short History of Wat Phra Dhammakāya

Wat Phra Dhammakāya was one of the offshoots of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, the mother monastery in Bangkok where the *Dhammakāya* method of meditation was founded by the abbot, Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, who passed away on February 3, 1959.² After the death of the abbot, one of the meditation masters of Wat Paknam was Machee Chan Khon-nok-yoong. In spite of her illiteracy, she was able to attract the attention of young university students, one of whom was Mr. Chaiboon Sitthiphol, ordained in 1969 and thereafter known as Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo. Within a few years, the number of the disciples of Machee Chan grew and registered under Baan-Thammapasit Foundation within the boundary of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen.

In 1972, they settled down on a piece of land of around 80 acres in Pathum Thani, about 40 kilometers north of Bangkok, with the intention of establishing an ideal Buddhist community based on the ideology of *Dhammakāya* meditation. Their new community was then called Soon-phuttha-cak-pathibattham, based on a certain technical term in the esoteric meditation of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*, although its name was later changed to Wat Vorani-Dhammakāya-ram, in honor of the land donor. In 1981, the name was permanently changed to Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

The first success of the community was its summer meditation retreat program for university students called “*Thammathāyād*” (Pali: *dhammadāyāda*, a common term in the Tipiṭaka for the heir of the Dhamma). Through this program they attracted new recruits most of whom soon became permanent members. Many young trainees who passed the program committed themselves as disciples of *Dhammakāya* meditation; many were ordained as permanent members of Soon-

² Another famous center of *Dhammakāya* Meditation is Wat Loung-phor-soth-Dhammakāya-ram, Damnuensaduak, Rajchaburi which was established in 1982, supported by Phra Bhavanakosol Thera, a senior monk of Wat Paknam and the abbot of Wat Saket.

phutthacak-patibattam, which is now known as Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

The *wat* grew hand in hand with its criticisms. Opinion on Wat Phra Dhammakāya is sharply divided into those who love it and those who hate it. For decades, the community has been the target of criticism for its massive fund raising, capitalist attitude, involvements with businesses, and unorthodox teachings. The biggest scandals have been the charges against its Abbot, first Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo, and currently Phra Phromayantha,³ for public fraud and embezzlement.

During the last week of August 2006, all charges against Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo were dropped by the Attorney General because of the political influence of the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, less than a month before the coup of September 19th. This outcome caused publishers in Thailand to hesitate before publishing any criticism against the leader of the *wat*. Currently, the community is still growing, at both local and international levels, even more successfully than ever before.

Different Layers of Teachings to Newcomers

The strength of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is not, as most outsiders suppose, its massive land and financial assets or its highly organized mass of followers. It is the sophisticated layers of myths and anecdotes, told and retold among members of the community to newcomers. The stories not only hold them together as a community but also inspire them to work together as troops in a highly organized institution under the commands of the Abbot. Unlike other Buddhist communities in Thailand where the teachings of the master remain open to the public, Wat Phra Dhammakāya is built upon rings of esoteric teachings of “*Vijjā*

³ Phra Phromayantha is his name due to his current position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Thailand, given to him on December 5, 2011. During the trial he was Phra Ratbhavanavisuth.

Dhammakāya” established by the late abbot of Wat Pak Nam Bhasicharoen, Phra Monkhol-thep-muni (Soth Chandasaro).

Most newcomers to the *wat* are impressed by the tidiness, highly disciplined and well-organized ceremonies, and publications of professional quality of the *wat*, in contrast to which most *wats* in Thailand are rather unorganized and amateurish. It is the only place in Thailand where every lay person is dressed in white, where all staff members wear uniforms specific to their assignments, and where everyone knows exactly their place and their goal in life. Its elementary meditation teaching is a combination of a simple mediation technique which comprises visualization of a crystal ball or a crystal Buddha image at the level of 2 finger-breaths above the navel around the middle part of the body, and the use of the universal mantra: *sammā-araham*.

The elementary teaching of Buddhism at the *wat* does not contain anything contradictory to the conventional Buddhism of Thailand. The *wat* teaches the precepts and practices of charity, morality, and meditation which leads to the attainment of *nibbāna* as an *arahat* (an enlightened disciple of the Buddha) and *Pacceka-buddha* (a Fully Enlightened Buddha but without teaching ability). At that level, the *wat* also endorses a worldview that everything in life comes through the Law of Karma: the good are always awarded with happiness whereas the evil are punished. (However, the *wat* is the Ultimate Field for merit making.)

When the newcomer has gained sufficient faith in the leadership of the *wat*, s/he will be introduced to a higher level of the teaching of *Vijjā Dhammakāya* where the conventional knowledge of Buddhism becomes almost insignificant. Personal enlightenment is no longer the goal of each person’s life. *Nibbāna* is not the final destiny of life. Through the knowledge of *Dhammakāya*, the inner body of enlightenment or the True Self of each person, there is another higher abode and bliss that is superior to *nibbāna*.

Esoteric Teaching of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni: *Vijjā Dhammakāya*

Phra Monkhol-thep-muni discovered his own *Dhammakāya* on the full moon night during the middle of the rain retreat of 1916 at the main shrine hall of Wat Bangkhuvien. This, he said, allowed him to bring back the original teaching of the Buddha, the so-called *Vijjā Dhammakāya*. According to his description, a bright crystal ball that he saw in meditation in the early morning of that day led his consciousness further inside to discover the Body of Enlightenment of the Buddha, after passing through layers of inner refined bodies one inside of the other. These bodies are the interior dimensions of human existence. *Dhammakāya Arahat* is a genderless body which transcends all impure existences and is the True Self of individuals. It is the living Buddha within, tangible and permanent like a huge living crystal Buddha sitting in deep meditation. The distance between its kneecaps is 20 fathoms.⁴

Nibbāna, according to Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, is not an abstract entity but rather an abode: a huge shining crystal sphere with a diameter of 141,330,000 *yojanas*⁵ and a surrounding shell of 15,120,000 *yojanas*.⁶ The lower rim of *Nibbāna* is located three times above the length of the diameter of the Three Worlds. *Nibbāna* is habited only by *Dhammakāyas* of the Buddhas of the past, present and future.

The description above was not an overnight discovery of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni. Convinced by his own spiritual experience, he set up a meditation workshop closed to the public exclusively for advanced students who have attained *Dhammakāya*. Selected insiders meditated twenty-four hours a day, the day being divided into six four-hour shifts.

⁴ "Fathom" is translated from "wā" the longest distance between two extended arms, a measurement in traditional Siamese scale.

⁵ A *yojana* is an Indian scale of measurement, approximately 16 kilometers.

⁶ Khu-mue-somphan as an appendix of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, *Biography and Achievements*, Wat Loung Phor Soth -dhmamaakayaram, First Publication, November 2543 BE (AD 2000) p. 315

Each shift was led by a master.⁷ The workshop was named “the Factory for Knowledge Making” (*Rong-ngān-tam-wichā*) or *Rong-ngan* in short, on the merit that it produced new knowledge of *Vijjā Dhammakāya* to the world. It was here that meditation masters were trained and where the most esoteric teachings of *Dhammakāya* meditation originated.

Advanced disciples of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni identified most activities in the Factory as healing services, prompted by requests to the abbot from families of patients. The healing work was done through prayers to the power of Buddhas in *Nibbāna*. However, most advanced masters in *Dhammakāya* meditation agreed that Phra Monkhol-thep-muni was searching for the final knowledge to enable him to switch off the control of the “Dark Force,” the *Māras*. He strongly believed that winning the final battle against the *Māras* would lead to the collective enlightenment of all of *saṃsāra* in his lifetime.

It is clear from the published sermons of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni that he considered himself to be the One sent forth to this world by *Phra Ton-thād* to destroy the *Māras*. The following is a famous quotation in one of his sermons, published by Wat Loungphor-Soth-Dhammakāyārām on October 7, 1955:

The most moral are the Buddhas; the most evil the *Māras*. After ordination I have found that *Phra Ton-thād* has commanded me to reincarnate to destroy the *Māras*. As long as they are not defeated, I will be still fighting to the end of my life here at Wat Paknam.⁸

⁷ Disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakāya believe that Maechee Chan was one of the masters leading the shift and she was the most advanced student of the late abbot. However, surviving members of the Factory confirm otherwise.

⁸ Biography of the abbot of Wat Paknam, Phra Monkhol-thep-muni (Soth Chandasaro), Wat Loung-phor-Soth Dhammakāyaram, Damnuensadueak, Racha-buri. This was the sermon celebrating the abbot’s birth, transcribed by Mrs. Chalaem Usubharatna, firstly published by Wat Paknam Bhasichaoren in the book *Rueng Thamnakai* (Dhammakāya) in 2499BE (A.D. 1956).

He taught that *Phra Ton-thād* is the Creator of *Nibbāna*, the heavens, and the Earth, as well as all *Dhammakāyas* of the Light. The *Māras* to which he refers are not the same as *Māras* in the biography of the Buddha as understood in the Buddhist tradition nor are they any of the five categories of *Māras* described in the commentary of the Venerable Buddhaghosa. They are the *Dhammakāyas* of Darkness who are the archrivals of the *Dhammakāyas* of the Light. Our human existence and the world are the battlefields between the two cosmic enemies. When the battle is won, the entire cosmic existence will reveal its true nature; i.e., the whole of humankind and all other living creatures will turn into *Dhammakāyas* of the Light. He himself plays the crucial role in this battle.

Phra Dhammajayo, the leader of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, stated that *he* was actually the *Phra Ton Thād Ton Tham* who commanded Phra Monkhol-thep-muni to lead the Cosmic Army in the Final War. Realizing that Phra Monkhol-thep-muni could not finish his assignment,⁹ he himself reincarnated to lead the Troops of the Dharma in the final cosmic battle.

The theology of Wat Phra Dhammakāya is a revolution in Theravada Buddhism, transforming it into a theological religion. It shifts the paradigm of reality towards a collective enlightenment in which the whole of cosmic existence is the battlefield between the Sons of Light, the Bright *Dhammakāyas*, against the Sons of Darkness, the *Dhammakāyas* of Darkness or *Māras*. To be a Buddha, according to the *Dhammakāya* meditation, is no longer a difficult task, as it is commonly understood in mainstream Theravāda Buddhism; it is seen as a small issue compared to the aim of the Founder of *Dhammakāya* meditation, which is to liberate the entire *samsāra* in his life through the Victory of the *Dhammakāyas* in the Last Cosmic Battle of the Universe.

⁹ Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun (Sermchai Jayamaṅgala P.T.6) *Tobpanhā-Thammapatibat* (Meditation Practices: Q&A), Wat Loung Phor Soth-dhammakāyāram, June 2542 BE (AD 1999); พระภาวนาวิสุทธิคุณ (เสริมชัย ชยมงกุล ป.ธ.๖) คอบบปัญหาธรรมปฏิบัติ วัดหลวงพ่อสตรธรรมกายาราม พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 1 มิถุนายน 2542, p. 458-460.

Genesis According to *Vijjā Dhammakāya*

The Knowledge of the Beginning is a subject the Buddha addressed in the *Aggaññasutta* (in the *Dīgha Nikāya*). However, the Buddha’s story, which describes how radiant beings lost their pleasant life-forms and became humans due to greed and violence, was plainly an allegory. Buddhism has no myth of the Prime Cause as described in the Bible or the *Ṛgveda*.

What Wat Phra Dhammakāya calls “Refined *Dharma*” are stories and esoteric anecdotes. They cover several topics: the miracles of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni; the Genesis (i.e., how *saṃsāra* and the Cosmic Battle of *Dhammakāya* came into existence); the nature of the *Dhammakāyas* of Darkness, the *Māras*; the Cosmic Battle between the Light and Darkness; the formation of the Army of the *Dharma*; what he saw by his *Dhammakāya* in his meditation; the severe punishment that those who abandon the *wat* or are expelled by the *wat* will receive in their after-lives; the amount of merit gained by serving him or by being a soldier in the Army of the *Dharma*; his true identity; Machee Chan and Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, the founder of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*, etc.

The listening disciples are naturally overjoyed and proud that they are the chosen ones. They are willing to serve him as soldiers in the benevolent Cosmic Army of the Light. Many certainly are willing to sacrifice everything, including their lives, to fulfill the wishes of the Venerable Dhammajayo.

On two occasions, in 1979 and 1980, Ven. Phra Dhammajayo, the Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, told me in private meetings the story of the beginning of *saṃsāra*. On the first occasion it was a story retold by a senior monk who as a young novice had heard it directly from the mouth of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni who was talking while pacing up and down at the *wat* one evening.¹⁰ On the second occasion, the story came

¹⁰ The setting is very similar to that of the *Aggaññasutta*.

from a hand-written manuscript of the Abbot, who allowed me to read it on May 17th, as my birthday present. The story was as follows:

In the beginning there was nothing but complete emptiness. Suddenly, a huge dazzlingly bright Dhammakāya, who was later called *Phra Ton-thād*, appeared. It was the first and foremost entity that emerged before everything; its brightness is greater than anything that has been or will be. Almost immediately, another Dhammakāya appeared, it was identical in shape and size, but with absolute darkness. It was darker than any darkness that has been or will be. Almost simultaneously another Dhammakāya appeared, identical in shape and size but with the color of well-polished lead. The three Dhammakāyas were the Prime Origins of all that have been and will be. Then each of them multiplied themselves to win over the others but no party could conquer over the rest. Those who had more refined awareness were able to annihilate those who were less refined. It was the start of the Cosmic War.

Nibbāna was created by the Light as the resting abode, followed by the heavenly abodes and lastly worldly existences. The first generation of the human ancestors was then created. Their bodies were refined and genderless with their sole mission to enter into deepest level of consciousness and annihilate the Dhammakāyas of Darkness. At first the strategy worked well, but later it was found to have a flaw. These celestial human beings were easily destroyed by the Dark Force. Another strategy was then developed: a new generation of human beings. They were designed to have bodies composed of gross

elements. They are womb-born and procreated by sexual intercourse. To achieve this, two Dhammakāyas reincarnated from *nibbāna* and assumed body of the flesh as a man and woman. They copulated and gave birth to the first members of the human race. Finishing their assignment, the two Dhammakāyas transcended the material world back to *nibbāna* again.

The new strategy also worked well in the first place, but later turned to have another flaw. Since their bodies were composed of gross physical elements, they are subjected to illness and death, the condition imposed by the Dark Dhammakāyas.

Further, they generated mental defilements, conditions which lead humankind to generate unwholesome karmic activities. Because of the karma, the cycle of rebirth and re-death of *saṃsāra* came into existence. Human beings are then trapped in the system; their consciousness clouded with defilement and their bodies are vulnerable to disease and death. Apart from this, the dark force is also responsible for natural disasters for the humankind, such as earth quakes, plagues, wars, etc.

To encounter the evil plans of the Dark Force, the Dhammakāyas of the Light created herbs and plants to cure diseases, and inspire new scientific discoveries and creativities among people. Scientists, doctors, and artists are successful through the inner inspiration of the Light. Some were then empowered by the Light to work as *bodhisattvas* and to be enlightened as Buddhas and help people to find their way to *nibbāna*. The *nibbāna* they

attain, however, is not final. Nevertheless, they are still under the control of the Dark Force.

In order to end the Trans-cosmic War, *Phra Ton-thād* sent down a special task force, the Troops of the Light which are millions of *Dhammakāyas* all of great power, led by two brightest among them who serve as their commander to fight the last battle.

Venerable Dhammajayo added that there were countless troops of the *Dhammakāyas* of the Light who reincarnated to fight the last battle. The troops were organized into four Divisions: the Warriors, whose duty is to wage war against the *Māras* or the Dark *Dhammakāyas*; the Propagators, whose duty is to propagate *Vijjā Dhammakāya*; the Constructors, whose duty is to build and amend physical structures of the buildings for the troops; and lastly the Suppliers, lay people whose duty is to fund the mission.¹¹

After I left Wat Phra Dhammakāya I did comparative studies on this esoteric myth of the genesis and I found that most Dharma masters from Wat Paknam shared a similar Gnostic ideology that the universe is the battlefield between the *Dhammakāyas* of the Light and Darkness who they also identified as *Māras*. However, none of them confirm the last part of the tale—that there were troops of *Dhammakāyas* dispatched by the Primordial *Dhammakāya* of the Light, or that there were two field commanders of the *Dhammakāyas* to fight the last battle. This bit was apparently an interpolation of the Venerable Dhammajayo.

Furthermore, the ending of the tale was altered sometime after my graduation from Oxford, around 1990. There were no longer two leaders of *Dhammakāyas*, but only one, who became Phra Monkhol-thep-

¹¹ . The plot of the Cosmic War is obviously a blend of two famous films, *The Matrix* and *Star Wars* (MacKenzie 157-168).

muni. However, it was *Phra Ton-thād* himself who reincarnated as the Venerable Dhammajayo who is the Commander-in-chief of all *Dhammakāyas* to terminate the *Māras*. He also has authority to empower anyone, no matter how good or wicked, to attain *Dhammakāya* or to be enlightened at any level if he so wishes. In this new scenario, the respected abbot that I knew was none other but the Avatar of the All Mighty God, the Creator of *Nibbāna*, Heavens, and Earth!

However, the Refined Dharma stories of the Master of Wat Phra Dhammakāya were sometimes contradicted. For instance, in the case of Phra Dhammajayo revealing to his disciples that he was *Phra Ton-thād*, who commanded Phra Monkhol-thep-muni to destroy the *Māras* and who later reincarnated as Phra Dhammajayo to continue the fight, another master of *Dhammakāya* meditation, Phramahā Sermchai Jayamaṅgala or Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun, contradicted this claim in a response to a question in the book *Tobpanhā-Thammapatibat (Meditation Practices: Q&A)* published in 1999.

Q: If a monk who is a Dharma Master reveals himself to his disciples that he is the *Phra Ton-thād* or Primordial Buddha who can grant the attainment of *Dhammakāya* to any person he wishes, can this be possible? If it is not possible, is the monk telling lies?

A: To answer your question, I have to approach it in two ways:

Firstly, if a monk reveals himself that he is *Phra Ton-thād* who has authority to grant the attainment of *Dhammakāya* to any person. This is not possible How can a disciple of the Grand Master the Late Abbot of Wat Paknam be superior to him? If he so claims, ask the venerable to prove his claim by flying. . . .

Secondly, since he is a monk, by passing the message and making it understood to the second person, according to the Vinaya, he has broke the Pārājika Rule (He is no longer a monk). (Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun 458-460)

Timing is a key factor for successful delivery of the Refined Dharma anecdotes to the audience. They are meant to be told to selected faithful as inspiration for a new assignment or during exclusive retreats after long meditation sessions. In the latter case, the mind of the audience is peaceful and open for any new message of faith. These esoteric messages also symbolize the supremacy of the leader of the *wat* in advanced *Dhammakāya* meditation where no other schools of meditation can claim authority.

Primordial Buddha: Power of Righteousness, Authority of the Abbot

Southeast Asia has long been under the influence of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. This has been the mainstream of Buddhist practice in Siam for no less than seven hundred years. The concept of *Phra Ton Thād* is not new in Buddhism; it was shared with some followers of Vajrayāna Buddhism who believed that the universe was created by the *ādi-Buddha* or Mahāvairocana Buddha. Historically, the belief may be seen as a relic of Yogācāra in early Siam which resurfaced in the Twentieth Century. However, the theology of *Vijjā Dhammakāya* is extreme. To liberate the whole of *saṃsāra* through the defeat of all the *Māras* in the Last Battle between Light and Darkness, this to be achieved not in the remote future, but in this very life, is new not only to Theravāda Buddhism but to the entire Buddhist religion.

The gnostic theology of *Dhammakāya* has strongly appealed to those members of the community who see the world in black and white: their abbot is the Center of the Universe, the Creator of *Nibbāna*, the

Heavens, and the Earth. The law of karma can no longer be applied to him. The years of turbulence he endured are seen as the works of Māra upon him. Accordingly, all these serious troubles are signs of his importance as the leader of this cosmic existence.

It will be unfair to the leadership of Wat Phra Dhammakāya to imply that all the esoteric teachings in the community were created by himself alone. Rather, he exaggerated the teaching of *Vijjā Dhammakāya* for his own purposes.

Power Base of Community Leader: Myth of the Cosmic Army of the Dharma

The story of the cosmic warfare and the true nature of Phra Dhammajayo has helped to create a strong community awareness rooted in absolute obedience to the leadership of Phra Dhammajayo. I later discovered that this does not exist in other communities that promote the same meditation technique.

The military model and the strong community solidarity are attractive to young graduates, men and women, leading them to renounce their families to be members of the *wat*. They are encouraged to see their parents as simply their passage to reincarnation rather than their primary responsibilities. Phra Dhammajayo often said, “Parents were just a path that brought you into this world,” and always demanded their total devotion. Thus, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been notorious in Thailand as the cause of divorces and family breakdown among members of its faithful disciples. The most important mission in life for followers of the *wat* is simply to serve the Master of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the Supreme Commander of the Troops of the Light.

New members of the community are recruited each year into the Troops, believing that they are bound for the rest of their lives to the Cosmic Commitment under the Master and not to their parents or families. I have no doubt that thousands of youths gave up their families to serve the Abbot in his glorious mission. One of them was me; I became the model and showcase for the younger generation.

Unlike members of other schools of Buddhism in Thailand who are trained to be humble, detached from social phenomena, and always ready to let go of any suffering and pain in life, followers of Wat Phra Dhammakāya are trained to be proud of themselves and to sacrifice anything in their lives for their leaders and the goal of the *wat*. Being honored as a part of the Army of the Light, they themselves are fighters who have to win every battle for the sake of the Master no matter how hard the assignment. On the contrary, they will be punished harshly if they fail.

They are also told that the Venerable Dhammajayo always knows every secret of their lives. There is no hiding place for his eyes of *Dhammakāya*. Because he also has the absolute power to control the fruition of merit, the amount of merit harvested at the *wat* is always maximal vis-à-vis other temples. He can save even the most sinful men facing the deepest crises in their lives and turn their crises into fortune whenever he likes. Moreover, they are trained to take every word of the Master seriously and made to understand that there is no danger they should fear as much as the wrath of the Master. Bad thought or doubt about the authority and ability of the Master is identified as the work of the Dark *Dhammakāyas*. Soldiers of the Army of the *Dharma* are to eliminate any negative thinking of the Master as soon as the thought arises.

From their first day, the followers of Wat Phra Dhammakāya accept the Venerable Dhammajayo as the sole authority in the teaching,

interpretation, and transcendental insight into the deepest knowledge of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*, and hence to accept that what he says is final and cannot be challenged. This assumption is endorsed by an iron rule of the *wat*: Any monk or lay member of the community who criticizes the Abbot on any account is to be expelled immediately even when the accusation is supported by only one witness. The leader of the community enjoys full right in revealing his prophecies, the esoteric knowledge of the *Dhammakāya*, to anyone. Most of the revealed pieces of information are called “*thamma la-ia*” or “the Refined *Dharma*.” These revealed stories are to be kept as personal secret and not to be spread to a second ear. Close disciples of the Venerable Dhammajayo also believe that the abbot has exclusive right to the highest knowledge of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*; the penalty will be severe for those who disobey him or carry out his order recklessly. One of the heaviest punishments is being imprisoned in “*save-thale*” or “*het-thale*” which is more severe than the Lokanta Hell in Theravāda Buddhist cosmology.

The deeper followers have gone into the community, the more difficult it is for them to withdraw. No matter what good they have done for the *wat*, as soon as they leave they are regarded as a disgrace to the community, like soldiers in the line of duty who defect to the enemy side. Their names are no longer mentioned in any social event or publication of the community and they are no longer welcome; they will receive a heavy penalty in the afterlife. Their activities are closely monitored so that they always remain low profile and cause no further harm to the *wat*. If they are not in the core group, they may enjoy some freedom in certain restricted areas, but their access to the inner information is longer permitted. Therefore, it is not surprising to see some ex-monks or former disciples of the *wat* still hanging around the community.

Among the ex-disciples of Phra Dhammajayo, the most outstanding was Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun (Sermchai Jayamaṅgala) the abbot of Wat Loung-phor-Soth-Dhammakāyaram Ratchaburi. He was expelled from Baan-thammaprasi in 1972, when Dhammajayo was still a young member of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen. Mr. Sermchai, however, did not give up the meditation practice. Instead, he teamed up with Chaokhun Bhavanakosol, the official *Dhammakāya* meditation master of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, and successfully established his own institute in Ratchaburi. The events, public activities, and teachings of Mr. Sermchai have caused a high degree of controversy among followers of Dhammajayo. They had not expected Sermchai to be successful as a meditation master; he was well-known for his Dharma talk shows. Dhammajayo explained that all of Sermchai's success came from the Dark Side that promoted him to be the fake one who misleads people to the force of the Dark *Dhammakāya*. Nevertheless, a sizable number of the disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakāya also are also faithful to the *wat* in Ratchaburi.

Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and the Army of the Light

Respect for the commands of the leader is the core of Wat Phra Dhammakāya's ethos. Such control is neither coincidental nor a part of Buddhism monasticism in Thailand. It is rooted in another frequently told myth of the organizational structure, the prophecy of the late abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, who, according to the Venerable Dhammajayo, took Adolf Hitler and as one of his greatest personal icons. According to this story of Refined Dharma, an ideal world would have resulted from the victory of Nazi Germany in World War II. The Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been inspired by the success of the Third Reich; it has become the blueprint of for the massive ceremonies and organization of the *wat*.

According to Dhammajayo, the late abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen believed that the Hitler was intrinsically a good person whose victory in World War II would have been good for the world, Buddhism and the *Dhammakāya* School of Meditation. This belief inspired him to meditate and pray for the success of the Nazis. Even after their defeat after the end to WWII, Phra Monkhol-thep-muni prophesized that *Dhammakāya* meditation would flourish in Germany and Italy, and soon the rest of the world. The prophecy is the strong inspiration for members of Wat Phra Dhammakāya to reach out for the world.

It is not surprising that the whole generation of Thais born after 1940 would be impressed by Hitler. Thailand teamed up with Japan and Nazi Germany during WWII and declared war against the U.S. and the U.K. In Thailand, several biographies of the great people of the world have included Hitler and Mussolini. In the 1960's, a young Chaiboon Sitthiphon was a keen reader of the biographies of all these great men and women; but Hitler was a special person for him. Not only did they share almost the same date of birth (Hitler was born on April 21; Dhammajayo, April 22), both of them started off with nothing before they rose to their power.

Moreover, the Venerable Dhammajayo explained that Hitler was a part of a major cosmic wave of reincarnations of *Dhammakāyas* from the *Nibbāna* of the Light to change the world, dispatched by *Phra Ton-thād*. Among them was also the famous physicist Albert Einstein. He stated:

There are millions of them who reincarnated on this world to join the Army of the Light. They are waiting for us to remind them of their true mission. All were parts of the same plan to bring a great change to the planet. These people are scattered in all countries, and they are unique in their characters. They are all outstanding and

successful in their fields such as science, medicine, business, industry, military and they are waiting to team up with us. It is our duty to alert them about who they really are and they will simply come to us.

The statement explains both the military setting of the followers of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and the reason why members of the *wat* never hesitate to reach out for new members for recruitment.

Methods Used by the Abbot to Impress Disciples About His True Nature

Meditation retreats are the principal tool for recruitment and building faith. These retreats are organized throughout the year and are arranged in different types and hierarchy. The largest one is the Thammadaya training program during the summer vacation, specifically designed for university students, both boys and girls. Currently, the program is also extended to international students. The goal of the program is to recruit new blood for the organization. Trainees are to observe the Eight Precepts of novice monastics and meditate eight to twelve hours per day. Male students are often encouraged to take a month-long ordination; girls continue to live in the community and practice meditation. The main incentive for the trainees is to “*pay back the price of milk to their mother.*”¹² No advanced meditation is taught during the retreat; the program teaches basic Theravada Buddhism, the Law of Karma, and basic meditation according to the Dhammakāya method. .

The *wat* also organizes weekly retreats and monthly programs for beginners and those who have interest in the technique. The retreats

¹² In Thai culture, gratitude to parents, especially to one’s mother, is a sign of a good son. It is often expressed in Thai that once in a lifetime a man, needs to be a monk for at least a rain retreat to *pay back the price of milk to his mother*. Monkhood is seen as a spiritual training in Thailand; the lifetime commitment to be a monk does not exist in popular Thai culture.

usually take place in beautiful resorts in the mountains or by the sea. They are free of charge, but at the end of the program the retreatants are asked to contribute to the Abbot or the *wat*. Beginners who perform well in meditation or major donors are encouraged to attend special retreats with the Abbot.

These special retreats are offered under the direct instructions of the Abbot. Only invited guests or special newcomers screened by the Abbot's close attendants are allowed to join. In these retreats, the Abbot brings in his own Dhammakāya-attainers, most of them boys and girls aged seven to fifteen recruited from well-to-do families of disciples. As the Abbot explains, children have clearer minds than adults, and therefore have greater potential to attain Dhammakāya. He does not formally set up any school for teaching children meditation; he gives these children a special tutorial class of advanced meditation privately in his own room. After they attain their Dhammakāya, the Abbot arranges for them to sit in the front row of the meditation hall and orders them to use their Dhammakāyas to search for answers to his questions so that all participants can hear about the Truth of the Universe. The questions are mainly about the supernatural, concerning angels, visiting hells of different realms including *Nibbāna*, and talking to the Buddhas in *Nibbāna*.

The children's parents normally attend the same retreat. They are usually proud of the spiritual achievements of their children, as affirmed by the Abbot. Out of their joy, they contribute more to him. Occasionally, the Abbot orders these young meditators to look into his body and tell the retreat-participants who he is and where he came from. Most of the time, these young advanced meditators affirm that the Abbot has a Dhammakāya of the Dazzling Light, brighter than anything in the Universe they have seen through the eyes of their own Dhammakāya. Also, on some occasions, an advanced meditation teacher

who has been affirmed by the Abbot as Dhammakāya-attainer would announce in the retreat that the Abbot was in fact the Origin of All Things.

It is strange that for over forty years of the community, the Abbot has never taught anyone how to wage war against the *Māras*; despite the fact that this is the task he claims as his primary duty. Apparently, the Abbot is the Great Master of *Dhammakāya* meditation who has kept the ultimate technique of meditation for himself.

The second in leadership of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya, the Venerable Dattajīvo, on the other hand, never addresses the issue of advanced *Vijjā Dhammakāya* publically. Most of his teachings concern basic Buddhist principles and practices. Whenever he was questioned about the higher meditation of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*, he would immediately refer to the Abbot as the sole authority. He would characterize every teaching of the Abbot as genuine and flawless. However, he often reminded his disciples that they are in the Army of the Light and that the command of the Abbot must not be challenged in any circumstance.

To What Extent is the Esoteric Teaching Accepted in the Community?

I am a former member of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and lived there for almost twenty years. I found that although all permanent residents of the community were aware of the teaching, not all of them accepted it. Some of them often criticized the Abbot in secret and expressed their disappointment in his interpretation of the *Dhammakāya* meditation. The claim that he was *Phra Ton-thād* was well-known, but some of them argued in secret that it was not possible.

However, no one challenges the teachings of the Abbot publicly. The community remembers the case of Phra Viriyasako, one of the

founding fathers of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, who was respected as the third most powerful monk in the community. In 1986, he stood up and challenged the Abbot regarding his teaching and corruption in his administration and accused him of betraying the commitment they shared before building up the community. The incident was one of the most serious crises that have taken place in the community. The outcome was that he and two other newly ordained monks were immediately banished from the *wat* and went into exile in Wat Pak Nam Bhasicharoen. Another result was a strict community rule to be applied in the *wat* that any person who was heard criticizing the Abbot on any ground would be subject to immediate expulsion even if the accusation were supported by only one witness. Again, the Venerable Dhammajayo won and cleared his way for absolute control of the community.

Influence in the Ecclesiastical Community of Thailand

For over twenty years the administration of Wat Phra Dhammakāya has influenced the Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand. The weakness of the top level of authority of the Thai *sangha* is in its feudalistic structure. Since the positions of the council members scarcely change, they are closely monitored by the *wat*. Details of their lives are studied and analyzed for strength and weakness by strategists of the monastery. Friends and foes of the Wat Phra Dhammakāya are carefully identified, approached, and manipulated in the ways that could turn provide the best for the community.

The Ecclesiastical Council currently protects the *wat* from any accusation or legal charges. Wat Phra Dhammakāya's control over the Ecclesiastical Council is evident. This was seen five years ago when the Supreme Patriarch issued a letter of injunction to defrock the Abbot of the *wat*. No member of the Ecclesiastical Council endorsed the order. As a

result, the Supreme Patriarch, having realized that the entire Council opposed him, boycotted all meetings of the Council. In the late nineteen-eighties, the Venerable Dhammajayo prophesized that his preceptor, Somdet Phramaha-Rajamangalacharn, the current abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, would become the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand. Currently, the prophecy seems about to become true, as the Supreme Patriarch, who is almost a hundred years old, is gravely ill and permanently hospitalized at King Chulalongkorn Hospital. The monk next in line for the position is the abbot of Wat Saket, 85 years old, who suffers from an incurable disease and has disappeared from the public eye for almost a year.¹³

In 2012, Wat Phra Dhammakāya was heavily criticized for organizing a pilgrimage of monks who walked upon a carpet of red rose-petals. Their walkway was upon the public roads and highways which were swept clean a day earlier, and as they were walking, thousands of followers of the *wat* scattered rose petals on ground to receive their venerable feet. The activities occupied a lot of public space, and streets were closed from the *wat* into Bangkok. Highway-flyovers that cut over the head streets were also closed, as they are constructed above the heads of the monks.¹⁴ These activities caused the heaviest traffic jams that Bangkok has ever seen. In defense of the *wat*, Somdet Phramaha-Rajamangalacharn, the abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, said in an interview that the monks of Wat Phra Dhammakāya were doing a good job for Buddhism. He even concluded that “Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen are one and the same.”¹⁵

¹³ Somdet Phra Buddhajahn recently made a public appearance and gave a short speech, despite being confined to a wheelchair, at the 9th United Nations Day of Vesak Celebrations held at the UNESCAP, on 2 June 2012.

¹⁴ The road-closure prevented the violation of a cultural norm,, because no one is supposed to stand above the level of a Buddhist monk.

¹⁵ Interview with the abbot of Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen, Somdet Phra Maharatchamangalacharn, www.DMC.tv, April, 2012.

Relationship to the State and National Politics

Wat Phra Dhammakāya remained impartial and neutral from politics when it was Soon-phuttachak-patibattam. Rule number six of the ten rules which were displayed for every visitor to the community as well as in the Dhammadāyāda Chanting Book states: “no political campaign or activities are allowed in the *wat*.”¹⁶ During the formation of the Palang Tham Party in the late nineteen-eighties, the leadership of the *wat*, then the Venerable Dattajīvo, flatly denied the invitation of Mr. Chamlong Srimuang to participate in the new party in their telephone conversation.¹⁷

This impartiality to politics is no longer true for Wat Phra Dhammakāya. The *wat* took an active role in forming its own political party in June 14, 2000, the Thai-Mahā-rat Party,¹⁸ after a series of public scandals within the leadership of the community broke out. For some practical reasons, the party did not do well in the general election and was finally dissolved by a court injunction on December 24, 2002.¹⁹ Apparently, the political initiative of the Phra Dhammajayo did not work as planned and the formation of a Dhammakāya-backed political party turned out to be a fiasco. Nevertheless, involvement in national politics is seen as necessary. The leadership of the *wat* publicly supported candidates for senatorial positions in the 2000 election and gained substantial influence among the senators. The leadership of the *wat* was most looking forward to work with the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), as they share same attitude toward business and capital management.

¹⁶ See also Dhammadāyāda Chanting Book (76).

¹⁷ One of the direct experiences of the author living in Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Palang Tham Party, 9 June 2531-10 Oct 2550.

¹⁸ The term “Thai Mahā-rat” was a name of the golden age in the new future of Thailand as prophesized by the Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya in 1988 during the time the *wat* was frequently visited by the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.

¹⁹ Constitutional Court Injunction 63/2545; also, www.concourt.or.th/download/Summary_desic/45.

Unfortunately, the TRT was also affiliated with Mr. Chamlong Srimuang and the Santi Asoke movement. Nevertheless, the leaders of Wat Phra Dhammakāya did not hesitate to build up close contacts with the leaders of the TRT.

Gradually, the attempt bore fruit. Wat Phra Dhammakāya's most significant gain in politics was its alliance with the TRT under the leadership of Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra in early 2005. The relationship with the TRT elevated the merit of the leadership of the *wat*. All charges pushed forward by the Attorney General against the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya were dropped from the court. The incident is one of the most important in the history of the Thai juridical system. The nature of this event has remained a subject of heated debate and controversy because the Attorney General who was responsible for the litigation against the abbot died suddenly. Once he had sworn that he would push the charges to justice as all of the criminal evidence was clear. After his sudden death, his body was quickly cremated. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra immediately appointed a new Attorney General who, without delay, pulled out all the fifty-two charges against the abbot from the court of justice.²⁰ This was the first incident of this sort ever to happen in the legal history of Thailand.

Early on the first Sunday of September 2006, Phra Dhammajayo declared his decisive victory to the masses of Wat Phra Dhammakāya with his favorite sentence in Pali: *Jitaṃ me* ("I have won!"). Subsequently, any newspapers that published criticism against the Abbot or Wat Phra Dhammakāya were mandated to publish formal apologies. From that time, the Thai public has seen scarcely any criticism against Wat Phra

²⁰ One among them was Lese Majeste. In 2000, I was personally questioned three times by a high-ranking police officers of the Department of Peace Keeping for more than a total of sixteen hours. I was told that they had gathered many important documents distributed by devotees of the *wat*. They were surprised that the leader of the *wat* was looking forward to the end of the Cakri Dynasty, the Monarchy of Thailand.

Dhammakāya or its abbot. Also, soon after, Phra Dhammajayo was once again reappointed to the position of Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya.

The coup of September 19, 2006, did not end the tie with the ousted prime minister who is currently in exile in various places around the world. Wat Phra Dhammakāya actively promoted the People Power Party (PPP) which emerged from the TRT. In addition to supporting some disciples running as candidates in the election campaign of 2008, monks of Wat Phra Dhammakāya publicly told visitors to vote for the PPP.

In spite of a heavy negative campaign and discrimination by the military and the conservative sector of Thai politics, the PPP managed to win the election and formed the majority in a coalition government led by two consecutive prime ministers, Samak Sunthoravej and Somchai Wongsawat. However, the PPP was dissolved by the Constitution Court of Thailand in December, 2008, resulting in the rise of a new coalition government led by the Democrat Party under the leadership of Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Ex-PPP members formed a new party called the Pheu Thai Party which continued its loyalty to Thaksin Shinawatra. The new party won a landslide victory in the general election of 2011. Wat Phra Dhammakāya again took an active role in political campaigns. Under the first female prime minister of Thailand, Wat Phra Dhammakāya has, for the first time, several hard-core disciples sitting in the parliament. Currently, Wat Phra Dhammakāya's faithful have become senior members of main political parties—the Pheu Thai, the Democrat, and the Chart Thai Pattana—just to name a few.

On December 5, 2011, in celebration of the 84th Birthday of King Bhumipol Adulyadej, the abbot was promoted to the title of Phra Thammayantha. His deputy was promoted to the title-rank of

Phraratch, a step higher in the feudal system of ranking, still within the Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand. This is an obvious sign of the victory of the *wat* in the government and the approval of the Cakri Dynasty. However, the palace also promoted the abbot of Wat Loung Phor Soth Dhammakāyārām, the staunch critic of Wat Phra Dhammakāya, to the rank of Phra Thep, equal to that of Dhammajayo.

Conclusion

Gnosticism, reincarnation, avatar and the Armageddon are nothing new to the world of religions; also, the concept of the *ādi-buddha* is well known in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is rather surprising to see all of these as a part of monastic Buddhism in 21st Century Thailand. These religious concepts are carefully integrated for selected disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakāya who see themselves as devoted followers of Buddhism. However, they are actually devoted members of an urban spiritual movement organized around charismatic leadership.

Although the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya has been shrouded by public fraud scandals, he is the only man behind the wheel of its administration. He does not need to give the esoteric teachings to each of his followers. He needs only a sizable number of hardcore disciples who believe in it. Among the millions of disciples of the *wat*, Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo is seen as a *bodhisattva* of great power who has dedicated his life for the good of all sentient beings in their harvesting of gained merit. For thousands of his hardcore disciples: he is not only the most important figure in their lives, but is the most important figure in the entire universe as the Creator and reincarnation of the All Mighty One, the Primordial Buddha.

The theology of the Army of the Light when applied among close disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakāya not only inspires a strong sense of

responsibility to the commandment and authority of the leadership of the *wat*, it also gives pride and energy to them to endure any hardship and difficulties, in spite of the fact that there is no concept of obedience in the teaching of the Buddha in Theravāda tradition. Once committed as a soldier in the Army of *Dharma*, they are willing to sacrifice anything for their leader. Apart from this, any ordeal, scandal and bad news against any member of the community are interpreted as the works caused by *Māras* rather than as results from karmas of the past. Wat Phra Dhammakāya is branching out into thousands of extra-monastic programs and activities, transforming Thai society. Thousands of families have seen their children, young boys and girls, committed to selfless dedication to the Master, the Abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakāya; hundreds of thousands more are willing to sacrifice their lives to do anything to serve him.

Nowadays, Wat Phra Dhammakāya is an established international organization—a spiritual empire that grew out of the charismatic leadership of Phra Phromayanthera or Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo which vows to promote the mission of the founding father of the meditation technique worldwide. In fact, the monastic activities are merely the tip of this iceberg; the material and financial expansions of the community have been more progressive than meditation retreats. Equipped with its own twenty-four-hour satellite TV, infinite funding, superb location, gigantic piece of land not far from Bangkok, and millions of followers, many of whom hold high positions in the cabinet, private sector, military and political parties—Wat Phra Dhammakāya will expand, not only to fulfill its apparent mission, but also to make radical changes to the political system of Thailand.

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