

Esoteric Teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya

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Prelude:

The exponential growth of the controversial Wat Phra Dhammakaya from a small group of Buddhists, disciples of the Venerable Phra Mongkol-thep-muni, the late abbot of Wat Paknam Bhaserao, is phenomenal. Within three decades, the community which had about ten permanent members who settled in the district of Klongloun, Pathum Thani grew to thousands, well-organized with over forty branches overseas and millions of followers worldwide. Throughout the period of aggressive expansion, the community has been shrouded with waves of controversies on various grounds. The esoteric teaching of meditation taught by the leaders of the community is behind the inspiration for thousands of young graduates, men and women, from various universities to sacrifice their lives to serve their Master that Buddhism in Thailand or Theravada World has never seen. What is the nature of this esoteric teaching? What is the source of its power? How is it taught? How does it developed? Why is it so appealing to the young minds to devote their lives and future to the authority of the community? What is the worldview of this community? These questions are discussed and analyzed by first-hand experience of the author who was one of its founding members.

Introduction:

The rise of Wat Phra Dhammakaya as a well-organized urban Buddhist movement is undeniable unique in the history of Thailand. After three and a half decades, the *wat* is now as a well-established international center of Buddhist movements. Apart from millions of followers in Thailand it has over forty branches overseas, two satellite televisions broadcasting in four languages and projects for constructing international university. All these achievements were possible without governmental support. In fact they were gained through continuous struggles of the members of the *wat* under the leadership of Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo. Most of the time these struggles were not only against the public criticism of the media, state interventions, juridical authority and even injunctions of the top administrator of the ecclesiastical community of Thailand.

During the first decade of the *wat*, when the Cold War in Thailand was at its peak, the military was highly suspicious of its motives and involvement with communism as the community could attract a huge mass of students to join its activities. The second decade saw a massive expansion of the community into its neighboring areas. Thousands of acres of land were purchased for wide scale expansion of its physical territory, incurring protest and demonstration from the local farmers. The third decade saw the *wat's* involvement with grandiose financial investments, massive fund raising and scandal over its mysterious administration. Until now, there has not been any Buddhist community in Thailand worse hit by such scandals than Wat Phra Dhammakaya and could manage more than just to survive.

Critics of the monastery often focus on the power of the financial management of the *wat* and the administration skills of the leaders of Wat Phra Dhammakaya as the

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source for its achievement, whereas the teaching of Dhammakaya meditation is simply judged as unorthodox. Those who shared enough experience in the community know that the authority of the community's leadership is solely allocated to the charisma of Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo endorsed by the myths of esoteric teachings of Dhammakaya Meditation. Legends and esoteric anecdotes he selectively delivered to his core followers were the foundation of his identity that made him revered, and his words are taken as commandments.

Some of these legends, stories of miracles and esoteric teaching are parts of the original teaching of the late abbot of Wat Paknam which is passed through Phra Dhammajayo. When they are combined with the community discipline employed by the leadership of Wat Phra Dhammakaya creates the strongest charisma of a Buddhist leadership ever walked on earth as perceived by his followers.

Being once an insider and one of the leaders in the board of administration of the *wat* who have successfully reformed the structure of the organization in 1989 - 90, and also a scholar in Buddhism and history of world religions, I am both blessed and cursed in presenting this paper. Since I have realized the academic values in bring up the esoteric teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya to the attention of international scholars and theologians. The information will greatly benefit academic world. 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 issue which have deeply affected the course of my life. This paper is, therefore, written with the intention not to discredit or to support Wat Phra Dhammakaya and its leadership, but to present the content of teaching which once I so deeply shared with other members of the Dhammakaya community as impartial and objective as possible for academic purposes.

Short history of Wat Phra Dhammakaya

Wat Phra Dhammakaya was one of the offshoots of Wat Paknam Bhasecharoen, the mother monastery in Bangkok where the Dhammakaya 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 attention of young university students, one of them was Mr. Chaiboon Sittiphol who was later ordained in 1969 and known as Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo. Within a few years, the number of the disciples of Machee Chan grew and register under Ban-Thammaprasit Foundation within the boundary of Wat Paknam.

In 1972, they settled down on a piece of land around 80 acres in Pathum Thani, about 40 kilometres north of Bangkok with a determination to establish an ideal Buddhist community based on the ideology of Dhammakaya Meditation.

Their new community was then called Soon-phuttha-cak-pathibattham based on certain technical term in the esoteric meditation of Vija Dhammakaya, and later changed to Wat Vorani-dhammakaya-ram, in honor of the land donor. In 1981, the name was changed to Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

The first success of the community was their summer meditation retreat program called "*Thammathāyād*" (Pali: Dhammadāyāda, a common term in the Tipiṭaka for the heir of the Dhamma) for university students. Through this program the new could draw new recruits to become its permanent members. Many young trainees who passed the program committed themselves as disciples of Dhammakaya meditation; many were

² Another famous center of Dhammakaya Meditation is Wat Loung-phor-soth-dhammakaya-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.

ordained as permanent members of Soon-phutthacak-patibattam, which is now known as Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

On the other hand, the growth of the *wat* also grew hand in hand with its criticisms; Wat Phra Dhammakaya sharply divided of the people into two groups: those who love it and those who hate it. For decades, the community has been target of criticism for its massive fund raising, capitalists attitude, involvements with businesses and unorthodox teachings. The biggest scandal has been the charges against its abbot, Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo or Phra Racchabhavanavisuth, for public fraud and embezzlement.

In August 2006, all charges against the controversial monk were dropped by the General Prosecutor through political influence of the Thai Rak Thai Party, just only a month before the coup of September 19th. The favorable outcome has hesitated all media in Thailand to publish any criticism against the leader of the *wat*. Currently, the community is still growing, at both local and international levels, much more successfully than ever before.

Different layers of teachings to newcomers

The strength of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is not, as most outsiders perceived, i.e. 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 to work together troops in highly organized institution under the commands of the abbot. Unlike other Buddhist communities in Thailand where the teachings of the master remain open for public, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is built upon rings of esoteric teachings of “*Vijjā Dhammakaya*” founded by the late abbot of Wat Pak Nam Bhasecharoen, Phra Monkhon-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 that of most *wats* in Thailand which is rather unorganized and amateurish. It is the only place in Thailand where every lay person is dressed in white, all staff members wear uniforms specific to their assignments, and everyone knows exactly where their place is and what is their goal of life. Its elementary meditation teaching is a combination of 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 with the use of the universal mantra: *sammā araham*.

The elementary teaching of Buddhism at the *wat* does not teach anything contradictory to conventional Buddhism of Thailand, i.e. the precepts and practices of charity, morality and meditation which lead to the attainment of Nirvana as an *arahat* (an enlightened disciple of the Buddha) and *Pacceka-buddha* (a Fully Enlightened Buddha but without teaching ability). At the 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 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 Dhammakaya* where all the conventional knowledge of Buddhism became almost insignificant. Personal enlightenment is no longer the goal of each person’s life. Nirvana is not the final destiny of life. Through the knowledge of Dhammakaya, the inner body of enlightenment, or the True Self of each person, it is found that there is another higher abode and bliss that is superior to Nirvana.

Esoteric teaching of Phra Mongkol-thep-muni: *Vijjā Dhammakaya*

The discovery of Dhammakaya by Phra Mongkol-thep-muni on the full moon night during the middle of the rain retreat of 1914 at the main shrine hall of Wat Bangkhuvien brought back the original teaching of the Buddha, so-called Vijjā Dhammakaya.

According to his description, the bright crystal ball that he saw in meditation since the early morning of the 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 interior dimensions of human existence. Dhammakaya Arahat is the True Self of individuals and it is genderless body which transcends all impure existences. 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.³

Nirvana, according to Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, is not an abstract entity but an abode: a huge shining crystal sphere with the diameter of 141,330,000 yojanas⁴ with its surrounding shell of 15,120,000 yojanas.⁵ The lower rim of Nirvana is located three times above the length of the diameter of the Three Worlds. Nirvana is habited only by Dhammakayas of the Buddhas of the past, present and future.

The above description was not an overnight discovery of the late abbot of Wat Paknam. Convinced by his own spiritual experience, he set up a meditation workshop exclusive for advanced students who have attained Dhammakaya. It is closed to the public where the selected insiders meditate 24 hours divided into six 4-hour shifts a day. Each shift was led by a master.⁶ The workshop was named “the Factory (*Rong-ngan*)” on the merit that it produced new knowledge of Vijjā Dhammakaya to world. It was here that meditation masters were trained and where most of esoteric teachings of Dhammakaya meditation were originated from.

Advanced disciples of the Phra Monkhol-thep-muni described that most activities in the Factory were healing services, as the abbot received requests from families of patients to heal them. The healing work was done through prayers to the power of Buddhas in the Nirvana. However, most advanced master in Dhammakaya meditation agreed that Phra Monkhol-thep-muni was searching for the final knowledge to switch off the control of the Dark Once which he strongly believed that this would lead to the collective enlightenment of the entire Samsara in his life time, i.e. by winning the final battle against the Maras.

Evidence is clearly shown in the published sermons of the late abbot of Wat Paknam that he was the founder of the school who described his life’s mission as the one sent forth to this world by Phra Ton-thad to destroy the Maras. The famous quotation in the sermon of the late abbot of Wat Paknam, Phra Monkhol-thep-muni as published by Wat Loungphor-Soth-dhammakayaram on October 7, 1955:

The most moral are the Buddhas; the most evil are, the Māras. After ordination I have found that *Phra Ton-thād* has commanded me to reincarnate to destroy the

³ “Fathom” is translated from “wā” the longest distance between two extended arms, a measurement in traditional Siamese scale.

⁴ A yojana is an Indian scale of measurement, approximately 16 kilometers.

⁵ Khumuesomphan as an appendix of Phra Monkhol-thep-muni, Biography and Achievements, Wat Loung Phor Soth - dhammakayaram, First Publication, November 2543 BE (AD 2000) p. 315

⁶ Disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakaya 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.

Māras. As long as they are not defeated, I will be still fighting to the end of my life here at Wat Paknam.⁷

Māras, here described in the quotation, are not the same as Māras in the biography of the Buddha understood in the Buddhist tradition nor that they are any of the five categories of Māras that of the commentary written by the Venerable Buddhaghosa. They are the Dhammakayas of Darkness who are the archrival of the Dhammakayas of the Light. Our human existence and the world are the battlefields between the two cosmic enemies, the Dhammakayas of the Light and Darkness. *Phra Ton-thad* is the Creator of Nirvana, the heavens and the Earth as well as all Dhammakayas.

The theology of Dhammakaya is no doubt a new revolution in Theravada Buddhism; from a Godless religion to a theological religion. When the battle is won, the entire cosmic existence will reveal its true nature, i.e. the whole of humankind and all the living creatures, will turn into Dhammakayas of the Light.

Herein, the paradigm of reality is shifted to collective enlightenment in which the whole cosmic existence is the a battlefield between the Sons of Light, or the Bright Dhammakayas against the Sons of Darkness or the Dhammakayas of Darkness or Māras.

Theology of Dhammakaya Meditation: A paradigm-shift from Non-theism to Monotheism Religion

To be a Buddha, according to the Dhammakaya meditation, is no longer a the difficult task as that commonly shared in mainstream Theravada Buddhism; it is seen as a small issue, relative compared to the aim of what the Founder of Dhammakaya meditation aimed to do: to liberate the entire Samsara in his life through the Victory of the Dhammakaya in the Last Cosmic Battle of the Universe.

The biography of the founder of the Dhammakaya Meditation was retold by the Phra Dhammajayo the sole leadership of Wat Phra Dhammakaya that he was actually the *Phra Ton Thād Ton Tham* who had commanded the Late Abbot of Wat Paknam to fight in the Cosmic Army embattling the Final War. Realizing that Phra Monkon-thep-muni could not finish his assignment⁸ he himself reincarnated to lead the Troops of the Dharma in pursuit of the final cosmic battle.

Esoteric teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya

From the first day of the *wat* followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya it is agreed upon one assumption that the Venerable Dhammajayo is the sole authority in the teaching, interpretation and transcendental insight into the deepest knowledge of *Vijjā Dhammakāya*; what he said is final and cannot be challenged by anyone. 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 Dhammakaya to anyone. Most of the revealed pieces of information are called “*thamma la-iad*” or “the Refined Dharma”. These revealed stories are to be kept as personal secret and not to be spread to a second ear.

⁷ Biography of the abbot of Wat Paknam, Phra Monkhon-thep-muni (Soth Chandasaro), Wat Long-phor-Soth - dhammakayaram, Damnuensadueak, Racha-buri. This was the sermon celebrating the abbot's birth, transcribed by Mrs. Chalaem Usubharatna, firstly published by Wat Paknam in the book *Rueng Thammakai* (Dhammakāya) in 2499BE (A.D. 1956).

⁸ Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun (Sermchai Jayama" gala P.T.6) *Tobpanhā-Thammapatibat* (Meditation Practices: Q&A), Wat Loung Phor Soth -dhammakayaram, June 2542 BE (AD 1999); พระภาวนาวิสุทธิคุณ (เสริมชัย ชยมงกุลโต ป.ศ.๖) คอบปญญาธรรมปฏิบัติ วัชหลวงพ่อดชธรรมกายาราม พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 1 มิถุนายน 2542, p. 458-460.

Genesis according to Vijjā Dhammakaya

The Knowledge of the Beginning is a subject of the Dialogue of the Buddha described in the Aggaññasutta, Dīghanikāya. However, it was an allegory in the discussion of the Buddha on the beginning of the human race on this world. Buddhism has no myth of the Prime Cause as described in the Bible or the Ṛgveda.

Natures of esoteric teachings at Wat Phra Dhammakaya

These Refined Dharma are stories and esoteric anecdotes; they cover several topics, namely: miracles of Phra Monkhn-thep-muni, the Genesis (i.e., how samsara and the Cosmic Battle of Dhammakaya came into existence), the nature of the Dhammakayas of Darkness or Māras, the Cosmic Battle between the Light and Darkness, the formation of the Army of the Dharma, what he saw by his Dhammakaya in his meditation, the severe punishment that those who abandoned the *wat* or expelled by the *wat* will received in their after lives, the amount of merit gained by serving him or being a soldier in the Army of the Dharma, the true identity of himself, *Maechee* Chan and the late abbot of Wat Paknam, the founder of *Vijjā Dhammakaya*, etc.

The listening disciples are naturally overjoyed and proud that they are the chosen ones and willing to serve him as a soldier in the benevolent Cosmic Army of the Light. Without doubt, many are willing to sacrifice everything including their lives to fulfill the wishes of the Venerable Dhammajayo.

Timing is key factor to successful delivery of the Refined Dharma anecdotes to the audience. They are told to selected faithful disciples 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 Dhammakaya meditation where no other schools of meditation can claim.

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

Among these stories of Refined Dharma is the revelation on the organization of the Army of the Dharma is crucial to the structure and authority of the leader. It is actually an extended version of the sermon of Phra Monkhn-thep-muni that he was commanded by *Phra Ton-thad* to destroy the Māras. Venerable Dhammajayo illustrated further that there were countless number of troops of the Dhammakayas of the Light who reincarnated to fight against the Dhammakaya of Darkness in the Cosmic War. The troops were organized into four Divisions, namely: the Warriors whose duty is to wage war against Māras or the Dark Dhammakayas; the Propagators whose duty is to propagate *Vijjā Dhammakaya*; the Constructors, who 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. It is not wrong to say that the story has created a strong community awareness rooted in absolute obedience in the leadership of Phra Dhammajayo. This does not exist in other communities that promote the same meditation technique.

The military model and community attitude create a strong incentive for young graduates, men and women to renounce their families to be members of the *wat*. Parents are seen as simply their passage of their reincarnation, and not primary responsibilities. The most important mission in life of followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is simply to serve as the Master of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the Supreme Commander of the Troops of the Light.

New members of the community are recruited each year into the Troops and, believe that they are bound for the rest of their lives to the Cosmic Commitment under the

Master and not to their parents or families. No doubt that countless number of youth gave up their families to just to serve the former abbot in the glorious mission. “Parents were just a path that brought you into this world,” was often said by the Phra Dhammajayo, who always demanded their total devotion. Thus, Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been notorious in Thailand as cause of divorces and family breakdown among members of its faithful disciples.

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 Dhammakaya 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 in by the Army of the Dharma, they themselves as fighters who have to win every battle for the sake of the Master no matter how hard the assignment is.

They are also told that the Venerable Dhammajayo always knows everything and every secret of their lives, and there is no hiding place for his eyes of Dhammakaya. He also has the absolute power to control the fruition of merit, thus the amount of merit harvested at the *wat* is always maximal vis-à-vis other temples, even the most sinful men facing the deepest crisis in their lives, he could save them all and turn crises in to fortune whenever he likes. Moreover, they are trained to take every word of the Master seriously, and 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 Dhammakayas. Soldiers of the Army of the Dharma are to eliminate any negative thinking of the Master as soon as the thought arises.

The deeper ones have gone into the community, the more difficult for them to withdraw. No matter of what good they have done for the *wat*, as soon as they left, they are regarded as disgrace to the community, like soldiers in 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 and will receive heavy penalty in the afterlife. However, their activities are closely monitored so that they always remain low profile and cause no further harm to the *wat*.

Among the ex-disciples of Phra Dhammajayo, the most outstanding was Phra Bhavanāvisuddhikhun (Sermchai Jayamaṅgala) the abbot of Wat Loung-phor-Soth - dhammakayaram, Ratchaburi who was expelled from Bān-thammapasit in 1972, when Dhammajayo was still a member of Wat Paknam. Mr. Sermchai, however, did not give up the meditation practice. Instead, he teamed up with a senior master of Dhammakaya meditation of Wat Paknam, Chokhun Bhavanakosol and successfully established his own institute in Ratchaburi. Events, public activities and teachings of Mr. Sermchai had caused high degree of controversy among followers of Dhammajayo who identified him as Dhammakaya of Darkness.

Practically, there are sizable disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who also are also faithful to the wat in Ratchaburi. Times and again that the Refined Dharma stories of the Master of Wat Phra Dhammakaya were contradicted. One good example concern the identity of the Phra Dhammajayo that he revealed to his disciple that he was *Phra Tonthad* who commanded Phra Mongkol-thep-muni to reincarnate to destroy the Māras.

The esoteric claim was contradicted as a response to a question in a 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-thad or Primordial Buddha who can grant the attainment of Dhammakaya 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-thad* who has authority to grant the attainment of Dhammakaya 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).⁹

Influence in the ecclesiastical community of Thailand

For over fifteen years that the administration of Wat Phra Dhammakaya has influenced the Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand. The weakness of the top level of authority of the Thai Saṅgha is its feudalistic structure. Since all the positions in the council hardly changed, details of the biography of each member of the council were studied by strategists of the monastery. Friends and foes of the Wat Phra Dhammakaya were carefully identified, approached and manipulated in the ways that could turn provide the best for the community.

It is not wrong to say that the Ecclesiastical Council is the strongest shelter that will protect it from any accusation or legal charges. In another word, it is not the Ecclesiastical Council that controls Wat Phra Dhammakaya; it is the other way round. This could be seen in a situation five years ago when the Supreme Patriarch issued a letter of injunction to defrock the former abbot of the *wat*. The result was no member of the Ecclesiastical Council endorsed the order.

Adolf Hitler's the Third Reich: the dream for global expansion

Respect to the command of the leader is the core of Wat Phra Dhammakaya ethos. The control was neither coincidental, nor was it a part of Buddhism monasticism in Thailand. It was rooted in another frequently told myth of the organizational structure was always referred to the prophecy of the late abbot of Wat Paknam who, according to the Venerable Dhammajayo took Adolf Hitler and as one of his great man. According to this story of Refined Dharma, the world would have turned into an ideal place if the Nazi Germany had won the World War II. The former abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been inspired by the success of the Third Reich which has become the blueprint of for the massive ceremonies and organization of the *wat*.

According to Dhammajayo, the late abbot of Wat Paknam believed that the Hitler was intrinsically a good person whose victory over the World War II would be good for the world, Buddhism and the Dhammakaya School of Meditation. This belief inspired him to meditate and pray for the success of the Nazis in WW II. Even after the defeat of the Nazis, Phra Mongkol-thep-muni prophesized that Dhammakaya meditation would flourish in Germany and Italy and soon the rest of the world. This is the reason behind the grandiose projects of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who sent teams of monks to start new missions in Germany and Europe.

Relationship to the state and national politics

Wat Phra Dhammakaya had remained impartial and neutral from politics from the beginning when it was Soon-phuttachak-patibattam. This is seen as in Rule #6 of the ten rules which were displayed for every visitor to the community as well as in the Dhammadāyāda Chanting Book “that no political campaign or activities are allowed in

⁹ *Tobpanhā-Thammapatibat* (Meditation Practices: Q&A), pp. 458-460.

the *wat*.”¹⁰ During the formation of Palang Tham Party in the late 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.¹¹ This impartiality to politics is no longer true for Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

The *wat* took active roles in forming its own political party in June 14, 2000 called Thai-maha-rat Party¹², after series of scandals of the leadership of the community broke out to public. For some practical reasons, the party did not do well in the general election and was finally it dissolved on court injunction on December 24, 2002.¹³ Apparently, the political initiative of the Phra Dhammajayo did not work as planned and the formation of Dhammakaya-backed political party turned out a fiasco. Nevertheless, involvement in national politics is seen as necessary. The leadership of the *wat* publicly supported candidates of for senatorial position in 2000 election, and got substantial influence among the senators. The party that the leadership of the *wat* was looking forward to work with was the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), as they share same attitude in business and capital management. Unfortunately, the TRT was affiliated with Mr. Chamlong Srimuang and Santi Asok movement. Nevertheless, the leader of Wat Phra Dhammakaya was not hesitated to build up contacts with leaders of the TRT.

Gradually, the attempt turned fruitful. It was the most significant gain in politics was the alliance with the TRT under the leadership of the ousted Thaksin Shinawatra in early 2005. The relationship with the TRT has merited the leadership of the *wat*. All charges by the state against the former abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya were dropped from the court.

The coup of September 19, 2006 did not end the tie with the ousted prime minister who is currently in exile. Wat Phra Dhammakaya has been actively promoting the People Power Party (PPP) which is known to be the reincarnation of the TRT. Apart from supporting some disciples running as candidates in the election, during the election campaign of 2007, monks of Wat Phra Dhammakaya publicly told visitors to vote for the PPP. The monastery was also behind the landslide victory of the Puea Thai Party in the General Election of 2011 - which resulted in the election of Yingluck Shinawatra, the younger sister of the aforementioned former-Prime Minister now living in exile.

Primordial Buddha: Power of Righteousness, Authority of the Abbot

Southeast Asia has long been under the influence of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism which was the mainstream of Buddhist practice in Siam for no less than 700 years. The concept of *Phra Ton Thād* is not new in Buddhism, it was a widely shared accepted among by followers of Vajrayana Buddhism who believe that the universe was created by the *Ādi-Buddha* or Mahāvairojana Buddha. Historically, the belief may be seen as a relic of Vajrayāna Buddhism in early Siam, which resurfaced again in the 20th Century. However, the theology of Vījā Dhammakaya has reached the extreme end of Buddhism, i.e. to liberate the whole Samsāra through the defeat of all the Māras in the Last Battle between Light and Darkness. And this is to be achieved not in the remote future but in this very life. This is new not only to Theravada Buddhism but to entire the Buddhist religion.

¹⁰ See also Dhammadāyāda Chanting Book, p.76.

¹¹ One of the direct experiences of the author living in Wat Phra Dhammakāya. Palang Tham Party, 9 June 2531- 10 Oct 2550.

¹² The term “Thai Mahā-rath” was a name of the golden age in the new future of Thailand as prophesized by the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in 1988 during the time with the *wat* was frequently visited by the Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.

¹³ Constitutional Court Injunction 63/2545; also, www.concourt.or.th/download/Summary_desic/45

The Gnostic theology of Dhammakaya has strongly influenced the mindset of those members of the community who see the world in black and white: their former abbot as becomes the Center of the Universe, the Creator of Nirvana, the Heaven and Earth. Through this belief, the Law of Karma can no longer be applied to him. The years of turbulence he endured are seen as the powerful attacks of Mara, the Devil upon him. Accordingly, the more serious troubles are signs of his importance as leader to of the cosmic existence.

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

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 Mahayana Buddhism. It is rather surprising to see all these as a part of the contemporary monastic Buddhism in Thailand of the 21st Century. These religious concepts are carefully integrated together and delivered as a complete package to selected disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who see themselves as pure followers of Buddhism. Being believers in these esoteric messages, converts them into devoted members of urban cult of a charismatic leadership.

Although the former abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is no longer in charge of the monastic administration officially, in practice he is the only man behind the wheel of its administration. He does not need to teach the esoteric teaching to each of his follower. He needs only a sizable number of hardcore disciples who believe in it. Among 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 merit gain, but for thousands of his hardcore disciples, he is the most important figure in their lives, and the entire universe, the Creator and reincarnation of the All Might One, the Primordial Buddha.

The theology of the Army of the Dharma when applied among close disciples of Wat Phra Dhammakaya 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 for 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 Theravada tradition. Once committed as a troop in the Army of Dharma, they are willing to sacrifice anything in their lives for their leader. Apart from this, any ordeal, scandal and bad news against any member of the community are interpreted as the work of Maras, and not as results from karmas of the past.

More and more people will be drawn into this whirlpool of the growing social black hole which is branching out into thousands of extra-monastic programs and activities, transforming Thai society for good. Thousands of families have sacrificed their children, young boys and girls, in selfless dedication to the Master, the former abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya; hundreds of thousands more are willing to sacrifice their lives to do anything to serve him.

Although the esoteric teachings of Wat Phra Dhammakaya are against every grain of the conventional doctrine of Theravada Buddhism, it has been deeply rooted implanted in the beliefs of millions of Buddhists who are faithful to the *wat* or the personality of its leader. Academically, the esoteric teaching of Wat Phra Dhamakaya is certainly un-Buddhist. Rather, it is a new form of religion that emerged out of mainstream Buddhism.

However, it has been created to magnet a large number of followers, most of whom are in their youth, to serve or even to sacrifice anything, even their lives, for the Master.

Nowadays, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is an established international organization a spiritual empire that grew out of a cult of charismatic leadership of Phra Rachabhavanavisudh or Phra Chaiboon Dhammajayo who vowed 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 retreat. Equipped with its own 24-hour satellite TV, infinite funding, superb location and gigantic size of land not far from Bangkok and millions of followers, many of whom are holding high positions in the cabinet, private sectors, military and political parties, soon the growing black hole will expand, not only that it can fulfill the apparent mission, but it even has a potentiality to make a radical change to the political system of Thailand.

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