



Chapter 3

The Movements Utilizing Dhammakaya Meditation

This chapter explains the movements utilizing the Dhammakaya meditation system explained in chapter two. The logical place to begin this explanation is Wat Paknam in Phasi Charoen, Thonburi. This is the temple where Luang Phor Sodh was appointed abbot, which provided a necessary center for spreading the teachings of Dhammakaya meditation. After describing the situation at Wat Paknam during Luang Phor Sodh's abbotship, the continuation of the teachings of the meditation system after his death will be explained. This is significant because it exemplifies a rare phenomenon among meditation masters in the recent history of popular Thai Buddhism: that is the continuing, and the growth, in popularity of a meditation system after the passing away of its founder. Traditionally, the passing away of a meditation master, or leader of a popular movement, signified the eventual demise of the movement. This is because so much of the movement's popularity was embodied in the charismatic leader; the leader exemplified the movement, and his passing away ensured the passing away of his movement. An example of this is Luang Boo Waen, who headed a large and popular movement while he was alive, but whose passing away was the beginning of the end for his movement. Luang Phor Sodh, on the other hand, was able to ensure his meditation system, and the movement surrounding it would continue. This is because the meditation system exemplified the movement more than the person rediscovering it, or teaching it.

This section attempts to explain how he accomplished this feat. By understanding the workings and organization of Wat Paknam while Luang Phor Sodh was abbot, one can see how the continuation of the meditation system was assured,

thereby assuring the continuation of the movement. This is also important as it shines much needed light on the reasons for the departure of Khun Yai Chan, and her followers, which led to the formation of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, and the eventual formation of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram. Following this explanation, the development and growth of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram will be explained. While it is somewhat uncomplicated to demonstrate the reasons why Khun Yai Chan and her young followers felt compelled to leave Wat Paknam, explaining the immense growth of the temple, and its perceived place as the future leader of Buddhism in the world is quite another matter. Of course Dhammakaya meditation plays an important role in understanding both the growth, and the lofty goals of the temple, but there is something else. For as this section of the paper will show, it is not Wat Paknam which has grown to nearly 2,000 rai in size, and which lures members of Thailand's increasingly wealthy members of society by the tens of thousands for special gatherings, it is Wat Phra Dhammakaya. And no other temple in Thailand, whether teaching Dhammakaya meditation or not, claims to be the center of Buddhism in the world, equating itself to the Vatican for Catholics and Mecca for Islamic followers. For these reasons, a more in depth look at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is important as it provides one view of the future of Buddhism in Thailand. This will be done by first comparing the three temples, Wat Paknam, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram, to note how the meditation system practiced at each temple has changed.

The Dhammakaya Movement at Wat Paknam

Luang Phor Sodh was appointed abbot of Wat Paknam by the head of Phasi Charoen Sangha District, Somdej Phra Vanarat. As explained in the biography section of chapter two, Luang Phor Sodh believed that studying was an important

part of a monk's life. Therefore, a section of Wat Paknam was dedicated to Pali language study, and one of his primary goals was teaching meditation. This meditation instruction not only involved teaching monks and lay followers interested in practicing the technique, but also teaching those meditators proven proficient in how to become meditation masters themselves. This helped the meditation system propagate throughout the country while Luang Phor Sodh remained primarily at Wat Paknam. Although meditation masters traveled to distant parts of Thailand spreading the teachings of Dhammakaya meditation, the center was firmly established at Wat Paknam with Luang Phor Sodh. The other temples where Dhammakaya meditation was taught acted merely as satellites.

The growth in popularity of Dhammakaya meditation, and its subsequent spread throughout the country can be attributed to two not unrelated factors: the magical/mystical qualities of the system itself; and the activities of Luang Phor Sodh at Wat Paknam. A typical day at Wat Paknam began with the feeding of the monks, which was done with food prepared at Wat Paknam's kitchens. This idea of having food prepared at the temple reportedly came about because of the hardships Luang Phor Sodh had experienced as a young monk on his daily alms round. While Luang Phor Sodh was living and studying in Bangkok, there were some days when he would gather scarcely enough food to subsist on. He vowed that when he was able to do so, he would see to it that monks did not have to rely on a system as undependable as the traditional alms round for their daily food.¹ While this is commendable for the compassion it displays for the well-being of the monks, it is a serious shift from the Thai Buddhist tradition of going out into the community for food. But apparently not serious enough to be of concern for Luang Phor Sodh. This also evolved into a system for caring for lay members of the district by providing them with the excess food produced at the temple. While this is similar to the

¹ Lokthip, p 16.

traditional practice of distributing a temple's excess food gathered on alms round to lay followers, it has one striking difference. That is, if the number of monks to prepare food for is known at the time of preparation, the leftover amount would be quite small. This small amount would surely not be enough for the many people said to receive food at the temple. Certainly the temple was preparing food for lay persons as well as monks. For this reason, it can be said that Wat Paknam began to perform tasks alien to the traditional temple. It also serves as an indicator that the temple would become the center for a popular movement, insomuch as the leader of the temple, Luang Phor Sodh, took it upon himself to perform tasks not traditionally performed by a temple for his own personal reasons.

His meditation technique is the most significant example of dissatisfaction with traditional practices. Luang Phor Sodh is described as adept at meditation, and yet he feels discontentment. He is not satisfied with his progress in traditional meditation practices, and so feels compelled to develop, or rediscover his own. These actions which constitute going against the status quo are characteristic ingredients in the formation of a new movement in Thailand. Other examples are: King Mongkut, while a prince-monk, establishing the Dhammayut Nikaya because he felt the Maha Nikaya, or existing Thai Sangha representing the status quo, to be incorrect on some doctrinal points; Buddhadasa Bhikku establishing Suan Mokh, his famous forest monastery, feeling that traditional Thai Buddhist temples had lost their direction. It is ironic that when Khun Yai Chan and her followers left Wat Paknam, they claimed the temple had lost its direction, and no longer represented the true teachings of Luang Phor Sodh. This will be explained in detail later in this section.

Understanding the daily routine of Luang Phor Sodh while abbot of Wat Paknam is important for understanding his movement, and its followers. After the morning meal, pilgrims assembled at Wat Paknam would request Luang Phor

Sodh's supernatural assistance for eliminating a variety of problems, or for special blessings. This was done by the pilgrim writing down his/her problem on a small piece of paper which was then collected, and passed on to Luang Phor Sodh. Luang Phor Sodh would go through the many pieces collected, and decide on a number to assist. This assistance came in the form of high-level Dhammakaya meditation. Luang Phor Sodh would instruct the small group of followers, whom he had selected to practice Dhammakaya meditation continuously in a special enclosed area, to concentrate their high-level powers on eliminating the problems selected. Normally, the problems were medical in nature, and Luang Phor Sodh was probably most famous for using Dhammakaya meditation to cure ailments. Luang Phor Sodh was also famous for making amulets, and charging them with power derived from high-level Dhammakaya meditation. There are numerous miraculous stories attributed to these amulets, and they are reportedly among some of the most sought after by Thailand's many amulet buyers and traders.

Heir to the Teaching

The enclosed area where the application of high-level Dhammakaya meditation took place became the focal point of the debate surrounding the question of heir to the teaching after the death of Luang Phor Sodh in 1959. As mentioned previously, Luang Phor Sodh personally selected the monks and mae chis to assist him in continual, around-the-clock, high-level Dhammakaya meditation. From those selected, came the eventual leaders, or figureheads, of the modern Dhammakaya movements outside Wat Paknam. Although it was never mentioned to me by anyone explaining the situation of Wat Paknam during Luang Phor Sodh's abbotship, the selection of one monk or mae chi over another must have had tremendous ego boosting/bruising effects on the members of the movement. This would explain the somewhat factional situation which existed at Wat Paknam while Luang

Phor Sodh was abbot, and helps explain the departure of Khun Yai Chan more than ten years after his passing away. The factions at Wat Paknam appear to have formed around meditation masters other than Luang Phor Sodh. This included both the monks and mae chis who practiced high-level Dhammakaya meditation with Luang Phor Sodh in the special enclosed area.

Whether for reasons of advanced proficiency in Dhammakaya meditation, supernatural abilities, personality, or other, many followers of the movement at Wat Paknam followed someone who they perceived as special in addition to Luang Phor Sodh. While this could potentially have been the cause of some problems during Luang Phor Sodh's abbotship, Luang Phor Sodh's position as "rediscoverer" and unquestionable, paramount leader of Dhammakaya meditation kept the problems minute if they ever did arise. This is also important for better understanding how the movement continued after Luang Phor Sodh had passed away. Unlike other movements which followed individuals, the movement at Wat Paknam followed a meditation system and the man who rediscovered and taught it. By Luang Phor Sodh proclaiming those other than himself as proficient enough to be called meditation master, he helped ensure Dhammakaya meditation would continue after his passing away.

There has been debate over the issue of a chosen successor, or heir to the teaching. For Wat Phra Dhammakaya, it is an essential element in the somewhat dogmatic history of their movement. Their claim that Khun Yai Chan was appointed heir is commonly found in temple publications, and stems from the fact that Khun Yai Chan was one of those selected to perform high-level meditation by Luang Phor Sodh. According to those at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Khun Yai Chan was the only one taught the highest levels of Dhammakaya meditation by Luang Phor Sodh, making her the only one capable of continuing the teaching of the meditation system after Luang Phor Sodh's death. This led to an increasingly diffi-

cult situation at Wat Paknam following Luang Phor Sodh's death due to jealousy of the other meditation masters who were not taught the same things as Khun Yai Chan.² Wat Phra Dhammakaya contends that by other meditation masters failing to admit Khun Yai Chan was the one who possessed the complete teachings of Dhammakaya meditation, and due to the eventual adversity Dhammakaya meditation would face by being practiced incorrectly by those unqualified, Khun Yai Chan and her followers decided to leave Wat Paknam and move to Pathum Thani Province, where the "essential teachings" of Luang Phor Sodh could be preserved, and taught to others, by "the Great Abbot's leading disciple".* They received a piece of land, opened their meditation center which would eventually become Wat Phra Dhammakaya, and began the Dhammakaya Foundation.

The Dhammakaya Foundation

The Dhammakaya Foundation is an organization which grew from the Dhammaprasit Foundation, an organization established at Wat Paknam by Khun Yai Chan and her followers to help perpetuate Dhammakaya meditation. The name was changed when the group left Wat Paknam for Pathum Thani, and new goals and objectives were created, among them are: disseminating Buddhism through modern media; to construct and maintain Wat Phra Dhammakaya; and to encourage persons of virtue.³ Wat Phra Dhammakaya's promotional pamphlets and publications help explain more about the movement, and why it has been so successful. From its very beginnings as the Dhammaprasit Foundation at Wat Paknam, the movement

² From a personal interviews with Phra Mettanando Bhikku, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Phatum Thani, Thailand.

* Meaning Khun Yai Chan.

³ Dhammakaya Foundation, "Campaign for the Year of Virtue in Glorification of His Majesty, The King, 1988"

saw itself as representative of what younger members of society, particularly students, desired from Thai Buddhism and Dhammakaya meditation. Khun Yai Chan's followers at Wat Paknam were primarily young, college-aged students. This is one reason why the movement continued to appeal to, and focus its recruitment on college students when the movement shifted to Pathum Thani. It was a movement of essentially young, energetic Bangkokians who took it upon themselves "to disseminate Buddhism through the use of modern media," and "to present traditional teachings in a way that is relevant to contemporary society."⁴ By crafting their meditation institute in ways pleasing to members of contemporary society, which entailed eliminating some less desirable aspects of the traditional neighborhood temple, the movement was able to attract increasingly larger crowds over the years. The less desirable aspects of temples absent from Wat Phra Dhammakaya include: festivals which involve entertainment deemed inappropriate to appear at a temple, such as movies, pop-music concerts, boxing tournaments, gambling, etc.; numerous temple-resident, or stray dogs, and their associated mess; and monks involved with questionable practices such as tattooing, and fortune telling. The temple's growth over the years, both in numbers of disciples and in acreage, indicate they succeeded in reaching many who agreed with their outlook.⁵

University Students and the Dhammakaya Foundation

The movement's focus on university students had two benefits: it brought the students, and their parents money, into the temple; and it assured the temple of having a wealthier than average following after the students graduated and joined

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For further descriptions of the temple's points of attraction, see Zehner.

the ranks of Thailand's upwardly mobile segments of society.⁶ Reaching the parents of university students was relatively easy once the students became active with the temple through the university's student club. As making merit by donating money or food to a temple is certainly nothing new in Thailand, this is done at Wat Phra Dhammakaya as well, but here, it was also institutionalized. An example of this is the temple's small Sunday morning market which sells food and sundry items. This store is conveniently located next to the parking area, and is situated next to a pavilion where monks wait to receive the items purchased at the store. This is essentially a merit mini-mart for followers to stop into on their way from the parking lot to the main meeting hall, and typifies one aspect of how the temple makes it easy for followers to participate in merit making activities. Another example is the Dhammadayada or 'Heirs of the Dhamma', Summer ordination program. This is a program developed for students who wished to ordain temporarily during the regular university summer holidays, in order "round off undergraduate students' academic knowledge with spiritual and ethical practice," as it is described as "The foundation of a moral and humanitarian society."⁷ This two month program begins with military type physical training in order to condition the future monks for the rigors of duthong-style living, which revolves around meditating and sleeping under a tent-like umbrella, followed by ordination and a period of practicing Dhammakaya meditation. The program has also been adapted to provide women the chance to participate in a similar procedure. The main difference being they do not go through any type of ordination, only the physical training and dhutong meditation practices. Special Dhammadayada programs have also been

⁶ For further descriptions of the foundation's efforts in recruiting university students and the Dhammadayada program, see Jackson pp 209-15, and Zehner, p 409-10.

⁷ Dhammakaya Foundation, "World Peace Through Inner Peace, Progress Report 1990 - 1992." p 8.

prepared for army cadets and veterinary surgeons.⁸ This is the only type of temporary ordination Wat Phra Dhammakaya offers to its followers. When Wat Phra Dhammakaya monks ordain, it is meant to be for life. This is also an important feature of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. As opposed to a local temple, where many of the monks may be only ordaining for a short period of time, Wat Phra Dhammakaya offers its followers dedicated, 'career', monks.

After the students have completed their temporary ordination activities, they are likely to continue participating in temple activities. This is also important in impressing the students' parents for the associated money it raises, and also for keeping the followers active in the temple once they begin working. Since its inception, there have been numerous fund-raising activities at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, with a great deal of the money coming from the followers themselves. It is common practice for followers to go door to door in their neighborhoods, and circulate collection materials at work in order to meet the various fund-raising goals the temple sets. One major goal just reached was the collection of money and gold to cast a solid gold, one and a half times life-size image of Luang Phor Sodh. At the casting of the image, Thailand's crown prince, HRH Crown Prince Vajrilonkorn presided over the ceremonies, and machine gun-toting guards from the Thai Army kept away would be thieves. Once this large scale goal was reached, all efforts were focused on the next large scale project; the creation of the Dhammakaya chedi.

The Dhammakaya Chedi

Looking at the Dhammakaya chedi, one can see how it exemplifies the Dhammakaya movement in Thailand. It shares the same main points with those of the movement itself, which are: it blends traditional Buddhist elements with con-

⁸ Ibid.

temporary Dhammakaya beliefs; it allows participation by thousands of interested parties; it is very flamboyant and meant to attract attention; and it raises a considerable amount of money. The design of the chedi is said to come from the very first chedi built in India. In describing the history of chedis in *The Light of Peace*, the English language journal of the Dhammakaya Foundation, a great amount of Wat Phra Dhammakaya doctrine is heaped upon the reader. For example:

In olden times, 'cetiya's (or as they used to be called 'stupas') were built as a symbol of the Lord Buddha's teaching to represent the real body of the Lord Buddha. Such a representation is not of the Buddha's physical body because it is now 2,500 years since his Parinirvana - before the invention of cetiyas. When we talk about the Buddha's real body, we mean Dhammakaya... (so) the building of cetiyas in earliest times, especially in the time of King Asoka, was for paying homage to the Buddha - or the real body of the Lord Buddha, the Dhammakaya.⁹

In other words, the Dhammakaya which chedis were built in olden times to pay respect to is the same Dhammakaya being paid respects to by building the chedi at Wat Phra Dhammakaya. In the article different explanations of what the Dhammakaya is are provided, but they are quite abstract, conceptual, and difficult to understand. For example, the Dhammakaya is explained in the following ways: what the Buddha is himself - what he really is...the Buddhas are known as the truth body of Dhammakaya; the body of enlightenment of the Lord Buddha - an inner body that is not the physical body but is the assembly of all the wisdom of the Lord Buddha.¹⁰ Added confusion comes from the following explanation:

The Buddha taught that the relics of four types of persons are worthy of entombment in a stupa - Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas, arahants and universal monarchs. The Dhammakaya Cetiya by name is clearly in the first category in paying respect to the Lord Buddha and in the second category in paying respect to the Dhamma Body of the Lord Buddha.¹¹

⁹ *Light of Peace*, Vol 6, No. 5, p 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

By this explanation the Dhammakaya is equated with a Paccekabuddha, a term which traditionally describes an individual who has attained enlightenment without the aid of a teacher. This type of Buddha has attained enlightenment, but cannot teach others. It is unclear how this concept can be likened to the "Dhamma Body of the Lord Buddha."

Additional stupefication comes from the following chedi description: "Another meaning of the spherical stupa is that of the Tathagatagarba - a word interchangeable with 'Dhammakaya' and meaning "the womb of the truth" or the "womb of the Lord Buddha."¹² Later in the same article the dome shape of the chedi is attributed to the *pathoma-magga*, the bright sphere seen by some who practice Dhammakaya meditation containing a person's element centers, thereby equating the womb of the truth or the womb of the Buddha with the *pathoma-magga*.

Essentially this article is attempting to appear intellectual (there are even oddly cited footnotes indicating publication referenced), while justifying another fantastic Dhammakaya Foundation project. This is apparently done to boost the fund raising activities of the members, who have little or no doubt that this chedi, and all other chedis are paying homage to the Dhammakaya, their Dhammakaya. When foundation members explained the chedi to me personally, their zeal for the project was impressive. 'This would be the best chedi in the world', this claim was made to me by a number of excited people. 'Each individual Dhammakaya image (one could sponsor for ten thousand baht) would last one thousand years.' This particular remark caught my attention. Upon inquiry I was told that the images would be made from a special metal alloy from Germany, and would withstand the elements for one thousand years. It was also one of the partial reasons given for the rather high price. Apparently after one thousand years, the images would no

¹² Ibid.

longer be able to weather the elements and would dissolve, or breakdown. I silently wondered why they didn't choose to make the images out of aluminum? which is not a special alloy from Germany, but is cheaper and scientists predict will last more than two thousand years before breaking down. The point is, the Dhammakaya chedi more than adequately illustrates how the temple blends traditional symbols with their own modern and intellectual-sounding teachings to establish in their followers a strong sense of faith in, and belonging to the temple.

The next point the chedi typifies is that of allowing mass participation. According to *The Light of Peace*, there will be enough room around the chedi "to accommodate a countless myriad of Dhammakaya images..."¹³ This will allow as many people as possible to participate in this project. As added incentive, the name of the person or company sponsoring the Dhammakaya image will be inscribed on the image. This is also done to ensure the person or company will enjoy prosperity. The relatively small size of the image is another factor which will allow many people to participate. Since the diameter of the chedi will be 108 meters, the circumference at the base will be about 340 meters. This alone will allow for a single row of 1,888 eighteen centimeter images. Due to the chedi's design which calls for concentric circles growing away from the center, this row of images next to the base will be the smallest, allowing further rows to hold more. If there are fifty rows of Dhammakaya images, occupying a space of only nine meters, and approximately two thousand images in each row, that would accommodate about 100,000 images, a rather conservative estimate for the proclaimed "countless myriad" but still an amount which allows great numbers of people to participate.

The next characteristic of the chedi which corresponds to the temple itself is that of attention getting. Wat Phra Dhammakaya would not be able to afford the

¹³ *Light of Peace*, Vol 6, No. 2, p 27.

once quoted¹⁴ amount of 15 million baht a month in expenses if it did not attract attention. To do this, they have embarked on an extensive series of extravagant projects at draw attention to their movement. The Dhammakaya chedi is but one of these. The chedi itself, as explained earlier, is heralded as the chedi "which exemplifies Buddhism as it really is"¹⁵ and will play a key role in the layout of the World Dhammakaya Center, the foundation's ultimate fund raising project. Contained within the chedi will be a solid gold Dhammakaya image, as well as relics of the Buddha. Exactly what relics of the Buddha these will be has not yet been explained. As mentioned earlier, the chedi will be a simple half sphere design, but with the added rows and rows of Dhammakaya images, its appearance becomes anything but simple. The concentric circles emanating from the dome are described as "haloes of light which symbolize the spreading of the Dhamma ever outwards for the peace of the beings of the world,"¹⁶ and in artists' renditions of the completed chedi, it often appears glowing in the darkness, surrounded by thousands of small oil lamps. In these depictions, it strongly resembles a flying saucer from a science fiction movie. However odd it may appear, there is no question that it succeeds in its goal of getting one's attention. In the same way, the temple itself has been involved with a number of enterprises which have been criticized by some and laughed at by others. Most notable is probably their winning a marketing award for their proposal of "selling" Buddhism to the masses.¹⁷

On this point, it is appropriate to bring up the final point both the chedi and the movement share; their fund raising capabilities. If one considers the potential fund raising capabilities of the project, the amount of money raised quickly be-

¹⁴ Taylor, 1990, p 141

¹⁵ Light of Peace, Vol 6, No. 5, p 79.

¹⁶ Light of Peace, Vol 6, No. 2, p 27.

¹⁷ Apinya, p 168.

comes striking. If the conservative estimate of a mere 100,000 Dhammakaya images is considered, the amount of money raised would be one billion baht. Certainly casting the alloy from Germany into images would not cost one billion baht. I even ventured a guess to one foundation member attempting to convince me to sponsor an image, that the images were likely to be mass produced, as opposed to individual castings, to which he answered "probably," unsure of the answer himself. But he assured me that the excess money raised on the chedi project would be used for the construction of the World Dhammakaya Center. He also added that even mass production of a Dhammakaya image did not detract from its sacredness and importance.

On this issue of fund raising it is also important to remember that the temple is reportedly burdened with the financial responsibility of paying 15 million baht a month to cover the cost of the land for the World Dhammakaya Center. If the chedi project is scheduled to be completed in five years as one foundation member reported, and the conservative estimate of 100,000 images cited above is used for reference, then the amount of money raised per month for the chedi project is approximately 16.6 million baht per month. Of course some of the money raised will be spent on the alloy from Germany used to cast the images, and the landscaping of the chedi area, but as mentioned earlier, the excess would be spent on the construction of the World Dhammakaya Center.

By applying these four characteristics to their movement, and making their temple and organization appealing to Bangkok's emerging and already extant upwardly mobile and wealthy classes, Wat Phra Dhammakaya has achieved a level of high degree of monetary or material success. This success has not been limited only to materialistic gains, but has also included receiving ecclesiastical ranks from the King of Thailand for the abbot and assistant abbot. Additional participation by members of the royal family have included HRH Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn and

his family at the casting of the image of Luang Phor Sodh in solid gold as mentioned previously, and the receipt of the Dhammacakra Sima-Pillar award (for organization with the best achievements in Dhamma Propagation) from HRH Prince Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, as a representative of Thailand's National Center for the Promotion of Buddhism.¹⁸ J.L. Taylor cites a Khaopiset article of the Dhammakaya movement which implies the amassing of wealth and receiving ecclesiastical ranks are not unrelated.¹⁹ The article stated that the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya had spent a great deal of money in an attempt to receive the rank of Chao Khun, and when offered the lower rank of Phra Khru, refused the title. Apparently a compromise was reached which enabled the abbot and assistant abbot to receive their ranks.

The reason for expending large amounts of money on matters such as ecclesiastical ranks when there are so many millions of baht to be paid out every month for temple maintenance is that of legitimacy. Much has been written on Buddhism as one of the legitimizing factors of kingship in Thailand,²⁰ but in modern times the relationship between the monarchy and elements within the Thai sangha appears more reciprocal. By attending temple functions and bestowing royal ranks on foundation leaders, the general public views the Dhammakaya movement as less radical, and more in line with mainstream Thai Buddhism. This does not imply that everyone will accept Wat Phra Dhammakaya as normal, but it is a tremendous counter to the charge that Wat Phra Dhammakaya is dangerous to Buddhism. After all, why

¹⁸ Progress Report, p 25.

¹⁹ Khaopiset (Special News) Year 11(3), Vol 585, 21-27 Sept 2531 (1988), cited in Taylor, 1990, p 141.

²⁰ See Tambiah, S.J., *World Conqueror, and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976. Also Ishii, Yoneo, *Sangha, State and Society - Thai Buddhism in History*, Peter Hawkes tr., Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1986. Also, Jackson.

would the movement receive such important attention if it was truly dangerous to Thai Buddhism? Royal recognition is also an important factor within the movement. The idea that Wat Phra Dhammakaya is the future center of Buddhism in the world is significant among followers. Royal recognition of temple members and participation at temple activities works to underscore followers' sense of pride in what they are doing at Wat Phra Dhammakaya. This enthusiasm is applied to future fund raising, and moneys increase. In this way, funds expended for royal recognition and participation function as a type of investment, and previous articles have pointed out Wat Phra Dhammakaya's proficiency in managing its investments.²¹

Wat Phra Dhammakaya's Ultimate Goal

The question which remains, and requires answering is why; why go through the trouble of declaring Wat Phra Dhammakaya the future center of Buddhism in the world, organizing mass gatherings, and attempting to raise such considerable sums of money to build such an elaborate temple complex? And what role does Dhammakaya meditation play in this empire building? The answer lies in the temple's Dhammakaya meditation practice, specifically their claim of attempting to resolve the battle of the supernatural, or *Wicha-rop* mentioned in the previous chapter, by subduing Mara, the ruler of the dark and evil universe. As explained earlier, Wat Phra Dhammakaya is continuing the battle of the supernatural begun by Luang Phor Sodh, by practicing high-level Dhammakaya meditation aimed at destroying evil in the universe. According to followers at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, there are many factors which determine how powerful high-level Dhammakaya meditation can be. These factors include the number of people practicing Dhammakaya meditation at the same time while concentrating on the same topic, and

²¹ See Jackson, and Taylor 1990.

special assistance from devices such as crystals and fossils. Since conquering Mara, and destroying evil in the universe for the benefit of all mankind is the ultimate goal of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, they will take the necessary measures to ensure they can gather enough power to complete the task.

Knowing this, and looking at the four characteristics of the temple and its foundation, one can achieve a better understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. The characteristics again are: blending traditional Thai Buddhist beliefs with contemporary Dhammakaya beliefs; encouraging mass participation; being flamboyant and attracting a great deal of attention; and raising considerable amounts of money. These are all done in an effort to defeat Mara, and bring universal happiness to all beings. To best understand this, each characteristic is explained in detail. The center of Buddhism must be some place in the world, and as Luang Phor Sodh was born in Thailand, and rediscovered Dhammakaya meditation in Thailand, it is a fitting place to establish the center. Labeling Wat Phra Dhammakaya the center is essential for high-level Dhammakaya meditation as concentration must be focused some place where the power generated during meditation can be put to best use. It should be remembered that the battle of the supernatural takes place in the deep cosmos, but it can be controlled from Wat Phra Dhammakaya. A temple which is attempting to become an important center for Buddhism should not be viewed in its native country as odd, heretical, or dangerous. Therefore it is necessary for Wat Phra Dhammakaya to appear as mainstream as possible, and not something strange or threatening. The temple's image may have been tarnished in the past, but measures have been taken to establish one more positive. This is important for their next characteristic, encouraging thousands of followers to participate. This relates directly to the belief that the number of people practicing Dhammakaya meditation at the same time increases the power generated. This power will be used by those engaged in the battle of the supernatural at Wat Phra Dhammakaya. This character-

istic is an especially important element of the World Dhammakaya Center, which will use the most sophisticated technology available to allow Dhammakaya meditation to be performed simultaneously at several different locations all over the world, the power generated during which will be focused at Wat Phra Dhammakaya. As this will require a considerable amount of money, a great deal of attention must be generated, thus the need for sensational projects such as solid gold statues and fantastic chedis. The money raised for these projects helps fund the World Dhammakaya Center, which will be the focal point of world-wide Dhammakaya meditation practice, which will enable those skilled in high-level Dhammakaya meditation to ultimately defeat Mara, and bring peace to the world and the universe.

The Development of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram

There was a time when Wat Phra Dhammakaya did not enjoy the secure base it does today. When the foundation's participation in large scale, and often risky business ventures earned the temple increasing suspicion and threats of sangha investigation, supporters of Dhammakaya meditation not associated with Wat Phra Dhammakaya decided some action was necessary to counter the potentially disastrous effects official censure of the temple would have on the meditation system. It was decided to establish another Dhammakaya meditation institute separate from Wat Phra Dhammakaya in order to safeguard the meditation system from collateral damage it might incur from the problems associated with actions being taken against Wat Phra Dhammakaya. This would probably not have been necessary if Wat Phra Dhammakaya had not been so vocal in its claim that they possessed the true, correct teachings of Dhammakaya meditation. By Wat Phra Dhammakaya declaring this, and becoming involved with businesses and activities unbecoming a traditional Thai temple, the meditation system would be included in any investiga-

tion and censure the temple experienced. In order to combat this, the Assistant Abbot for Meditation Affairs of Wat Paknam, Phra Bhavana Koso Thera (Veera Kanuttamo) and an enthusiastic lay meditation instructor, Sermchai Polpartharidhi, organized the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Institute on 74 rai of land in Rajburi Province. Like Wat Phra Dhammakaya, this institute also has a foundation to support it. It is the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation. And also like Wat Phra Dhammakaya, the institute became a temple. But that is where the similarities between the two movements cease. Mr. Sermchai ordained in 1986 and as Phra Ajahn Maha Sermchai Jayamanggalo became the abbot of Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram when it was registered as such in 1991.²²

The objectives and goals of the Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Foundation are less grandiose than those of the Dhammakaya Foundation, but at the same time they are more focused, and concerned primarily with the teaching of Dhammakaya meditation to the general public and instructing monks in Dhammakaya meditation to enable them to become competent meditation masters. Also listed in the institute's objectives is the following goal: "To maintain the "Right" Dhammakaya Buddhist Meditation Practices the way Luang Phor Wat Paknam (His Most Venerable Phra Mongkol Thepmuni), the late Abbot of Wat Paknam Phasi Charoen had taught his pupils."²³ When I inquired whether this implied that the Dhammakaya meditation being taught at Wat Phra Dhammakaya was not "Right," Phra Ajahn Sermchai explained that what was being taught at Wat Phra Dhammakaya was not 'not right', but rather limited. The explanation he provided is important for understanding the growth and development of both Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram. He explained that the Dhammakaya meditation taught at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is a modified, narrow version of what Luang

²² Phra Ajahn Sermchai, p 94.

²³ Ibid.

Phor Sodh taught while he was alive. This is because the meditation master of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Khun Yai Chan, was not taught the higher levels of application of Dhammakaya meditation. These levels enable the practitioner to understand Buddhist Dhamma through Dhammakaya meditation. To understand these higher levels, one must have a good enough comprehension of the Pali language to be able to read and understand sutras in the Buddhist canon. Khun Yai Chan, he informed me, is illiterate, and cannot even read or write in Thai, let alone Pali.²⁴ The fact that Khun Yai Chan is illiterate is not disputed by Wat Phra Dhammakaya. In fact it is used to enhance her proclaimed position as the "leading disciple," and "heir to the tradition". In describing the successful campaign to raise enough gold and money to cast a one and a half lifetime sized image of Luang Phor Sodh, the following description of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is provided:

Who would believe that a small and illiterate farmer's daughter from Nakorn Chaisri would one day be the leader of university graduates in founding a temple? Again who would believe that a whole generation of Thai youngsters with the world as their oyster would side-step the bright lights of worldly success to ordain for life in service to their religion?²⁵

To Phra Ajahn Sermchai, the fact that Khun Yai Chan is illiterate is significant, as Luang Phor Sodh could not have taught anyone who could not understand Pali the highest levels of Dhammakaya meditation which deal with Dhamma principles. He describes Khun Yai Chan's supernatural capability as assessing merit. This fact is also supported by Methanando Bhikku of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, who described

²⁴ From a personal interview with Phra Ajahn Sermchai, Wat Saket, Bangkok, Thailand.

²⁵ Light of Peace, Vol 6, No.1, p 8. Also the second sentence was added as an example of how The Light of Peace often sensationalizes facts. They are referring to Wat Phra Dhammakaya monks who vow to ordain for life, and apparently designate the approximately two hundred monks who have ordained at Wat Phra Dhammakaya as an entire generation of young Thai men. There are however, several million young Thai men in the same generation as Wat Phra Dhammakaya monks who have not ordained for life at Wat Phra Dhammakaya, so the term 'whole generation' used above is misleading.

Khun Yai Chan as a type of "merit calculator."²⁶ She is described as having the ability to determine exactly how much merit, and one would assume demerit, one has made by a given act. This fact would explain a great deal about the emphasis Wat Phra Dhammakaya places on giving, primarily money. The act of donating to different projects is described as creating different kinds of primarily future happiness. Giving money for the gold casting of Luang Phor Sodh assures one: "will have a joyful heart for evermore. . .not for a year or two, but for countless lifetimes reminiscing as to the unrivaled good of he who has rediscovered "*Vijja Dhammakaya*."²⁷ Other types of happiness such as spiritual and worldly success are frequently mentioned in pamphlets and periodicals describing Wat Phra Dhammakaya's special projects. What is out of place here is not the temple's promises of benefits to be had by giving, as this is in line with most schools of Buddhism, but rather the emphasis the temple places on giving.

Due to Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram's formation in response to the problems Wat Phra Dhammakaya faced, there exists some rivalry between the two temples. Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram describes its reasons for existence primarily as the protection and proliferation of Dhammakaya meditation, as opposed to becoming the center of Buddhism in the world. Protection here also refers to countering claims made at Wat Phra Dhammakaya that the system of meditation they teach is the true teaching of Luang Phor Sodh. Although the temple and meditation center together are quite large, 185 rai, their plans for development of the land are modest, with much of the land used for open-air meditation. The temple and foundation keep strong ties with Wat Paknam, with the abbot and assistant abbot listed as the first and second vice presidents of the meditation institute.

²⁶ From a personal interview with Phra Mettanando, Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Phatum Thani, Thailand.

²⁷ From a Wat Phra Dhammakaya pamphlet for Magha Puja Day, 25 February 1994.

The president is Somdej Phra Buddhajan, abbot of Wat Saket, and an important member of Thailand's Sangha Council of Elders. This affords Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram a slight advantage over Wat Phra Dhammakaya, whose strongest supporter is the abbot of Wat Benjamabopit. Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram's propagation of Dhammakaya meditation revolves around bi-annual meditation training sessions, scheduled 1 - 15 May, 1 - 15 December each year. The focus of these sessions is on training monks, although lay participation is welcomed and encouraged. These sessions have been held since 1982, but Phra Ajahn Sermchai felt that lasting progress in Thailand's provinces was not being made. Monks who came to the training sessions were advancing, but when they returned to their home provinces they often faced an apathetic response from the natives, and sometimes opposition. In order to counter these reactions, Phra Ajahn Sermchai developed meditation teams which would accompany monks back to their homes. One team would spend about two weeks traveling to each section of the country; the north, the northeast, and the south. The temple's location in the central region does not necessitate a central region journey. In doing so, provincial residents could meet more monks who practiced and preached the benefits of Dhammakaya meditation, and be more open to trying the meditation system. These trips could also be used to assure provincial residents who have a reserved feelings about Wat Phra Dhammakaya, that this Dhammakaya system is the system of Luang Phor Sodh and Wat Paknam, and not related to Wat Phra Dhammakaya. According to Phra Ajahn Sermchai, the trips have been very successful, and will make a difference in helping to more firmly establish Dhammakaya meditation in the provinces.

When asked to characterize the members of his movement, Phra Ajahn Sermchai described his followers as primarily monks with some followers from the public and private sector. When asked why his followers from the public and pri-

vate sectors were smaller in number than those of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, he stated simply that he was not involved in active recruitment of students, nor did he advise his followers to act in this manner. Essentially, his is a movement focused almost entirely on the meditation technique. There are no plans for an expansive temple complex to be labeled the center of Buddhism in the world, and for this reason, no need to go through the immense fund raising activities to support such a center.

One Origin, Three Movements

With this in mind, it is interesting to look at the three "centers" of Dhammakaya meditation in Thailand today to see how they relate to one another, and how the meditation system has evolved over time. To do this one must start at Wat Paknam, the original center of Dhammakaya meditation. Wat Paknam became famous while Luang Phor Sodh was abbot. This fame stemmed primarily from the meditation technique he rediscovered, and the abilities it gave him to heal the sick, grant other miracles, and make amulets believed to be possessed of great power. His fame spread throughout the country, and his meditation system, although popular, also reportedly earned him some suspicion from other monks. While Luang Phor Sodh was abbot, Wat Paknam was a temple where many meditation masters taught Dhammakaya meditation, although there was no question as to who was the ultimate leader of the technique. After his passing away, a disagreement over who was, or should be, the leader came to the surface, and resulted in the departure of Khun Yai Chan and her young followers. They moved to their meditation institute, reformed the existing Dhammaprasit Foundation into the Dhammakaya Foundation, and began planning their empire, which is today becoming the World Dhammakaya Center. They claim to control the true teaching of Luang Phor Sodh, but by their own account, and others associated with Dhammakaya meditation, they have changed the technique. Their claim to the true teachings lies

in the fact that Khun Yai Chan was the leading disciple of Luang Phor Sodh while he was alive, and assisted him in high-level Dhammakaya meditation at Wat Paknam, thereby making her the leader of the meditation system. In Dhammakaya Foundation publications she is constantly referred to the "leading disciple," "the most adept," and "heir to the tradition." There is no way to support these claims, just as there is little proof to dispute them. This has become a point of contention between the three temples which is one's word against another's. It is relatively easy for leaders of Wat Paknam and Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram to claim the Dhammakaya meditation they teach is the original, unchanged method, which may be why claims of legitimacy are seldom stated. For Wat Phra Dhammakaya however, the claim is an essential element in the personality cults surrounding Khun Yai Chan and the abbot and assistant abbot. It becomes confusing when claims to the original teachings of Luang Phor Sodh and modifying the technique appear together, as in the following article:

Some are surprised to find out that most of the outstanding disciples in his (Luang Phor Sodh's) time were female, not monks - the most adept being the nun Khun Yay Upasika Jan Kohn-Nok-Yung - founder of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. The Great Abbot probably never intended his teachings to become a personality cult and the trend at Wat Phra Dhammakaya for the younger generation to meditate and to simplify meditation for beginners has done much to place the emphasis on the technique itself in the present day. The development of the technique at Wat Phra Dhammakaya has opened the meditation for the masses instead of focusing on monastic circles as in the time of the Great Abbot.²⁸

Apparently the author of this article saw nothing conflicting in presenting evidence claiming meditation practiced at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is the true Dhammakaya meditation and at the same time describing how it has been changed and developed

²⁸ Light of Peace, Vol 5, No.6, p 90. Also, another point which is ironic to bring out from this article is the inference that Wat Paknam has become home to the personality cult of Luang Phor Sodh, while failing to mention the enormous personality cult surrounding the abbot of Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

to meet the needs of the masses. It is probably Charles Keyes who most accurately described the changes Dhammakaya meditation experienced at Wat Phra Dhammakaya when he said the system was "popularized"²⁹ by the abbot and assistant abbot. This is accurate description because Khun Yai Chan, possibly due to her advanced age, leads a very isolated life at the temple, and serves primarily as a figure head that offers legitimacy of the meditation technique to the movement. The driving force behind the movement comes from the abbot and assistant abbot. The World Dhammakaya Center is their vision. It is their goal to become the leaders of Buddhism not only in Thailand, but in the world.

"Popularized" is also the most accurate way to describe the changes to the meditation system. There is no confusing Dhamma to concentrate on while meditating, it has been smoothed out of the system, and replaced with relatively easy to understand features such as presenting alms to the Buddha in Nirvana to make merit.³⁰ Phra Ajahn Sermchai contends that it was never there, as Khun Yai Chan did not have a background in Buddhist Dhamma to apply to the system, rather she assisted in high-level Dhammakaya meditation to effect miracles, and in the wicha-rope mentioned in the previous chapter. For this reason, Wat Phra Dhammakaya teaches an abbreviated, convenient system that emphasizes success or spiritual progress usually achieved through giving, primarily money, the benefits of which can be explained by Khun Yai Chan in her capacity as expert in calculating merit. The following excerpt describing the efforts of those who raised gold and money for the casting of the Luang Phor Sodh image explains this well:

In their entire lifetime, they have only ever obtained two or three ounces of gold to go round their own neck..but somehow through recollecting their own past tri-

²⁹ Keyes, p 134.

³⁰ I was told this at a Sunday service I attended. The event is also listed in the Light of Peacs calendar of events, usually done on the first Sunday of each month.

umphs success seems to fill every moment. Persuading others to join in merit with them, they find results never imagined...miraculously...until in retrospect they wonder how they managed it. They feel that only a kilo is a trifling matter and end up with more gold than they originally intended! Anyone who undertakes and succeeds in some great work feels rightfully fulfilled and self-assured. No obstacle seems significant. Defeat is unthinkable.³¹

Although Wat Luang Phor Sodh Dhammakayaram and Wat Paknam are very close in many ways, the meditation system has changed somewhat under Phra Ajahn Sermchai. Basically, the change involves the teaching of high-level Dhammakaya meditation, and allowing access to the teachings of these higher levels. Phra Ajahn Sermchai felt that there were some people at Wat Paknam who wanted to keep many of the secrets of high-level meditation for themselves, or for followers within their group. He disagrees with them in teaching Dhammakaya meditation in this secretive nature. Critics of Phra Ajahn Sermchai however point out the potentially serious problems of teaching someone high-level techniques who is not prepared to use them, and the possible troubling consequences. Phra Ajahn Sermchai counters this criticism by saying that it was up to the meditation master to determine whether or not someone was prepared for the more advanced levels of Dhammakaya meditation, and denied that he meant teaching simply anyone who requested to be taught regardless of their spiritual progress, which could indeed prove to be a problem. He is primarily concerned with keeping Dhammakaya meditation available for all people interested, and against shrouding the technique in esoteric protectionism, which could eventually lead to its deterioration and disappearance from the earth once again.

³¹ Light of Peace, Vol 6, No.1, p 10. (Original grammar and punctuation from article)