The paradox of sacred consumption in the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya

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Abstract

This study analyzes the complicated relationship between consumer society and religious activities, focusing on the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, a movement whose followers have increased since the 1970s, especially among the new urban middle classes in Thailand. With regard to the activities of the temple, there appear to be two different images. Outsiders criticize the temple for religious practice which promote consumerism and worldly desire, but followers of the temple claim their religious practice is a protection against contemporary stimuli of worldly desire. These views are not necessarily incongruous if the temple’s activities are considered within the framework of a consumer society where consumption is not merely the acquisition of material commodities, but an act of social differentiation through the manipulation of signs. Information and images, including those of religious activities, are part of this consumption and differentiation. Discourses which oppose consumerism may then become a commodity which is consumed. Thus critics of Dhammakaya may be misreading the subjective intentions of the temple’s members, but equally Dhammakaya practice may indeed be promoting consumerism of anti-consumerist discourse.

Introduction

Economic development policies, introduced by the Thai government since the end of the 1950s have greatly influenced Thai society. The major economic activities have shifted from traditional agriculture accompanied by state-owned modern industry to private enterprise in heavy chemical industries, agro businesses, and service
industries. Institutions of higher education have also been established to produce a workforce for these modern industries. Although there is still a tremendous gap between the rich and poor, the social change that occurred around the 1970s resulted in a new urban middle class with higher educational levels and stronger purchasing power. In the late 1980s, with the help of foreign investment, the Thai economy achieved double-digit rates of economic growth.

However, in 1997 the bubble economy of Thailand collapsed leading to the Asian financial crisis. After the crisis, the Thai economy suffered from a recession for a short while, but recovered through finance from the IMF, expansion of foreign trade, and a stimulation of domestic demand through private consumption. By 2003, the economic growth rate reached 6 percent.

This era of economic development, rapid growth, and crisis has had consequences for Thai Buddhist society. Wat Phra Dhammakaya (Phra Wat Phra Thammakai or Phra Dhammakaya temple) emerged in the early 1970s and increased its membership since the 1980s. During the late 1980s, the wat purchased a large tract of land, which gave rise to a legal dispute. In 1994, the wat began to advertise the construction of a great pagoda. From the year after the Asian financial crisis (1998), the temple aggressively sold amulets to raise contributions toward the construction of this pagoda. In 1999, newspapers were filled with articles questioning the suitability of the activities and teachings of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. A former abbot and a lay executive member were suspected of embezzling temple assets in late 1999. The trial extended for a long period until August 2006, when the court dropped the case at the request of the prosecution on grounds that the former abbot and executive member had returned 959.3 million baht to the temple, that the teaching had been changed to conform to the Buddhist canon, and subsequently, the temple supported the religious activities of the state and the society at large. The prosecution also stated that withdrawal was the best way to contribute to unity in Thai society, because the suit has created a big rift in the society of Thai Buddhism. The media suggested that influential supporters of Wat Phra Dhammakaya may have interfered in the court case.
Continuous news and reports about the case have attracted considerable attention regarding the activities of the temple. Even before 1999, researchers had offered critical opinions on the activities of the temple and its related groups. These criticisms focused not only on the distortion of Theravada Buddhism in Dhammakaya teaching and embezzlement of temple assets mentioned above but also on the temple’s commercialized and consumption-oriented practices. However, members of the temple denied such criticisms. According to some members, their teaching also criticizes consumerism. For example, a book that is read by many young members criticizes the selfish attitude of merchants and businessmen that do not care for society. It also stresses the importance of inner contentment with moderate wealth, and overcoming shortage through diligence and new ideas. Some devout members have chosen a simple life in the temple instead of seeking secular wealth.

Even though there are two contradicting views on the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, both opinions are based on anti-consumerism. What does this difference and similarity mean and how is it possible to connect consumerism and anti-consumerism? This paper discusses the relationship between the structure of activities in this temple and consumer society.

This study does not consider whether the teaching of Dhammakaya meditation, the so-called “Wicha Dhammakaya,” is a “proper” teaching of Buddhism in Thai society. One of the reasons for this reservation is my lack of ability, knowledge, or authority to make judgment on the orthodox teaching of Theravada Buddhism. It is certain that Phra Thammapidok (P. A. Payutto), a famous monk and a leading authority on Theravada Buddhism teaching, concluded that the philosophy of Dhammakaya meditation is not based on the Pali canon (Tripitaka) of Theravada Buddhism, and the House Commission of Religion, Art, and Culture directed the temple to correct its teachings. These comments can serve as an important basis for judgment. Yet in August 2006, the prosecution stated that the teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is correct according to the canon (Tripitaka) of Theravada Buddhism. However, the significance of this statement is not clear, because the temple has for a long time asserted that Dhammakaya teaching is
based on the Tripitaka, but this had not prevented the criticisms mentioned above. It seems that the controversy was overlooked for some political reason.

The second reason for my reservation is that even if the teaching of the temple is judged as unorthodox according to the teaching of Theravada Buddhism, the issue will move to another dimension of complicated controversy on the variation in religious teaching between sects. For example, this leads to essential questions such as “What is Buddhism?” and “How we can explain the difference between Theravada Buddhism based on the Pali Canon (Tripitaka) and Mahayana Buddhism(s) which draws on various other Buddhist scriptures?” Although it may be rather difficult to place the teaching of Dhammakaya meditation within Theravada Buddhism based on the Pali Canon, I refrain from judging whether the Dhammakaya teaching is acceptable as a “proper” teaching of Buddhism in Thai society.

Further, I have not examined the management of the large assets and funds of the temple by its chief monks and lay executive members because it is difficult to obtain reliable information.

This study uses field research to examine how the pious belief of ordinary members in Wat Phra Dhammakaya and its organizational activities are linked to consumer society.

Although the controversy over Wat Phra Dhammakaya seems to be a bygone issue and the legal charge was withdrawn by the prosecution, it is quite important to understand the structure of the temple’s activities even now. Even after the Asian financial crisis of 1997, consumerism did not decline in Thai society; instead, the Thai economy recovered on the basis of domestic personal consumption, thereby exacerbating the issue of consumer society and religion.

Wat Phra Dhammakaya and its associate institutions

Wat Phra Dhammakaya is a large temple located in Pathumthani Province, north of Bangkok. The temple teaches a unique method of meditation which differs greatly from orthodox forms of mediation in Theravada Buddhism. This Dhammakaya meditation was established by Phramonkon Thepmuni (Sot Chanthasaro 1884–1959) who was a former abbot of Wat Paknam,
located in Phasi Charoen district near the center of Bangkok. He handed this unique practice down to several groups of his pupils. Wat Phra Dhammakaya is one of the largest groups in this lineage.

Dhammakaya meditation practice starts by meditating on a light (sphere) crystal ball or on a Buddha figure in the mind, thereby cultivating the inner self along various stages that eventually lead to Dhammakaya, the Dharma body. This meditation aims to achieve nirvana through the experience of unity with the Dhammakaya in the mind. Nirvana is regarded as the ultimate goal in life. However, the word “nirvana” in the teaching of Dhammakaya meditation is interpreted as a domain that can be reached with Dhammakaya as the “essential self.” Therefore, many monks assert that the teaching is inconsistent with the basic idea of non-self in Theravada Buddhism. Furthermore, it is believed that the practice of Dhammakaya meditation can not only lead to nirvana but also give rise to supernatural powers of protection and worldly happiness. (The temple claims these teachings have been corrected, and the prosecution accepted this claim in dropping the case, but I have not ascertained whether practice has truly changed. This account is based on the situation at the time of my research.)

There are three key persons who played a central role in establishing Wat Phra Dhammakaya and its organization: the first abbot Phra Thammachayo (1944—), who is the current president of the temple organization; the current abbot Phra Thattachiwo; and a female practitioner Ubasika Jan (1908-2000), who was the meditation teacher of the former two. While Phra Thammachayo and Phra Thattachiwo were students of Kasetsart University, they became pupils of Ubasika Jan. After graduating, they were ordained and established a small meditation center for young people in 1970. The center became a temple in 1977 and was named Wat Phra Dhammakaya. Today the temple occupies a large tract of land and its organization has spread throughout Thailand and to more than twenty foreign countries. The temple currently performs grand rituals three times a year and it is said that more than a hundred thousand people attended in its heyday. In 1997 there were 511 monks, 226 novices under the age of twenty, 108 lay male trainees, and 307 lay female trainees in the temple. A number of these trainees comprised the administrative staff. These figures include
only those who vow permanent monkhood. If we add temporary monks and novices, the number would reach approximately two thousand. However, with the exception of the permanent monks, there is no membership system so it is hard to determine the exact number of followers. Most of the followers are classified as new urban middle class, but urban followers who have lower education levels are also increasing.

Apart from its unique meditation practice, Wat Phra Dhammakaya attracts people because of its massive pagoda and assembly hall, and through marketing strategies and use of mass media. The temple takes pride in its well-managed administration and disciplined practice. This is illustrated in its main rituals performed at important occasions in a year. These are great events during which a hundred thousand people are seated in orderly lines, giving a religious and aesthetic impression to participants. Photographs and videos of these events are used for advertisement purposes and for entertainment by followers. Training activities, such as occasional mass ordination programs for young people, bring a sense of efficiency, discipline, and beauty.

Other activities of the temple include weekly meditation sessions and donations to monks. Several types of Buddha images or amulets with supposedly supernatural power are distributed to followers, depending on the amount of their donation. The temple has consistently provided various items such as amulets and staged events such as the construction of new buildings in order to increase the flow of donations.

The Dhammakaya Foundation and the Student Buddhist Club organize other activities. For example, the foundation provides short-term retreats at resorts. Student Buddhist clubs of universities also organize quiz contests about Buddhist teaching called the “Dhamma Quiz,” exhibitions of Buddhist teaching called “Path of Progress Exhibition,” and mass ordinations. These activities also provide opportunities to recruit new members.

Religious practice and consumerism

Many researchers and critics evaluate the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya from the perspective of commercialization and
consumerism, pointing to “the legitimization of capital accumulation for “moral’ ideals,”11 offering a new package of nature, tranquility, order, cleanliness for religion at a reasonable price,12 “commercializing of ‘Making Merit,’ laying importance on marketing strategy,”13 and encouraging consumption by increasing the types of merit-making and stages of mystic experience through meditation practice.14 The media have carried critiques such as: “The Dhammakaya abbot is either an ambitious saint, victimized by people jealous of his enormous success, or an unmatched devilish schemer who knows exactly how to exploit religious belief”; and, “Due to the sheer size of his religious empire, estimated to be worth Bt20–40 billion, and a following of hundreds of thousands, he has practically managed to hold the entire nation hostage.”15

However, followers of the temple, especially devoted followers, think of their own practice as neither an act of satisfying their desire and accumulation of capital nor the mere leisure of enjoying the comfortable atmosphere of the temple. Rather, they think that they are ascetic practitioners who seek spiritual value and keep a distance from the worldly society that stimulates desire. It is necessary to examine the opinions of both those who criticize Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the followers in order to clarify the reasons for the difference in these opinions. Furthermore, it is important to deepen our understanding of the relationship between consumerism and religious practice. What kind of act is conducted through religious consumerism? In a consumer society, consumption is not merely the act of acquiring material luxuries, but an act of differentiation achieved by the manipulation of signs.

I will first discuss the relation between consumerism in common usage and Buddhist ethics in terms of two different levels of belief. I will then introduce a way of viewing consumption which is based on sociological theory and which differs from common usage. Finally, I will examine the relation between the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and consumer society.

Two levels of belief

The activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya involve two levels of belief.16 The first is the worldly level of belief, such as enjoying the beautiful, clean, and well-organized atmosphere of the temple,
experiencing well-prepared rituals, or seeking worldly pleasure of a
wealthy life. The second is the transcendental level of belief such as
aiming for the state of nirvana on the basis of Dhammakaya
teaching. Many followers at the first level donate money, sometimes
in relatively large amounts, to the temple or monks and then
participate in meditation sessions in the temple for seeking the
worldly pleasure of the temple’s atmosphere and a wealthy and
healthy life from the mystic power of meditation, merit-making,
and amulets. The more devoted followers seek the transcendental
goal of nirvana.

The current abbot explains that

Buddhism is overflowing with eternal and essential truth. If we
compare it to a commodity, it is one of the highest qualities.
However, marketing it is now a problem.\textsuperscript{17}

Wat Phra Dhammakaya points to these two levels of belief to
justify its teachings on amulets.

Many people need something to support their mind and soul.
Such objects\textsuperscript{18} motivate and inspire them to perform good deeds.
Consequently, after their spirituality levels are increased and their
worldly desires reduced, they do not need to rely on these objects
anymore.\textsuperscript{19}

For example, relying on amulets of a Buddha image is like
catching a wooden board when drowning; once you have become
a good swimmer, you need not hold on to the board anymore.\textsuperscript{20}

These explanations can be portrayed as exploiting Buddhism
for the temple’s business. However, it is also possible to understand
them as inviting people to enter an elementary religious life by
using advertisements which emphasize worldly happiness at the first
stage, in order to lead towards a more profound level of belief at a
later stage.

Even Phra Paisan Wisalo, a famous monk and social critic in
Thailand, expresses similar ideas, though he has a critical opinion
regarding the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and the
influence of consumerism. Phra Paisan states that Buddhism in
contemporary society needs not only to control consumerism but to
carefully take consumerism into religious activities in order to
attract people living in a contemporary consumer society. He uses
examples such as distributing audiotapes or videotapes about Buddhist teaching, not to seek profit but to invite people to temples, or distributing amulets in order to compose people’s minds and lead them to a more profound level of religious practice.

Therefore, criticism of consumerism which focuses on the satisfaction of material desire and which fails to take into account the two levels of belief and the relationship between them, may be beside the point and ineffective. In the case of amulets, for example, we should rather ask whether monks do in fact lead their followers from an elementary belief to more profound practice, as the two-level theory claims. To provide a concrete example in the case of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, we can find out whether followers who participated in the mass ordination of the temple and have learned teaching and meditation for a long time have less attachment to amulets than other followers.

However, even though the temple’s activities may be reconciled with Buddhist teaching in this way, these activities may be subject to the system of consumption in consumer society. In other words, even activities which are claimed to work against material desire may be transformed into facilitators of consumer society. In the next section, I explain the concept of consumption and consumer society based on a sociological theory which is different from common usage.

**Characteristics of consumer society**

The term consumer society has been used in several contexts. People in contemporary society have realized that industrial society has reached a high level and some big changes have been made within the society. Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist, investigated this social change. In his work (1970), he states that consumer society is not a society that spreads waste or luxury but one in which people systematically internalize the rules of consumption that adapt to the structure of capitalism. In other words, “the consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption. That is, there is a new and specific mode of socialization related to the emergence of new productive forces and the monopoly restructuring of a high-
productivity economic system.\textsuperscript{25}

Consumer society is a society that has changed the meaning of consumption to promote the expansion of the system of capitalism. For this expansion and change, a new mechanism for more consumption is needed beyond consumption based on the easily satisfied use-value of goods. Such a new mechanism does not stress commodities with use-value and exchange-value, but commodities that have sign-value which show the position of their owner in the system of social differentiation. In this mechanism, the people become competitive and endless manipulators of objects to highlight their social differences from other people or to show a higher status, even while upholding the myth of living in an egalitarian and affluent society.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus, in a consumer society people buy more things and more varied things in order to differentiate themselves, and by so doing they expand the amount of consumption while also reproducing the system of this social differentiation based on a shared set of signs.\textsuperscript{27} Competitive differentiation is based not just on the value of objects but the meaning of the signs attached to these objects. Commodities such as information and images are consumed more because these are rapidly developed as new products.

Consumption does not have to be ostentatious. Indeed anti-ostentatious consumption also has a sign value. For example, modest interior decoration can be a sign of a higher status as compared to upstart-like flashy decoration. Therefore, a scornful attitude toward material satisfaction or an anti-consumption discourse has a part in the system of signs and becomes “meta-consumption,” another way of showing difference within the same system.\textsuperscript{28} Consumption in a consumer society is not an act based on the desire to obtain luxurious commodities, but a socio-cultural manipulation of signs based on the desire to improve oneself and raise one’s status in the social structure.

Against this background, I will now analyze the religious activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya using both the subjective interpretation of its ordinary members and analysis of its organization.
Worldly consumption and sacred consumption

It is important to separate the sociological analysis of religious activities in terms of consumption, differentiation, and the manipulation of signs, from the criticism of consumerism as mere satisfaction of material desire. The sociological analysis of consumer society helps to clarify how anti-consumerist teachings become part of the consumerist economy. This analysis focuses on the mechanism whereby consumer society transforms anti-consumerism into meta-consumption.

Critics accuse Wat Phra Dhammakaya of promoting consumerism (as commonly understood), but followers of the temple deny that they are indulging in consumerism. Rather, they assert that they are restraining their worldly desire (in other words, being anti-consumerist) in order to reach the ultimate goal of the transcendent nirvana. The pursuit of this ideal results in the expansion of the temple’s organization and the proliferation of its activities. How do these two views of Wat Phra Dhammakaya co-exist?

Why are the followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya interested in religious activities which critics believe is consumerism? A preliminary response would be to say that such activities are natural as they are living in a consumer society. Yet why do followers choose such consumptive religious activities rather than alternatives such as sight seeing, clinical beauty treatments, or music concerts? The answer must be that members of Wat Phra Dhammakaya are attracted to its activities precisely because these activities are different from those of other temples and different from worldly consumerist activities such as sight-seeing and beauty treatments.

The members are actively differentiating themselves through activities which show a critical towards common consumerism. They donate money to the temple for making merit, practice meditation in a refreshing atmosphere, participate in spectacle rituals, and enjoy the photographs and videos taken at rituals. They are also given amulets. They believe these activities contribute to the restraint of their own desire. Consider the case of a former Miss Thailand World (1997) who responded to a newspaper reporter’s critical comment about her large amount of donations to Wat Phra Dhammakaya.
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What's wrong with spending lots of money on making merit if one gets a good feeling in return? Why does nobody complain when someone uses the same amount of money to buy a luxury car? It's all the same. One gets a good feeling (from doing that too). 29

It seems that she thinks of the religious practice of making merit as consumption. However, she chose making merit instead of the worldly consumption of purchasing a luxury car. Another follower states this point more clearly:

My experience at the special meditation session in Chiang Mai has resulted in a complete change in my lifestyle and character. Previously, in order to contain my frustration and irritation, I used to frequent restaurants and enjoy scrumptious meals, and take holidays to resorts in Pattaya or in Chiang Mai.

But now my outlook towards life has changed completely. I now take pleasure in simply visiting this temple every Sunday. Meditating at the temple makes me feel very good. I have even begun to enjoy the simple food provided at the temple. Moreover, I can understand what makes me feel like donating money to the temple. Once before, when I witnessed someone donate over 10,000 Baht, I was very surprised, but now I know the feeling. I also want to spread this happiness that I feel so that others can get the opportunity to make merit by giving donations. 30

These remarks show that consumption at Wat Phra Dhammakaya is different from usual worldly consumption which satisfies material desire. Followers perceive it as an act of anti-consumerism and a sacred practice for improving spirituality by reducing worldly desire. However, it is also true that such religious practice involves consumption. The followers of the temple make a distinction between worldly consumption on the one hand and sacred consumption that includes the criticism to the worldly consumption on the other.

Followers reduce their worldly desire while expanding consumption at the same time. At the first stage, the shift from worldly consumption to sacred consumption can form an elementary level of reducing worldly desire. For example, they give up a holiday at a beach and instead participate in a meditation...
session at a resort hotel organized by the Dhammakaya foundation, and use the money saved to donate to the temple in return for receiving special amulets. At the next stage, they make merit by acquiring the many kinds of new sacred items provided by the temple, practice meditation in the open courtyard of the temple, and maintain a simple lifestyle within the Buddhist precepts while at the temple. More devoted followers also keep the precepts in everyday life, participate in mass ordination with strict training on discipline, and donate their service to help in the preparation of spectacle rituals and other organizational activities. Finally, if they make nirvana the ultimate goal of their life, they throw away their chance to get relatively high salaries in their profession and choose to become a staff member of the foundation. They work for the Dhammakaya organization with a small salary and a simple life as a semi-renouncer living in the temple. Some are ordained as lifelong monks and support the temple activities completely, contributing to the expansion of the organization.

From the subjective standpoint of the followers, this ladder of practice is seen as a means to reduce worldly desire. Refraining from worldly consumption (in other words, anti-consumption) is achieved by shifting to sacred consumption. The reduction of worldly desire supports the expansion of religious consumptive activities by the temple and foundation as a whole. Anti-consumption becomes a tool for the organizational expansion of the temple.

The followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya consider their sacred consumption as a practice which improves their spiritual level. Consumer society expands because anti-consumption discourse is a form of meta-consumption. Commodities such as information and images that are the object of cultural and spiritual consumption are very convenient for the system of capitalism because they speed up the turnover rate of production.

**Mentality of production and consumption**

How has the connection between religious practice and consumption developed in contemporary Thai society?

The first key point is that religious consumption is related to
The practice of discipline and efficiency. The followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya train themselves to acquire discipline and efficiency in their activities, for instance in the training for a mass ordination. Discipline and efficiency also characterize their ritual spectacles in a large assembly hall and their meditation sessions in a clean and quiet place. Discipline and efficiency appear to be desirable characteristics for the newly risen urban middle classes because these attributes are strongly related to the mentality required by organizations in a production-centered industrial society. However, participation in rituals and meditation sessions is also a consumptive act in which people display themselves on TV monitors, videotapes, and magazines, and in which they donate large amounts of money (called making merit) to acquire new sacred items continuously provided by the temple. These consumptive acts are also acts of differentiation. In these acts, there is an element of narcissism in people showing off their well-organized and disciplined bodies to themselves and to others. There is also a sense of enjoyment derived from the comfortable and modest atmosphere which is markedly different from the playful mood of village rituals.

Thus, the religious practice of the followers in Wat Phra Dhammakaya stresses the mentality of production and consumption at the same time. To understand this point from a sociological viewpoint, we have to examine the social context of contemporary Thailand where the capitalistic economy took root rather late but then developed rapidly. In Thailand, organizational enterprises such as manufacturing industry, where discipline and efficiency have great importance, emerged during the early 1960s and then progressed very rapidly. This economic development in Thailand was termed a "condensed capitalizing economy" by economist Akira Suehiro, meaning that both industrialization based on the production of manufactured goods and service industries such as the information industry which advanced nations achieved after the early stage of industrialization, appeared at the same time. Therefore, the urban middle classes who play the key role in this rapid economic development are required not only to have the attitude of discipline and efficiency which is useful for production but also to be well-trained consumers for the
information industry. Furthermore, earnings are highly differentiated according to educational background. Urban white-collar workers and professional workers with higher educational backgrounds have been drawn into the torrent of consumer society. The followers of Wat Phra Dhammakaya who contribute the large amounts of donations to the temple are drawn from these social ranks.

In this situation where mentalities on both production and consumption are developed simultaneously, why are the activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya attractive to many people? We need to examine the considerable influence of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and the difficulty in practicing Buddhism in a consumer society.

Buddhist morality plays an important role in Thai public society. Some Buddhists perceive discipline and orderliness as positively related with economic development. Others have a negative view of consumption as a luxury, a waste of money, and a stimulus to increased desire. However, economic development is strongly connected to the growth of a consumer society. If we deny the entire consumer society, we would have to rebuild the economy and modernize from the start. Consumption in consumer society is not the luxury of owning material commodities but an act of differentiation with the manipulation of signs. Sustainable development or development based on tradition may easily co-exist with a consumer society. Buddhist morality in Thai society has not effectively dealt with this complicated structure of consumer society.34

The sacred consumption and well-disciplined activities in Wat Phra Dhammakaya do deal with this difficulty, although in a superficial way. Followers consume commodities of spectacular rituals and other religious services in order to differentiate themselves through signs with sacred meanings. They see such consumption as inherently critical of "materialistic worldly desire" and "consumerism," and sometimes as a method of reducing their own desire. Participating in the organizational activities of the temple can be an act of differentiation through the display of an attitude of discipline and efficiency. Contributions to the temple are regarded as good deeds with religious meaning and public
benefit, and thus are a means to achieve differentiation by demonstrating a good image.

Conclusion

The activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya have expanded since the 1970s, especially among the new urban middle classes. On the one hand, the temple has been criticized for promoting religious practice steeped in consumerism and worldly desire. On the other hand, the temple’s followers claim that their involvement is a way to reduce their own desire, especially through the discipline and efficiency of the temple activities, as part of their effort to attain the ultimate goal of nirvana.

I have argued that these two images of the temple are compatible. Followers enter the temple’s religious consumptive space through the practice of sacred consumption that is different from worldly consumption and that displays an image of spiritual and moral progress. More devoted followers who aim to attain the ultimate goal of nirvana not only acquire an attitude of discipline and efficiency and consume their well-disciplined self-image with enjoyment but also become workers in the religious organization producing sacred commodities and contributing to this work with discipline and efficiency. In short, sincere religious practice intended as an antidote to consumerism sometimes involves the promotion of consumerism through collective organizational activities. These are the crucial points for understanding the complicated relationship between consumer society and religious activity.

Even Phra Paisan, who examined the mental or religious aspect of consumerism and pointed out the problem of consumerism, did not analyze it sufficiently. The reason for this may be not in his theoretical ideas but just in his lack of research and analysis about the actual operations of the temple and the world of subjective meaning of each follower. He may have thus overlooked the mechanism for expanding the organization based on the connection between consumerism and the reduction of worldly desire.

For example, Phra Paisan emphasizes that Buddhism should keep a distance from consumerism, but at the same time he suggests
that Buddhism must try to control consumerism through attracting
the people living in consumer society toward Buddhism. He accepts
that the trade in Buddhist amulets is not only a source of profit for
monks but a way to give peace of mind and lead followers to a more
profound level of belief including controlled consumption without
waste, reduction of worldly desire, and so on.\textsuperscript{35} These are concrete
ideas and teach us a lot. However, I am afraid that these ideas might
be dragged into the system of consumer society again as meta-
consumption in the form of anti-consumerism. And indeed, some
of his ideas are already visible in the religious and consumptive
activities of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, as examined in this paper.

Both those who support the activities of Wat Phra
Dhammakaya, and those who criticize them, need to reconsider.
Followers need to understand that even though they regard their
religious practice as a sacred practice and a reduction of worldly
desire, it may be helping to expand consumer society.

The critics need to understand the sociological aspect of
consumer society. They overlook the fact that their everyday life
incorporates consumer society. Even criticism of worldly desire and
anti-consumerism are dragged into consumerism. A commodity
that meets spiritual needs and contributes to self-cultivation satisfies
the consumer's desire for differentiation and is suitable to the
system of consumer society based on continuous production. Even
ecological activities in advanced nations and trips to observe
developing countries might be interpreted as acts of sacred
consumption.\textsuperscript{36}

Notes

1 This paper is a revised and expanded excerpt from Hidetake Yano, \textit{Buddhist
Movements in Contemporary Thailand: Thammakai Meditation and Thai Society in

2 'Huha "aiyakan" khothom khadi thammakai! Ang samaki-yut taekyaeck:
thammachayo" khun 959 lo. laeo yom pheiphae tam traipidok "phra phayom"
chikhong "baepni", \textit{Matichon}, 23 August 2006, p. 1; and Sanitsuda Ekachai.
'Commentary: Prosecutors let monk off the hook,' \textit{Bangkok Post}, 24 August 2006.

3 Phra Somchai Thanauttho, \textit{Mongkhon chiwit chabap "thammathayat" lem 2

4 Phra Thammapidok (P. A. Payutto), \textit{Karani thammakai: ekasan phua
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phrathammawinai (The Dhammakaya case: documents for judgment on teachings), (Mulanithi Phuttatham, 1999).

5 Khanakammathikan kan sasana sinlapa lae watanatham saphuthaenrasadon, Raikan karani wat phra thammakai (Report on Wat Phra Dhammakaya), (Bangkok: Samakhom sitkao mahachulalongkon rachawithayalai, 1999), p. 124.

6 For opposing arguments from the side of Wat Phra Dhammakaya, please see Phra Somchai Thanauttho, Nipphan pen atta rua anatta (Is nirvana self or non-self), (Bangkok: Wat Phra Thammakai, 1999).

7 There exists another problem. If we speculate that the teaching of Wat Phra Dhammakaya is neither Theravada Buddhism nor Mahayana Buddhism, it means it is outside Buddhism, and the controversy becomes a matter of conflict or dialogue between Buddhism and another (new) religion.

8 The author’s fieldwork was conducted from 1995 to 1997, visiting rituals and various activities of the temple and its associated institutions such as the Student Buddhist Club. In 1998, a questionnaire survey was completed by more than 300 followers of the temple, both monks and laity.

9 Some people criticize the Dhammakaya concept of nirvana because it materializes what should be transcendent (Lokuttara) in Theravada Buddhist philosophy. However in the case of Mahayana Buddhism such as Tibetan Vajirayana Buddhism, they use a symbolic graphic representation of enlightenment or transcendence, which is called Mandara. So we have to carefully criticize the meaning of “materialization of transcendence.”


13 Apinya Fuangfusakun, ‘Sasanathat khong chumchon mueang – samaimai sueksa korani wat phra thammakai’ (Religion in the urban community: contemporary study of Wat Phra Dhammakaya), Warasan phuthasat sueksa (Chulalongkon Mahawithayalai) 5, 1, Jan-Apr 1998, p. 49.


16 We can see similar phenomena in other religious organizations.

17 Apinya, ‘Sasanathat,’ p. 49.

18 Here the word “objects” means Buddhist amulets.


20 Munlanithi Thammakai, Choluek, p. 102.
It is difficult to judge whether the distribution of amulets and collection of donations, generally conducted by lay followers, is unjustified profit-making or not since temples need to raise funds for legitimate expenses in managing the temple. Some people have also criticized the massive expansion of the temple's management organization, but this criticism is hard to evaluate. Perhaps Wat Phra Dhammakaya needs a large organization because it is a new institution with new teachings. Perhaps other established temples are concerned to protect their own territory.

The Dhammakaya temple has also been criticized for using modern technology and the commoditization of religious ideals to bolster traditional hierarchy, such as patron-client relations. I understand the importance of this criticism, but it lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Such sacred items can be regarded as "commoditized merit making." New items for making merit are produced one after another, consumed, and then rapidly forgotten. Therefore, commoditized merit-making is a form of "simulacra," that is, a copy without the original or the authentic. The ideal in religion can be seen as real only for those who believe it. We have to carefully consider whether the difference between real and unreal, between original and copy, can be seen only in commoditized merit making or religious activities in general. Even followers have a feeling of loss of reality and authenticity in highly commoditized merit-making. Mystic experiences such as the inner experience of Dhammakaya meditation can complement the loss of reality and authenticity in religious ideals.

One requirement of the staff of Dhammakaya Foundation is a high educational background with graduation from junior college, university, or graduate school. If these highly educated people get a job outside the temple, they can receive relatively high wages.

For the relationship between consumerism and Thai Buddhism, please see Suwanna Satha-Anand, *Ngoen kap sasana: thepayut haeng yuksamai* (Money and religion: divine strategy of the era), (Bangkok: Mulanithi Komonkhimhong, 1998), and Phra Paisan, *Phutthasasana*. Suwanna, though her analysis about consumer society is sometimes inclined to the analysis of bubble economy, pointed out the basic view of Pali Buddhist Scriptures for acquisition and use of wealth,
and discussed the problem that Thai Buddhist Sangha has not indicated the clear guidelines for an economically developing Thai society. Phra Paisan conducted deeper analysis of consumerism itself. He not only points out the spiritual dimension of consumerism and quasi-religiosity of consumerism, but also tries to show the concrete plan dealing with consumer society properly under the control of Buddhism. Although his concrete plan is full of thought-provoking ideas, as I mention later, it risks being pulled into consumer society.


36 This point needs more careful consideration. We must distinguish the problem of consumerism itself and the combination of consumerism and other ideologies. Otherwise, we may overlook the merit of the combination. In this combination, consumerism can enhance ecology to reduce environmental disruption.