

The Gods of Traffic: A Brief Look at the Hindu Intersection in Buddhist Bangkok

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Any visitor to Thailand will undoubtedly pass dozens of shrines on street corners, at bus stations, and on monastic grounds to supposedly “non-Buddhist” deities. Besides the shrines to Thai royalty and national heroes, there are shrines to “Hindu” deities like Ganesha, Brahma, Śiva, Indra, and the uniquely Thai “Jatukham Ramathep.”² This is not a new phenomenon, there are shrines

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² Starting in 2004 and reaching its pinnacle in the summer of 2007, newspapers, television programs, film stars, and politicians in Thailand had regular commentaries on the popularity and economic impact of this new class of amulets from Nakhon Sri Thammarat in Southern Thailand called the Jatukham Ramathep. The flurry (what Thais came to call “khai” (fever)) of people who traveled to the South to purchase these amulets reached into the tens of thousands. When one group of these amulets went on sale two people were trampled to death as crowds rushed to the monastery cash in

and images dedicated to these deities found in the earliest Thai kingdoms.³ Here I will briefly describe the shrines on one of the busiest intersections in Bangkok, Ploenchit, in the central commercial district of Siam Square. Here we will see that Hindu images are not a marginal feature of Thai religion, but visually and ritually central to Buddhist life in Thailand.

Perhaps the most popular shrine is that of the famous Than Thao Mahaphrom (referred to in English as the “Erawan Shrine,” shrine around a golden statue of a four-faced Brahma image cast in 1956 in front of what is now the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel and across from the Central World Plaza Mall, National Police Headquarters,

hand. There have been reports of people murdered to get their hands on rare Jatukham Ramathep. The amulet markets are full of inexpensive imitations and rare original runs of these amulets. There are t-shirts with images of the amulet on the front in every major mall and market in Thailand. I was given two of these amulets by scholar friends in November 2006 and June 2007. They are popular among the elite and the lower classes. There already have been Thai books written about their history. Thousands of people walked the street with these large round clay amulets hanging around their neck outside of their shirt. There are many reasons that this fever has hit Thailand -- economic speculation, peer pressure, and so on. One of the reasons the Jatukham Ramathep has become so popular is because it is considered the amulet made by a famous police major general from Southern Thailand who had killed over 65 “bandits” in his career and was never shot in the line of duty. Police Maj. Gen. Khunphantarak Rajadej (Khun Phan), who passed away in 2006 age of 104 is believed to have created the first Jatukham Ramathep amulet in 1987. The name is drawn from the Pali compound – *Catugamaramadeva* (Rama of the Four Towns). However, locally it is associated with a mythological Southern Thai prince who was have believed to have taken up arms against enemies if Buddhism. The name of the amulet may also come from the carved wooden doors of the monastery, Wat Mahathat in Nakhon Si Thammarat (Southern Thailand). Since there are four carved images of Hindu deities at Wat Mahathat, the amulet could have been named after these gods (not towns) who are loosely associated with the four protectors of Sri Lanka (Lakkhana, Rama, Sumana, and Khattugama). Relics were brought to Nakhon Si Thammarat from Sri Lanka in the twelfth century. The amulet’s name may come from a conflation of the names Khattugama and Ramadeva, traditional gods in Sri Lankan Buddhism and Hinduism. There are a number of different theories. Regardless of the origin of the amulet or the iconography of the image of the “Hindu” god on its face, it is important, partly, because it was made and promoted in the South by a police major general. This amulet is believed to have protected this most heralded police general, as well as the general public. The peace that he, Khun Phan, kept in the past, will return to the South.

³ There have been a few studies of Hinduism in Thailand in general. For further reading see: S.N. Desai, *Hinduism in Thai Life*. Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 2005; Trilok Chandra Majupuria, *Erawan Shrine and Brahma worship in Thailand: With reference to India & Nepal*. Bangkok: Craftsman Press (1987); Penny van Esterik, “Interpreting a Cosmology: Guardian Spirits in Thai Buddhism,” *Anthropos Freiburg* 77.1-2 (1982): 1-15; Priyawat Kuanpoonpol, “Court Brahmins of Thailand and the celebration of the Brahmanic New Year,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 33.1 (1990): 21-51; Satya Vrat Shastri, “Brahmins in Thailand,” *Abhinandana-Bharati: Krishna Kanta Handiqui Felicitation Volume*. Calcutta: Gauhati, 1982; and, Satya Vrat Shastri, “Hindu Culture in Thailand,” *Amrtadhara: R.N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume*. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984.



and Gaysorn Plaza Mall.⁴ This shrine to a Hindu god is so beloved by the people of Thailand that the foundation that administers it took in 1.5 million US dollars in 2004 alone from donations. A mentally disturbed man (or at least that is one of the rumors) was beaten to death by a crowd when he attacked the image with a sledgehammer in 2006. The former Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra was rumored to have prayed to the image and performed secret magical rituals to ensure his shaky political fortunes in 2006 right before he was forcibly removed from office by Sondhi Boonyarakalin. This shrine competes with prestige in the country with royally consecrated Buddha images and receives more visitors daily than nearly any other ritual site in the country. This is not a mere aberration or passing fancy. Unique rituals and liturgies, including the frequent performance of classical female dancers, Sanskritized-Thai chants, and the offering of yellow carnations and wooden elephants, have sprung up at the shrine.

This shrine connected to the Thai tradition of building “San Phra Phum” (Spirit Houses) on the grounds of homes and businesses to provide domiciles for land spirits who are displaced by human structures, has spawned the creation of dozens of copycat shrines throughout the country. Clearly, these ceremonies have not “worked” in most cases, because politicians like Taksin have lost power and Sondhi has been targeted for assassination (although the fact that he survived a daring assassination attempt might actually “prove,” for many, the power of his magic). The reasons they keep performing the rituals are numerous. They involve increasing their social prestige, their cultural capital, and out-performing each other all in front of television camera crews. However, the reason these performances are so effective (they attract and enthrall thousands of their respective supporters) is that they draw on common features of the Thai religious repertoire. Politicians need to perform these rituals, because they are expected to. It would be like a U.S. presidential candidate not having the “pancake breakfast” during the Iowa primaries, or a president not throwing out the first pitch

⁴ Nathan McGovern’s MA thesis on this shrine is essential for understanding rituals associated with this site, “Brahmā Worship in Thailand” (2006: especially chapter six). Charles Keyes also produced (unpublished) a paper on the subject in 2006 “The Destruction of a Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and the Fall of Taksin Shinawatra: the Occult and the Thai Coup in Thailand of September 2006.”.

for the annual Washington Nationals baseball team's home opener. It comes with the job.

The use of ritual to ensure political good fortune is not limited, of course, to Taksin. His political opponents, represented from 2007-present by the PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy) party led by Sondhi Limthongkul, have performed rituals to guarantee their political goals. After a series of bloody street battles between the PAD supporters and the government in Bangkok in the Fall of 2008, Sondhi led two rituals. The first was a circumambulation of the government house grounds dressed in white, sprinkling holy water, and chanting. He called this a "dhamma walk."⁵ On the second occasion he stated that:

"For many years in the past, the powers of many sacred things including the spirit of the City Pillar, the Equestrian Statue of King Rama V, Phra Sayam Thewathirat, and the Emerald Buddha, have been suppressed by evil people using magic. 'Suppress' does not mean destroy, because sacred objects cannot be destroyed, as they have too much power. But 'suppress' means not allowing them to emit their power, by encircling them. This is true... Like at the statue of the Emerald Buddha... Behind it there is a stone. Evil-minded people had allied with some in the Royal Household Bureau to allow a Khmer adept to go behind the Emerald Buddha and take the stone away, because that stone is the important thing for emitting power... Tacks had been inserted at the six corners [of the state of King Rama V] so that the statue of the revered king could not emit its power. We drew out the tacks from all six places."⁶

⁵ Kultida Samabuddhi, "Sorcerer Sondhi wards off evil: Followers don white, clean, pray for victory," *Bangkok Post*, November 10, 2008.

⁶ Chang Noi, "PAD saves the nation from supernatural attack," *The Nation*, November 10, 2008. I thank Erick White for sending me this article. Chang Noi is a pseudonym for Christopher Baker. This pseudonym was made public on November 25, 2008 at a talk at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand.



A well-known historian and journalist noted that Sondhi openly accused Thaksin of being behind the destruction of the Erawan Brahma statue in March 2006. Sondhi said Thaksin “wished to thwart political forces rising up against him.”

Five of the most blatant attempts to cash-in on the popularity of the Erawan shrine are other shrines at this intersection like the one of the god Narayana (riding the mythical bird Garuda), the green goddess Laksmi whose statue is on the fourth floor of the ultra-modern high-end Gaysorn Plaza shopping complex, the elephant headed god Ganesha, the triple god Trimurti, and the god (also green) Indra, all built within a 500 meter circumference. In front of the Intercontinental Hotel, the Central World Plaza Mall and Cinema Complex, the Amarin Plaza, and the Gaysorn Plaza respectively. .

Two of these shrines merit a further description. The first is a shrine to the Hindu deity, “Trimurti,” (a statue that represents three major deities in Hinduism: Brahma, Śiva, and Vishnu, apparently competing with the Erawan Shrine representing only Brahma across the street and the nearby shrine to the god Indra). It was established in front of the Zen Department Store in the Central World Plaza originally, but then moved because of construction 300 meters down the sidewalk and now sits next to the Ganesha image. The Trimurti platform and image measures over 25 feet high and is surrounded by a moats, as well as incense and flower holders, and donation boxes. The Narayana, Indra, Lakshmi, Erawan, and Ganesha shrines are particularly popular with those aspiring to become wealthy which would make them particularly appropriate since they each are in front of Thailand’s most expensive shopping malls and hotels. The Trimurti has a unique following, because it is popular with women especially on St. Valentine’s Day. St. Valentine’s Day, like Christmas, has become widely celebrated in Thailand despite its “Christian” origins. On February 14th, 2008, I visited the shrine to make an offering and observed hundreds of young Thai women offering long-stemmed red roses (another imported tradition), red incense sticks, and red candles (the traditional three offerings to a Buddha image, colored red in honor of St. Valentine) to the shrine.



There was even a newly composed liturgy that the women read off of handouts as they knelt in front of the shrines holding their roses and hoping to find love. The liturgy consists of one short Pali benediction (sādhū sādhū sādhū ukāsa: “praise praise praise exaltation!”) and then a short Thai verse which only mentions the fact that the Trimurti is a great deity, but states nothing about his powers to help worshippers find love or companionship.⁷ Despite the intention and the meaning of the chant having no relation, clearly this shrine drew a very specific group -- young women. One woman I spoke with said she was confident that despite not having a boyfriend, her offering would ensure she met the love of her life that very evening. Even though the Trimurti image is actually based on a statue from the sixteenth century in Ayutthaya, it has not been a particularly popular image in the history of Thai religions. Since a few urban legends claim that young women who knelt down to the shrine when it was cast in 2004 met the men of their dreams, it has become to be associated with luck in love. The Trimurti images in South Asia and in Ayutthaya were never associated with this specific type of blessing as far as I have been able to find.

Next to the Trimurti is the Ganesha shrine. Ganesha (Thai: Phra Phi Kanet) has long been a deity known throughout Southeast Asia, generally associated with the arts and learning. However, there has been a recent massive growth in the popularity of Ganesha images, shrines, amulets, and liturgies. Ganesha amulets and images are sold (“rented”) throughout the country especially at Wat Phra That Cho Hae in Phrae Province, Wat Trimit in Bangkok, and Wat Indrawihan. There are shrines at the Brahmanic training school (Thewasathan Bot Phrahm) in Bangkok, Phraratcha Wang Sanam Chan palace in Nakhon Pathom Province, murals of Ganesha at Wat Suthat in Bangkok, and an entire museum dedicated to Ganesha images and history in Chiang Mai. A very specific liturgy and ritual has been developed for Ganesha recently primarily thanks to the work of a Brahman ritualist named Thotsaphon Changphanitkun who is associated with Wat Umathewi (popularly known as “Wat Khaek”) a Hindu temple on Silom Road in downtown Bangkok. Every year (since 2004) he has held a massive festival in honor of

⁷ “Ukāsa” is a strange spelling for Pali “ukkamsa.”



Ganesha and sells amulets, images, posters, plastic dolls, umbrellas, bumper stickers, and the like.⁸ The appropriate times to worship Ganesha, Thotsaphon claims, are on the 9th or 14th on the month, between February and July, but never on Tuesdays. On those days, the worshipper should not eat meat and offer fruit of various sorts (especially bananas), milk, oyster sauce, and steamed rice sweets. While offering these gifts to an image of Ganesha, one should chant a Sanskritized Pali (with some vernacular Thai words as well) chant which begins with the word “Om,” but otherwise follows vocabulary and phrases common in Buddhist Pali chants in Thailand with the insertion of the name Ganesha in the middle of a chant that could easily be in honor of the Buddha. The chant is only three verses long and is a very simplistic series of honorifics. For example, the last verse reads in nearly Pali phrase using some vernacular Thai phonetic conventions: “tatiyampi phra phi ghanesavara sabbasiddhi bra siddhi me mahālābho bhavantu me” (for the third time, Oh venerable Ganesha, you are forever powerful, let you grant me success, great wealth and possessions). After chanting this one should light an oil lamp and a stick of incense, think of the wish you would like granted, concentrate deeply, and place the incense with your right hand along with a bottle of lamp oil, and other gifts at the feet of the shrine. Other chants to Ganesha have also been composed by Thotsaphon which have similar syntax and meaning. They are all very short and easy to read or memorize by visitors to various shrines. Ganesha has also gained notoriety because of celebrity endorsements and stories of the great success and wealth that followed their worship of Ganesha. These include the famous singer and actress, Aphaphon Nakhonsawan, as well as the action movie actors, Anucha Tosawat and Pokon Phonphisut.

Like Somdet To and Mae Nak, Ganesha, Trimurti, Jatukham Ramathep, and others have become important partially due to testimonials of famous and successful celebrities who have been saved, enriched, or have fallen in love because of being associated with them, performing their liturgies, holding their amulets, performing rituals in front of their shrines, and the like. The power of Somdet

⁸ See for example a story about the 2007 festival on the front page of the newspaper *Thai Rath*: “Hae ruam wan goet Phra Phi Kanet,” *Thai Rath*, September, 17, 2550 [2007].

To (and in some cases, Mae Nak) is seemingly more authentic to some because they were actual historical figures who lived in Thailand. However, what does not seem important to most people is whether they are associated with Hinduism or Buddhism. In fact, the casting of Ganesha images and amulets is ritually supervised and performed by Buddhist monks at Buddhist monasteries like Wat Phikhunthong in Singburi Province, Wat Mahathat in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, as well as other monasteries in Phuket, Lad Phrao (Bangkok), and Chonburi. One of the largest casting and consecrations (*phithi pluk sek*) of Ganesha images in Thai history took place at Wat Pak Nam under the supervision of the popular Buddhist monk, Luang Pho Ke, on December 13, 2007.⁹ The large shrine in front of the Central World Plaza and next to the Trimurti “love” shrine has begun to develop its own following and has its own liturgy.¹⁰ This is not necessarily a sign of the decline of Buddhism or the rise in Hinduism in Thailand, it simply reflects a general lack of concern with religious boundaries and a valuing of abundance and security. Ganesha is said to protect those with money and help those without it get it.¹¹

This is a good example of how Thai religious repertoires work and how cultural movements are created. Thai rituals and liturgies are never static. Over the twentieth century, many major scholars of ritual and liturgy like Freud, Staal, Levi-Strauss, and Douglas saw ritual as static, universally understandable, structural, and rule-based. However, in Thailand, rituals and liturgies are mutable. We must see how rituals and liturgies change overtime, and how this change makes them dynamic and perennially useful to both those in power and those in need of a touch of power. Thai rituals and liturgies are constantly changing. However, they can be legitimately grouped together because they share a common repertoire of tropes, meters,

⁹ Information about these rituals and liturgies can be found on pamphlets at Wat Umathewi and the Thewasathan in Bangkok. Thotsaphon Changphanitkun wrote a short book as well *Phra Phi Kanet* (2550 [2007]). An amulet of Ganesha comes with every purchase of the book.

¹⁰ The liturgy is distributed for free on flyers next to the shrine. There are three verses which all start with the Sanskrit “Om” and besides using the Sanskrit spelling of “Ganeṣa,” the chant is otherwise in simple Pali. All three are straightforward litanies of praises for Ganesha, referring to him as glorious in actions and thoughts, and a great god, worthy of being praised forever -- “mahādeva ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā.”[sic].

¹¹ Peter Skilling has shown that Brahmins and Buddhist monks were tied together in ritual, inscriptions, and royal declarations from at the least the Sukhothai period -- “Kings, Sangha, Brahmins” (2007: 182-215).



rhythms, lexicon, implements, and especially aesthetic/physical performative contexts (i.e. the colors, altars, incense, flowers, etc. all look, feel, sound, and smell similarly). Most Buddhists in Bangkok do not see these supposedly “Hindu” images as foreign to Buddhism, but as simply part of being religious in Thailand.