



Against Buddha's Teachings or Not? The Relationship between Thai Amulets and Buddhist Teachings: A Case Study of Monks' Attitudes toward Contemporary Thai Amulets in Bangkok

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Received: 03 August 2025; Revised: 12 September 2025; Accepted: 24 October 2025

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Abstract

This paper investigates the attitudes of monks in Bangkok towards contemporary Thai Buddha amulets, examining whether these objects align with or contradict the teachings of the Buddha. The findings of the research, which was conducted through questionnaires administered to monks in various Bangkok temples, revealed a divergence of opinion. While certain monks perceive amulets as being irrelevant to the fundamental tenets of Buddhism, or even as a commercial diversion, others regard them as practical instruments for disseminating the Dhamma to non-monastic individuals. The paper under scrutiny here highlights the complex interplay between religion and material culture and offers insight into the evolving interpretations of Buddhist practice in modern Thai society.

Keywords: Thai amulets, Buddha's Teaching, Monks' attitudes, Thai Buddhism

1. Introduction

Over time, social changes have led to the gradual integration of superstition into Thai Buddhists' religious practices and lifestyles. The influence of capitalism and consumerism has led to the penetration of commercial interests into people's lifestyles, religious practices, and beliefs. (Bhavakhunworakit, B. 2012) The trend of commercialization of Buddhism (พุทธพาณิชย์) is also growing in today's Thai society. As one of the commercial products of Buddhism, Thai amulets are particularly popular, attracting many individuals to purchase them; however, some amulets of recent times have been produced for commercial purposes. (Sawangsri, B. 2006)

Despite constant criticism that the commercialization of Buddhism has departed from the teachings of the Buddha, the Thai amulet The practice of praying for blessings still exists in temples in Thailand. Despite constant criticism that the commercialization of Buddhism has departed from the Buddha's teachings, arguing that "Thai Amulets have made the Buddha's teachings fade away" (Bunluesilp, N. 2007), Thai amulets still exist in some Thai temples and have the rental business.

This research explores the nuanced attitudes of monks in Bangkok toward the commercialization of Thai Buddha amulets, examining how they perceive the compatibility of these practices with core Buddhist teachings. Using qualitative interviews, it analyzes the ways in which monastics interpret and negotiate the relationship between spiritual tradition and contemporary material culture.

2. Literature Review

In Thai Buddhism, amulets play a significant role not only as religious objects but also as cultural symbols deeply intertwined with Buddhist beliefs and local traditions. Chitiyaphol and Kwiecien (2019) assert that Thai amulets possess profound historical and spiritual significance, while Dansilp and Freeman (2002) emphasize that their perceived power arises not merely from material composition, but from consecration rituals and the respect they command.

The sacred power of amulets is derived from multiple sources. Jackson (1999) and Reynolds (2019) highlight their connection to Buddhist relics, images, and holy sites, while Soontravanich (2013) stresses the influence of revered monks and doctrinal teachings. At the same time, folk beliefs and supernatural elements also contribute to their sanctity, as seen in the veneration of figures such as Luang Phor Khoon (Yee, 1996; Jackson, 1999).

The role of amulets has sparked scholarly debate. Cadge (2008) suggests that amulets serve as mnemonic devices and markers of religious identity, while Tambiah (1984) sees them as tools to support meditation and the internalization of Buddhist teachings. However, their commercialization has raised concern. Kitiarsa (2012) argues that the commodification of religious objects reflects the weakening of doctrinal foundations in contemporary Thai society, where capitalist forces have transformed Buddhism into a marketable commodity. Fan and Wang (2023) similarly observe that misuses of sacred imagery have fostered public skepticism.

Doctrinally, Buddhism emphasizes ethical conduct, karma, and mental cultivation over reliance on external objects. Ennen (2024) notes that modern interpretations often reduce Buddhism to a therapeutic framework, neglecting its redemptive and philosophical dimensions. Pematana and Khong (2021) reaffirm the centrality of Right Mindfulness as an integrated practice rooted in the Dhamma. Furthermore, critiques from Thai media (Bunluesilp, 2007; Sanyanusin, 2015) warn that excessive reliance on amulets may divert attention from core Buddhist values, calling for a renewed focus on ethical practice and inner cultivation.

Analysis of the relationship between the Buddha and the Thai amulets: The monks' attitude towards the amulet in the temple

This study investigates the relationship between the Buddha's teachings and the Thai amulets by analyzing the monks' attitude towards the amulets for rent in the temple. The Thai

amulet is one of the forms of Buddhist belief in Thailand. In contemporary Thai society, Thai amulets are of significant importance in terms of their capacity to elevate and provide a spiritual anchor (Chitiyaphol & Kwiecien, 2019). The continuous development of the Thai amulet industry has led to the emergence of an increasing number of amulets in the country. This diversification of the amulet industry in Thailand is indicative of the inclusive characteristics of Buddhism. But the impact of commercialization and market demand has led to the emergence of divergent perspectives regarding the relationship between Buddha's teaching and Thai amulets.

Thus, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1. Commercialization of Thai Buddha amulets has led to divergent interpretations regarding their compatibility with Buddha's teaching.

H2. Some Buddhist monks perceive the production and rental of Thai Buddha amulets as conflicting with core Buddhist principles, particularly those related to non-attachment and non-materialism.

H3. Temples that refrain from producing or renting amulets may do so based on a doctrinal stance that such practices contradict the original teachings of the Buddha.

H4. Interviews with monks in Bangkok may suggest that not all monastics view amulets as contradictory to the Dhamma; some consider them compatible with Buddhist practice when used with the right intention.

3. Research Methodology

The present study reviews relevant classical texts and academic discussions in order to establish a theoretical foundation. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews are conducted with monks from temples in Bangkok to gather their views on the religious value of amulets, their connection to the Buddha's teachings, and the role of the monastic community in the amulet industry. The interview data are analyzed using content analysis and interpreted through a comparative approach to examine the relationship between traditional Buddhist principles and contemporary amulet practices.

Amulet Market in Bangkok is a century-old and the biggest market known for amulets. Since most of the amulets offered for rent in most temples in Thailand are Thai Buddha Amulets, in this study, the Thai Amulets that were talked about and used in the interviews refer to the Thai Buddha Amulets, which are Phra Khrueng (พระเครื่อง) in Thai. The study selected different temples in the Bangkok metropolitan area for the research, which included temples with Thai Amulets for rent as well as temples without amulets. The temples that were chosen for this study and don't have Thai amulets for rent are as follows:

- Wat Pathum Wanaram
- Wat Molilokkayaram
- Wat Rakhangkositaram
- Wat Bamphen Chin Phrot (Non-native Thai Buddhist temple)

As for the temples that offer Thai amulets for rent, this study chose the follow temples as the research site:

- Wat Hua Lamphong
- Wat Intharawihan
- Wat Bowonniwet Vihara

- Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (Non-native Thai Buddhist temple)

These two types of temples represent distinct perspectives: the former emphasizes doctrinal purity or consciously avoids commercial practices, while the latter actively engages in the material culture of contemporary Buddhism. This contrast is crucial for understanding whether involvement in the amulet economy influences monks' attitudes.

Within these temples, monks were selected through purposeful sampling, with a focus on their Buddhist knowledge and experience. The key criterion was that participants must have studied Buddhist scriptures and have a deep understanding of the Buddha's teachings. This ensures that the views collected are grounded in doctrinal knowledge rather than personal or popular beliefs, thus guaranteeing the authoritativeness and depth of the research data.

4. Results

A total of 20 monks from eight Buddhist temples located within the Bangkok metropolitan area were interviewed for this study, with the number of monks interviewed at each temple slightly adjusted for temple size. The study gathered a relatively diverse and wide range of monks' views and opinions.

During the interview, this monk informed us that although no business related to Buddha amulets is conducted in the temple, he is engaged in the manufacture of Buddha amulets as a means of generating income to finance the construction of the stupa.

Table 1

DESCRIPTION		TOTAL (8)	PERCENTAGE
THAI Amulets Against Buddha's Teachings or Not			
against		1	12.5%
not against		0	0%
indefinite		5	62.5%
other	not related	2	25%

This table summarizes the views of monks in temples that do not offer Thai Amulets for rent on whether Thai amulets are against Buddha's Teachings. Of the eight monks surveyed, 12.5% believed that amulets were contrary to the Buddha's Teachings, none believed that amulets were not against Buddha's Teachings, 25% believed that amulets had nothing to do with Buddha's Teachings, and the majority (62.5%) were unsure about the issue.

When it comes to the monks from the temple which offer the amulet for rent, the interview result is a little bit different.

Table 2

DESCRIPTION	TOTAL (12)	PERCENTAGE
THAI Amulets Against Buddha's Teachings or Not		
against	1	8%



not against		4	33%
indefinite		2	17%
other	not related	5	42%

This table presents the views of the 12 monks in the temple with the rental of Thai Buddha amulets. 8% thought the Thai amulet was against the Buddha's teachings, 33% thought it was not contradict, 42% thought the Thai Buddha amulets had nothing to do with Buddha's teachings, and 17% said the answer was unclear.

The majority of people (59%) do not perceive a clear contradiction between the use of amulets and the teachings of Buddha. More people think amulets don't against Buddha's teachings than think they do.

From the statistics in Tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that the percentage of monks' views in different types of temples varies considerably. In temples that do not offer amulets for rent, the vast majority of monks believe that the relationship between amulets and the Dharma cannot be definitively judged, but there are no monks who believe that amulets are not contrary to the Dharma. In contrast, the vast majority of monks in temples offering Buddhist medals for rent did not believe that amulets were contrary to the Dharma or did not believe that amulets were related to the Dharma. Thus, interviews with monks from both temple types yielded a more comprehensive and objective viewpoint.'

Table 3

DESCRIPTION		TOTAL (20)	PERCENTAGE
THAI Amulets Against Buddha's Teachings or Not			
against		2	10%
not against		4	20%
indefinite		7	35%
other	not related	7	35%

This table presents the views of 20 monks from eight temples on whether Thai amulets are consistent with Buddha's Teachings. Of the monks surveyed, 10% believed that amulets were contrary to the Dharma, 20% believed that amulets were not contrary to the Dharma, 35% believed that amulets had nothing to do with the Dharma, and a further 35% were uncertain about the issue. The study demonstrated that monks held different opinions on the issue, reflecting the different interpretations and understandings of Thai amulets in the Buddhist context among monks in contemporary Thai society.

The following tables show why monks in two types of temples think Buddha amulets relate to Buddha's teachings, and there are many different attitudes and reasons about the relationship between the Thai Amulets and Buddha's Teachings



Table 4

Relationship	The Temples with Thai Amulets for rent		
	Reasons		
Related	Against	-Buddha forbids it	-Gives support to the soul. -To remind people to be careful about what they say and what they do.
	Not Against	-Remembering the Buddha and Buddhist gods which leads to doing good deeds -Thai Amulets in themselves and in general do not contradict each other, the rest depends on the behavior and motivation of the participants. -It is a representation and symbol of Buddha, bringing wisdom and truth.	-For the practice of Dharma -Mainly in the meaning of the amulet itself -It is necessary to conduct a detailed analysis by the specific motivation of the Buddha amulet holder
Not Related	Indefinite	-Influenced by contemporary Buddhist business, harder to judge -Times are changing and cannot be viewed from a traditional and primitive perspective -Can help remember the Buddha, but the way may not be formally recognized -Depends on the motivation of the participants	
		-Appeared very early and is a tradition in Thailand -Buddha never mentioned amulets. -Thai Amulets are an ever-popular item in Thailand -One is an inner understanding and the other is an outer manifestation, and they are not related.	



Relationship	The Temples without Thai Amulets for rent		
	Reasons		
Related	Against	-Dharma teaches that it is about letting go of everything and not seeking outside help.	-From the perspective of the root of Buddhism, it is against the Buddha's teachings. However, in the actual situation, there is nothing wrong with providing Buddha amulets for rent.
	Not Against		-It is necessary to conduct a detailed analysis in accordance with the specific motivation of the Buddha amulet holder.
	Indefinite	-Must be conducted in accordance with the objectives of the participants in the Buddha amulet industry.	
Not Related	-The study of the Dharma is solely concerned with individual practice and has no bearing on material objects such as the Thai Buddha amulets.		

Table 5

Relations	Total(20)	Percentage	Description of Opinions
Thai Amulet is part of Buddhism Practice or Not			

Yes	3	15%	-Sometimes it is used to calm the mind, to meditate, or to practice good deeds. -Thai amulets are the symbol of Buddha that can remind us of Buddha. -Provide people with the opportunity to pay homage to the Buddha and bring them closer to the Buddha
No	10	50%	-It's different, but it causes people to become closer to Buddhism. -Buddha never talked about it and it can't help people understand the Dharma -It is a personal faith, not related. -Amulets have been around for a long time. -People's understanding of the Dharma
Need specific analysis	7	35%	-It depends on what is requested and how people use it

This table summarizes the views of 20 monks on whether Thai amulets are part of Buddhism practice. Of these monks, 15% believed that amulets were an integral part of Buddhism practice, citing that amulets could be used for meditation and as a symbol of the Buddha. However, 50% of the monks did not consider amulets to be a part of Buddhism practice, noting that the Buddha did not mention amulets and that amulets do not contribute to the understanding of the Dharma. The remaining 35% believed that the relevance of amulets depended on the context and how the people use them, suggesting the need for a specific analysis. The variety of opinions suggests to some extent that the relationship between the two is not definite.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Interviews with temple monks in the Bangkok area have revealed a wide range of views on the production and rental of Thai Buddha amulets, changed the study's researchers' view of the relationship between the two before the study, and provided a more comprehensive and rational explanation. These views reflect a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Thai Buddha amulets and the Buddha's teachings. In temples with no Thai amulets for rent, the monks' views were generally that the Thai Buddha amulet might be contrary to the Buddha's teachings. Still, they also emphasized the need to consider the practicalities of the situation. Most monks in this kind of temples were more cautious about this issue, some monks believing that the problem needed to be analyzed on a case-by-case basis and that no generalizations should be made.

Among the temples renting Buddha amulets, only one monk from a foreign temple (Wat Mangkon) believed that the amulets were against the Buddha's teachings, while the majority of Thai monks have posited that the production and commercialization of Thai Buddha amulets do not contravene or are not related to the Buddha's teachings. This may be related to the

existence of Thai amulet-related industries in these temples. They regard amulets as instruments that, when employed with the appropriate motivation, can safeguard individuals and foster greater dedication to Buddhism among those who believe in Buddhism. It is believed that the Thai Buddha amulet can serve as a reminder to laymans to adhere to the Buddha's teaching and instill confidence in those who bear it. Meanwhile, a foreign monk from the UK expressed that he didn't understand why there are Thai amulets, arguing that it makes no sense and has nothing to do with Buddha's Teachings and Buddhist practice, providing a wider variety of perspectives for this study.

In contrast, other monks maintain that the Thai Buddha amulet is not directly linked to the Buddha's teachings and should not be relied upon for spiritual progress. They emphasize the necessity of a profound personal study of the Buddha's teaching, moral activities, and meditative practice, rather than the reliance on material objects, to achieve true understanding of the Buddha's teachings. A small number of monks hold the view that amulets contradict the Buddha's teaching. The argument put forth by these monks is that the Buddha prohibited the use of material aids such as amulets. The monks posited that the amulets might foster attachment and superstition, which could impede genuine spiritual development.

In the context of whether or not amulets are part of Buddhist practice, it is widely acknowledged that these objects are a fundamental component of the practice. This is because amulets are typically blessed and chanted by monks before their introduction into the market to reach the hands of laymen. But the results of interviews with monks who had studied Buddha's teaching in temples indicated that the majority of them considered Thai Buddha amulets to be a separate entity from Thai Buddhist practice. It is important to consider how and for what purpose the amulet is used. This determines whether the wearing of the amulet contributes to the practitioners' practice and understanding of Thai Buddhism. If the amulet is worn for reasons other than those traditionally associated with Buddhist practice, such as for psychological comfort or financial gain, it is not a Buddhist practice. In such cases, the appropriateness of the practice must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

The study argues that the relationship between Thai amulets and Buddha's Teachings is complex, with different analytical perspectives on whether there is a relationship and whether the making and renting of Thai amulets is contrary to Buddha's Teachings. Although the two are fundamentally unrelated, interviews with monks have provided us with new insights. The relationship between Thai amulets and Buddha's Teachings is not strictly dichotomous, but rather exists in a subtle "gray area" that reflects both certain correlations and irrelevancies in varying degrees. At the beginning of the study, we thought that the two were not related, but that there was a possibility that they could be contradicted and that the involvement of monasteries and monks in the circulation of Buddhist licenses was to some extent against the Buddha's teachings. However, through interviews with monks and analysis of their attitudes, we found that at the level of the underlying ideology, the two are related, and whether they are contrary or not depends on the intention and personal behavior of the buyer. There is no strong connection between them at the root and the actual psychological level, and the involvement of monks and the provision of Thai Amulets for rent in temples does not conflict with the Buddha's teachings.

As a result, research has produced a wide variety of views, whether one agrees that Thai Amulets are contrary to Buddha's Teachings, disagrees that they are contrary, or believes that

they are unrelated, all are reasonable and not erroneous, depending on the perspective of the analysis and the degree of study and understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Even within the same temple, views on the topic are diverse, and monks may hold diametrically opposed views on whether the production and sale of amulets is consistent with or contrary to the Buddha's teachings. These differing attitudes highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of contemporary Thai Buddhist practice and the continuing debate about the role of amulets in religious life.

6. Suggestions

The findings demonstrate that there is no monolithic monastic viewpoint, but a spectrum of positions shaped by doctrine, pragmatism, and personal experience. Generally speaking, given the diverse and sometimes conflicting perceptions of amulets within Thai society, it is recommended that temples and the broader Buddhist community work to integrate amulet practices with the foundational principles of Buddhist teachings. Such integration may foster a more balanced and informed understanding of the role of amulets in contemporary religious life. Temples involved in the amulet economy are encouraged to contextualize these practices within Dhamma education. Transparency about the use of proceeds (Such as for temple maintenance, charity) can align commercial activities with the ethical virtue of generosity.

Furthermore, the production, use, and distribution of amulets should be grounded in ethical considerations to ensure that these practices do not overshadow or distort the core values of the Dhamma. Future research should continue to investigate the perspectives of various stakeholders — including monks, lay practitioners, and temple administrators — on the significance of amulets, particularly in relation to religious faith, educational function, and the effects of commercialization in modern Thai society.

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