

BEYOND REBIRTH: MATERIALITY AND RECYCLING IN THAI AMULETS

John Johnston¹ & Chaiyaporn Phayakhrut²

ABSTRACT—The materials used to create Thai amulets are significant and often symbolic, affecting their perceived efficacy. Recently, modern materials like recycled plastic and glass have gained popularity, reflecting societal concerns such as environmental sustainability. These innovative amulets offer a critique of consumerism in Thai amulet culture, forging connections between Buddhism and environmentalism. Recycled plastic amulets created by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio exemplify how materiality conveys Buddhist concepts. Despite their modern composition, these amulets are still ritually activated by monks, illustrating the evolving relationship between Buddhist material culture and environmental consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism and Environmentalism; Consumerism; Material Culture; Recycled Plastic; Thai Amulets

Introduction

Amulets are a highly visible and popular category of contemporary Thai religious material culture. The materiality of amulets is of special significance and, as will be demonstrated in amulets composed of both traditional and new materials, the qualities associated with the material constituents of an amulet have special significance for the perceived efficacious nature of that object. Clay is the primary material used for Thai amulets and is typically mixed with various additives. The earliest Buddhist molded plaques and amulets, often traced to India in the early centuries

of Buddhism, were composed of clay (Nattaphon 2561: 658–659). Fired clay amulets are likely over-represented in the historical record due to their comparative durability. Unfired molded tablets and amulets are very fragile, for example, water dissolves unfired clay. The majority of amulets sold in markets in Thailand nowadays continue to be composed of clay mixed with additives and manufactured by simple press molds. Amulets today, however, are also composed of a wide variety of other materials including various metals, bone and other animal parts, enamel, wood, and glass. The most common and least expensive metal used for amulets is copper. Precious metals such as silver and gold are less frequently used and are often sold in jewelry stores and gallery settings rather than by informal street

¹ Corresponding author. University of Arizona, Tucson.
Email: jnjohnston@arizona.edu

² Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University, Bangkok.



FIGURE 1: Carved tiger tooth amulet, H.: 3.8 cm
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sellers and in amulet markets. In recent years, amulets have evolved to include new materials such as photographs, holograms, and have even begun to appear as virtual objects.³

Materiality and Perceived Efficacy of Thai Amulets

Materials used for amulets are important in relation to the perceived efficacy and potential function of these objects. Traditional amulets composed of clay usually follow recipes comprised of various carefully selected ingredients.

³ For an example of online digital amulets see: <https://www.worldamulet3d.com/indexen.php> (accessed August 2024).

Examples of materials considered auspicious and appropriate for amulet recipes include ashes from cremated remains and hair (especially from spiritual masters), soil (particularly from important sites such as temples and cemeteries), lime, tree gum, cane juice, beeswax, honey, soft-prepared chalk, and ashes from incense sticks. Medicinal plants are a popular ingredient for amulets, particularly those with homophonous names conveying positive meaning such as *kalong* (ກາຫລອງ, snowy orchid) meaning “crows attracted to fragrance” conveying attracting love, *sawat* (ສວາດ, nickernut) conveying loveliness, and *rakson* (ຮັກຂ່ອນ, crown flower) meaning “many loves overlapping” indicating attraction of love interests.⁴ While numerous special ingredients may be used for these often complex amulet recipes, they all must be prepared as a powder or be finely pulverized so that the additives can be evenly mixed with clay during preparation of the raw material.

Amulets may also be entirely composed of animal materials, with those made from endangered or threatened animal parts being particularly problematic. The amulet trade may encourage illegal poaching to acquire animal materials. The perceived qualities associated with specific animals are conveyed through the material and thus considered

especially suitable for use in amulet production. For example, teeth and bones from tigers are used for amulets that provide strength and protection,⁵ building on their association with the ferocity and power of an apex predator [FIGURE 1]. Elephant ivory is also used for amulets, especially tusks broken during fights between two male forest elephants over a female. This material is particularly prized for amulets associated with durability, invulnerability, and protection from poisonous creatures (Phanuphong 2565). As we will see in the case of recycled plastic amulets, this strong association between the qualities of the raw material and perceived special attributes of the amulets endures in new materials.

A recent departure from traditional materials used for Thai amulets was conceived and produced by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio and unveiled and distributed at Bangkok Design Week in 2022. A series of nine different amulets were produced using different recycled plastic waste materials. Plastic waste was recycled and thus transformed into objects valued for their efficacy [FIGURE 2]. These amulets contain numerous layers of meaning and significance. A *Reuters* news article brought worldwide attention to this innovative initiative that links Thai amulets with themes of environmental ethics and sustainability (Jiraporn 2565).

The specific plastic materials used for these recycled amulets were intentionally selected and directly relate to the reputed qualities of the

⁴ Broken and crushed clay amulets are reportedly used as an ingredient in some amulet recipes, but their use is controversial. Prominent monk Luang Po Lek (หลวงพ่อเล็ก; b. 1959), for example, is opposed to pulverizing broken clay amulets for this purpose as the elevated status of the object is lost through this process. See: <https://www.watthakhanun.com/web-board/showthread.php?t=3428> (accessed August 2024).

⁵ See also article on fox amulets by Guanxiong Qi, this Special Edition.



FIGURE 2: Recycled plastic amulets © Qualy x Dots Design Studio

amulets, clearly demonstrating the importance of their materiality. According to Teerachai Suppameteekulwat (ธีรชัย ศุภเมธีกุลวัฒน์) of Qualy Design, a leader in the recycled plastic amulets project, the following plastics were used for amulets which directly correspond to their unique properties and potential application:

Recycled water bottles were used for making amulets that provide, or represent, the quality of adaptation [การปรับตัว, *kan prap tua*] because water easily adapts to fit any container.

Amulets made from recycled bottle caps represent “closure” [การยับยั่ง, *kan yap yang*)] and are used to limit financial loss because these caps prevent loss from bottles. These amulets are also related to limiting, or

closing, negative environmental impact resulting from excessive consumption.

Amulets made from recycled fishing line and fishing nets are used for the purpose of “catching” [การดักจับ, *kan dak chap*] that which is desired [FIGURE 3].

Amulets made from recycled milk bottles are used to attain “healthfulness” [สุขภาพดี, *sukhaphap di*] due to the association between drinking milk and health and physical strength.

Amulets made from recycled snack bags are related to “eating” [การกิน, *kan kin*]. Since overeating may cause serious health problems, these amulets are reminders to limit and regulate intake.



**FIGURE 3: Fishing line transformed into recycled plastic amulet,
H.: 4 cm x W.: 3.5 cm. © Qualy x Dots Design Studio**

Amulets made from recycled plastic shopping bags are reminders that one should not overconsume [ความฟุมฟีอย, *khwam fumfoei*], particularly given the environmental harm from excessive purchasing (interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022).

These recycled amulets were also designed to mimic the size and shape of an Apple Watch. This was an intentional design decision to attempt to connect with a younger and more technologically savvy generation. When asked about the reasons for the Apple Watch size, Teerachai replied, “most of the new generation are not interested in Buddhism, so this kind of amulet can easily reach them”. Indeed, these recycled amulets are made to fit into an

Apple Watch wristband and can be worn in this manner, contrasting with the typical use of worn amulets as pendants placed on necklaces.

Yet it is perhaps the theme of recycling and the engagement with environmental concerns that most resonates with a younger audience. Climate change and the existential challenges of an increasingly degraded natural environment are current, timely, and critically important themes. The use of recycled materials demonstrates that Buddhist culture is engaged with environmentalism and concerns of the modern age. The explicit connection to environmentalism, even if only symbolically through the modest production of recycled amulets, demonstrates the Buddhist community’s engagement with current concerns.



FIGURE 4: Somdet To, unfired clay amulet,
H.: 3.2 cm x W.: 2 cm, Wat Rakhang
© Bangkok Monastic Collection

Recycled Plastic Amulets

The designs appearing on the surface of both sides of the recycled plastic amulets are also symbolic and laden with meaning. The front of the amulet features an image of a buddha seated in meditation. The image is easily recognizable to those with even a cursory knowledge of Buddhist iconography. The buddha image on the recycled plastic amulets is closely based on the famous amulets made by Somdet To (สมเด็จโต; ca. 1788–1872) of Wat Rakhang (วัดระฆัง) in Bangkok [FIGURE 4]. Amulets of this type are arguably among the most popular in Thailand. Amulet markets today sell thousands of Somdet To amulets from Wat Rakhang, mainly

composed of unfired clay. Wat Rakhang was the main temple of Somdet To and is located on the banks of the Chao Phraya river. Somdet To was noted for supernatural abilities and his powerful amulets. As stated by Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, “In Somdet To’s description, the amulet is made from powerful materials (enchanted powder, precious metals, herbs used in lore) following strict rules, including the recitation of mantra, and finally is ‘activated’ by ritual” (2013: 235). The critical significance of the materiality of the Somdet To amulets, as we shall also see with the recycled plastic amulets, highlights the important role assigned to the physical substances used in their creation. Justin McDaniel (2011: 200) draws attention to the importance of *phong* (ຟົງ), a powder made of potent materials that “is the most important material needed to make an amulet” and the scarcity of this material is viewed as a limiting factor for large-scale amulet production.

Stanley Tambiah describes Somdet To amulets as “small tablets, usually made of white or yellow clay, with a figure of a Buddha sitting in Samadhi meditation style embossed on them. The pedestal on which he sits may have three, seven, or nine layers, three and nine being the more popular” (1984: 219). While the closely related buddha image found on the recycled plastic amulets is an intentional visual reference to the Somdet To amulet, it is not a precise reproduction. The restrained and minimalist style of the buddha image on the Somdet To amulet is a major factor in its selection as a design inspiration. The image of the simplified,

linear buddha seated upon a layered base found on the recycled amulets is also emblematic more generally of amulets as a category of Thai Buddhist material culture. The recycled plastic amulets visually paraphrase from the enormously popular Somdet To amulet design, incorporating a traditional and widely known design source into new, environmentally sustainable form.

The designers of the recycled plastic amulets did not select the buddha imagery found on the Somdet To amulet due to historical associations or biographical information specifically tied to the late master. The specific special qualities of the Somdet To amulets' source is lost in translation to a new material. Amulets produced by Somdet To, for example, are closely associated with national protection. As McDaniel states, "The association of amulets and physical and national protection was not a mere pastime and cultural oddity. It was and is an intensely detailed practice. It is a practice of which Somdet To is considered the greatest master in Thai history" (2011: 57). However, the recycled plastic amulets bearing related Somdet To imagery are intended for an audience of mainly young, educated, urban Thais who are unlikely to be familiar with the direct visual reference to Somdet To amulets, much less the complex historical and cultural associations of the design source. The recycled plastic amulets do not directly relate to the theme of national or even personal protection, but rather employ the Somdet To-related imagery for purely stylistic reasons and as a means of making the amulets appear traditional through the use of a broadly familiar motif.

The traditional materials so important in the creation of the famous Somdet To amulets have been replaced by a variety of recycled plastic materials in the Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio amulets. The specific design of a buddha image molded onto the surface of the recycled plastic amulet has a further justification beyond the connection with imagery related to the extremely popular Somdet To amulets. The sleek and restrained representation of the seated buddha was also deemed appropriate because its minimalist design appears stylistically contemporary. According to Teerachai, "[T]he Somdet [To] designed amulets have a minimal style, so our amulets also don't have many Thai visual elements or imagery. This amulet is thus a type of international art that is easy to understand" (interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). The Somdet To amulets were particularly appropriate as a design inspiration for the recycled plastic amulets as their minimalist style appears contemporary and there is an absence of complex imagery and symbols that may be hinder connection, particularly among younger audiences lacking knowledge of Thai amulets.

The reverse side of the amulet reads *sati* (ສຕි) as a monogram in raised relief [FIGURE 5]. This term is another aspect of these amulets that contains layers of meaning. *Sati* in Pali (*smṛti* in Sanskrit, literally "memory" or "retention"), commonly means mindfulness, or awareness, in traditional Buddhist contexts. The Thai epithet *phra* (ພຣະ), which implies purity, is frequently added to the title of amulets as a sign of respect. Through the invocation of



FIGURE 5: Recycled plastic amulet with monogram inscription *sati* on reverse
 © John Johnston

the words *phra sati* (พระสถิต) “purity and mindfulness”, the designers of the amulets hope to inspire greater mindfulness of the natural environment. When combined, *phrasati* also sounds very similar to “plastic”, thus creating an intentional play on words that highlights the material aspect of the amulets.⁶

The recycled amulets were given free of charge in exchange for merit-making (*ทำบุญ, tham bun*) activities such as giving donations for temple construction, commissioning rituals, and offering support at temple festivals. This aspect of trading amulets for good works was done as a matter of trust, so no documentation proving that the receiver had given a donation or justification was required. Merit-making

is one of the strongest motivations for Buddhist activities among the laity in Thailand and these recycled amulets were given in recognition for these acts.

A surprising development occurred during the distribution of the recycled amulets. A particular color was very much in demand. These amulets, however, had not yet been “activated” through rituals led by monks. Other amulets which were in unpopular colors had already been ritually activated. The public strongly preferred amulets that had been ritually activated, regardless of color, over the examples that had not been “blessed” by monks (Teerachai interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). This demonstrated that the ritual of activation was considered an important, indeed essential, quality of the amulets even among a generally young Thai audience. Despite modern materials

⁶ Another possible play on words here might be with Sanskrit *prāśasti*, a genre of inscription that praise rulers (Nicolas Revire, pers. comm.).

and contemporary design elements, the desire for activation of the amulets through ritual endures as a vital concern. Through activation, recycled plastic amulets join the category of Buddhist materiality valued for their efficacy which, as outlined by Fabio Rambelli, includes “[...] relics but also talismans and amulets” (2007: 65).

Recycled Amulets and Ritual Culture

Amulets exist within a large and complex context of Thai material culture that provides an extensive array of goods for the faithful. The broad range of objects associated with Buddhist material culture can be divided into categories based on their role in practice and ritual. Rambelli states, “Buddhism classifies sacred objects on the basis of the modality in which the sacred is produced or manifested in them” (2007: 65). Amulets belong to a class of religious objects typically valued for their perceived efficacy that can be widely replicated and distributed. Additional objects in this category, often sold by the same merchants that sell amulets, include *yantra* designs, talismans, and charms. As with amulets, these items are associated with improved luck, health, and financial benefit. The perceived efficacious qualities of amulets are the primary reason for them being collective items. Stories of how specific types of amulets provide protection, improved health, and good fortune fuel their consumption. These stories are conveyed through specialized magazines, websites, social media, and through direct storytelling, particularly between dealers and collectors.

The perceived efficacy of amulets is also associated with their imagery and design, connections with important sites and temples, and the roles of prominent monks and spiritual masters in the ritual activation of the objects. These important associations are expressed in physical form in the amulet. For example, soil from a special temple or hair from a famous master may be rendered into powdered form and added to the amulet recipe.

Chanting and ritual, which are the main means of activation, are critical to the perceived efficacy of amulets. The ritually activated amulet attains new status as an elevated object. Of consecrated objects, Trine Brox states that “After being awakened, sacred objects remain powerful and venerated as reincarnating agents capable of granting blessings” (Brox & Williams-Oerberg 2022: 23). As will be discussed later, this activation of the object to elevated status may also be interpreted as realization of a final physical form that transcends cyclical recycling.

The creation of amulets is generally a transparent process that imbues the objects with religious significance and status. The recipes and special ingredients used for the amulets are of critical importance, along with the site of consecration and details about the ritual activation process. Today, it is not uncommon for amulet dealers to have video clips showing the activation rituals used for specific amulets. The visibility of the materiality of amulets and the manufacturing and activation of these objects stands in contrast to most manufacturing processes that are often hidden or obscured from the consumer.

Contrasting Buddhist materiality with the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, Rambelli states, “[...] in the case of Buddhist sacred objects, in contrast, relations between an object and its users, producers, and actual processes involved tend to be emphasized, displayed, and sacralized” (2007: 273). The video clips of amulet activation rituals often supplied by amulet dealers are a modern means of openly sharing the process of how these objects are created and activated. As we will see, details of the manufacture of the recycled plastic amulets are also made visible and relate to their perceived efficacy. Thai amulets, with their frequent associations with stories about materiality and the process of creation and activation, exhibit a high degree of transparency in the manufacturing process.

Given the new material used in the amulets, the ritual of activation of the Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio recycled plastic amulets proved challenging. Many monks rejected requests to bless the amulets due to the untraditional materials. According to our informant, a group of monks in Ayutthaya province finally consented to perform activation rituals for the amulets (Teerachai interviewed by the authors on 21 July 2022). These ceremonies, which feature the recitation of sutras, typically last from one to three days. White string that is assigned the status of religious supply (สายสิญจน์, *sai sin*) is usually wrapped around a group of amulets with the string held by officiating and chanting monks.

A striking aspect of the recycled plastic amulets is the intentional connection made by the amulet

designers between recycling and rebirth. The relationship between recycling and rebirth appears in a number of texts exploring the intersection of Buddhism and environmentalism. For example, the term “eco-karma” (กรรมนิเวศ, *kam niwet*) is used to characterize cause and effect from the perspective of sustainability (see various essays in Tucker & Williams 1997). The process of recycling, in which discarded materials are given new life, bears obvious parallels to the Buddhist principle of rebirth and cyclical existence. However, recycled plastic amulets extend this concept. The plastic amulets have met their final ends as spiritually activated and thus elevated objects. The designers conceived of these recycled amulets taking final physical form and not to be discarded or re-recycled. This assumption of final form is also intended to be similar to the concept of the *parinirvāṇa* (ปรินิพพาน, *parinipphan*), the final extinguishing accomplished by buddhas. Rather than rejoining the cycles of birth and rebirth, buddhas enter *nirvāṇa* (นิพพาน, *nipphan*), the ultimate transcendence of rebirth. The recycled plastic amulets are presented as also taking final material form, going beyond rebirth/recycling and similarly no longer subject to samsaric cyclical re-creation. The view that recycling is akin to re-creation in *samsāra* is echoed by Ian Harris, who states that “[...] (from) the environmentalist perspective, it becomes clear that recycling is connected with samsara” (1997: 384). Harris draws a parallel between the rounds of birth and rebirth that characterize *samsāra* with the cyclical process of recycling and re-recycling.

Objects of activated status, such as the recycled plastic amulets, are shown to attain their final physical state, no longer bound by the cycle of re-creation. In his inquiry into the intersections between Buddhism and discourse of environmental concerns including recycling, rebirth, and *samsara*, Harris states, “In the first place, environmentalists are certainly committed to the principle of the recirculation of inanimate materials, such as wood products and the like, but how far are they prepared to go in the direction of the recycling of sentiency itself?” (1997: 383). Recycling is thus used as an analogy to address several core Buddhist concepts including impermanence, rebirth, and *samsara*. This equivalency between recycling and rebirth is extended to items that are viewed as having taken their final physical form as activated and efficacious objects of Buddhist material culture. Harris brings the equivalency between recycling and rebirth to a broad context in stating, “For traditional Theravada Buddhism, the universe is a vast unsupervised recycling plant in which unstable entities circulate from one form of existence to the next” (1997: 383). Principles of environmental sustainability are thus fitted into key, traditional Buddhist concepts such as karma (eco-karma) and rebirth (recycling).

The utilization of recycled plastic materials for the manufacture of Buddhist objects is particularly relevant in Thailand—one of the worst contributors of plastic waste in the world. Though Thailand was the 28th largest global economy in 2023,⁷ it created 4.8 million

tons of plastic waste annually, ranking as the 12th worst plastic polluting country in the world in 2022.⁸ While some single-use plastics are banned in the country, enforcement is woefully lacking, and the generation of plastic waste remains prevalent. Even within Thai amulet culture, plastic waste is noticeable. Plastic pendant cases used for hanging amulets on necklaces are by far the most common method of wearing amulets. Collecting supplies, particularly plastic sleeves, bags, and cases, can be found by the thousands in large amulet markets. In such a plastics-intensive context, the use of recycled plastic waste for amulets is a fitting environmental statement.

Recycled Glass Amulets

Another example of the use of recycled materials in the production of amulets, and further demonstration of the intentional act of converting waste materials into Buddhist objects, can be found at Wat Chak Daeng (วัด查กแดง), a sprawling temple complex located just south of Bangkok in Samut Prakan province. The abbot of Wat Chak Daeng is Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangkaro (พระมหาประนอม ธรรมลังกาโร; b. 1965), better known as Phra Pranom (พระประนอม), an accomplished Buddhist leader with a background in chemistry. He has combined an ambitious recycling program with Thai Buddhist temple culture. The temple also serves as a recycling

⁷ According to WorldData.info, 2023: <https://www.worlddata.info/largest-economies.php> (accessed 5 January 2024).

⁸ According to Brand Inside, 2022: <https://brandinside.asia/plastic-pollution/> (accessed 14 March 2022).

⁷ According to WorldData.info, 2023: <https://www.worlddata.info/largest-economies.php>



FIGURE 6: Recycled glass amulets in a plastic case produced for Wat Chak Daeng,
H.: 5 cm x W.: 3 cm © Monastic Collection

educational center.⁹ As Phra Pranom states, “If you want to know somethings about recycling, just come here” (interviewed by the authors on 18 August 2022). Wat Chak Daeng is best known for recycling plastic waste into cloth used for monk’s robes. The temple has expanded recycling efforts to produce a variety of goods made of recycled plastic cloth. These recycling activities are among the most explicit connections between contemporary Thai Buddhism and efforts to preserve the environment.

Recently Phra Pranom has taken an interest in recycled building materials. The temple has an ambitious plan to establish a Buddhist teaching hall built entirely of recycled materials. Recycled glass amulets were produced as gifts from the temple for those who donated to the recycled building project [FIGURE 6]. Amulets are frequently an important means of raising funds for Buddhist temples and as recognition for merit-making. In this case, recycled glass amulets reward support of a Buddhist-led recycled architecture initiative at Wat Chak Daeng. The use of recycled glass amulets to acknowledge support for a new building composed of recycled materials demonstrates the

⁹ According to Watchakdaeng.com: <https://watchakdaeng.com/2020/biography-phra-maha-pranom-thammalongkaro-abbot-of-watchakdaeng/> (accessed 15 May 2022).

commitment of Wat Chak Daeng's leadership to promoting environmental

causes and setting an example for the wider community.

Thai amulets composed of recycled materials tangibly represent a growing awareness and concern for the degradation of the natural environment. These amulets demonstrate engagement with this critical contemporary issue by a segment of the Buddhist community. Designers of these amulets intentionally use materiality and its connection to environmentalism and sustainability to convey relevancy to younger audiences. While the design motif of the simplified buddha is a visual reference to the historical Somdet To amulets, the Apple Watch size and shape of the recycled plastic amulets are clearly contemporary and an overt attempt to connect with a new generation.

The recycled plastic amulets produced and distributed by Qualy Design & Dots Design Studio represent both a continuation and departure from traditional Thai amulets in terms of materiality and relationship with environmental concerns. The specific material composition used for the various recycled amulets directly relates to their perceived qualities and unique efficacy. This direct connection between the materiality of the amulet and its specific efficacious qualities builds on traditional understanding of the significance of materiality in these objects. The act of ritual activation by monks remains essential in the perceived transformation of these amulets. The seated buddha

image on the recycled plastic amulets recalls the traditional Somdet To design yet was also selected due to its modern and minimalist appearance. The Somdet To-inspired linear buddha image becomes generalized and broadly emblematic of Thai amulets generally rather than a visual statement specifically tied to Somdet To. The *phrasati* title of the amulets playfully combines a Buddhist term with an intentional, homophonous reference to the "plastic" materiality of these objects.

The act of providing the recycled plastic amulets to acknowledge and reward merit-making links the amulets to one of the primary religious acts in Thai Buddhism. Similarly, the recycled glass amulets from Wat Chak Daeng are gifts recognizing the virtuous act of donating to temple building efforts and are also used to strengthen the important relationship between the Thai Sangha (the order of monks) and laity.

The materials used for the amulets composed of recycled plastic and glass indicate growing environmental concerns and engagements with sustainability efforts. Despite these new materials and themes appearing in amulets, the requisite act of ritual activation is honored in the transformation of the objects. In these cases, new societal concerns are manifested in a Buddhist material culture rooted in traditional practices and perceptions. While the direct environmental impact of

recycling a relatively small amount of plastic or glass waste into a few thousand amulets is modest, the conceptual, thematic, and symbolic aspect of these amulets is significant

and represents an increased awareness and concern for protecting the natural environment and highlights the role of religious ethics and Buddhist material culture in these efforts.

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