

Be a V-Star!: Dhammakāya Programs to Cultivate Virtue in Thailand's Youth

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The Dhammakāya Temple (Wat Phra Thammakai) in Pathum Thani, Thailand has emerged as one of Buddhism's largest new religious movements over the past fifty years. The Temple's phenomenal growth has been linked to its leadership's ability to apply traditional narratives of merit-making and ethical practice to Dhammakāya fundraising and to promote a distinct form of meditation practice perfectly suited to contemporary life for practitioners of all ages. The Temple has promoted youth initiatives since its founding, and the success of these programs may be one factor in the Temple's growth over the past decades. This article will examine some of these Dhammakāya youth-oriented religious programs, from temporary ordinations, dhamma quizzes, and student retreats to animated television programming and its "V-Star Change the World" events, and suggest that these youth initiatives have remained a popular vehicle for support and recruitment despite numerous criticisms and scandals over the past decades.

Keywords: Dhammakāya Temple; Wat Phra Thammakai; Dhamma-heir Program; Dhammadāyāda; *Maṅgala-sutta*; V-Star; Dhamma Media Channel (DMC); Thailand

The Dhammakāya Temple (*Wat Phra Thammakai*) in the Bangkok suburb of Pathum Thani is one of the few Buddhist temples in Thailand, outside of the temple tourist circuits, that has international name recognition. This distinction rests on its status as the fastest-growing new religious movement in Thailand (with over three million followers worldwide), and as the country's most controversial temple, with decades of controversies over its purported aggressive fundraising, commercialization of Buddhism, heretical teachings, financial malfeasance, and ties to the ousted prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra (Phra Payutto 1999; Rungrawee 2002; Keyes 2006, Scott 2006 and 2009; Mackenzie 2007; Taylor 2017). Despite this history of religious controversy, the Temple continues to offer its wide array of events and programs for its domestic and international supporters. These serve to bind the community together and as vehicles for recruiting new



practitioners and potential donors. Many of the new participants are young people, from primary students to college students, who are drawn to the Temple's programs that specifically target youth practice and identity.

When I began studying this Temple and travelling to its main temple in Pathum Thani as a graduate student in the late 1990s, I was immediately struck by the number of young people and college-aged students at its Sunday services, and by their active engagement in Temple activities. The vast majority wore the standard white Dhammakāya uniform, which immediately marked them as members of the Dhammakāya community, rather than as casual visitors. Young children were engaged in group activities, while teenagers served as greeters, guides, and mentors to the young. These images of youth engagement stood in strong contrast to the youth that I had witnessed at the other temples, many of whom were simply accompanying their families to make merit and secure blessings. They were not formally organized, nor were there many programs directed primarily at them.

Buddhist temples in Thailand have historically served as centers for community life, from hosting festivals and conducting funerals to functioning as schools and pharmacies. As such, temples frequently brought monks and families together, and they became sites for the cultivation of Buddhist virtues in young people. Monks would often offer sermons that emphasized the *panca sīla* (five precepts) and the four *brahma viharas* (loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity), while lay families made offerings, young children learned how to properly bow, and older male children ordained as novices. While many of these interactions continue today, there is no doubt that things have changed. Modern government education, hospitals, movie theatres, and shopping malls have supplanted the traditional function of the temple as a center for community life. The Dhammakāya Temple has sought to address these social changes through a decades-long campaign to make it a center for modern life, with a focus on building a new community of young renouncers and lay families.

This article will outline a few of the ways in which the Dhammakāya Temple has deliberately reached out to Thai youth through ordination and meditation programs, ethics contests, television programming, and social media. I will argue that these programs have served as vehicles for building and fostering a Dhammakāya community despite decades of controversy and scandal. Since the focus of this article is on the ways in which the Dhammakāya Temple has sought to engage various youth constituencies, I will rely primarily on Dhammakāya materials. Some of these I have collected over the twenty-five years that I have studied this Temple, while others are currently being produced online and through social media.¹

¹ I will primarily use the Royal Thai General System of Transcription unless it is a Thai word with a standard Romanization or a Dhammakāya version. I will also use Dhammakāya transliterations or nomenclature when appropriate. The movement frequently mixes English and Thai words together.

Brief history of the Dhammakāya Temple

The Dhammakāya Temple (*Wat Phra Thammakai*) is one of the largest temples in Thailand, both in terms of its number of monastic and lay practitioners as well as its geographic footprint. Its size and branding parallel mega-churches in the United States, which similarly seek to create a distinct religious and social community. The Temple was founded in the early 1970s as a satellite meditation center (*samnak*) for practitioners from Wat Paknam in Thonburi. The practitioners were students of Khun Yay Upasika Chan (1909–2000), a *mae chi* (precept nun) renowned for her skills in meditation and lauded as the “foremost disciple” of Luang Phor Sodh, the popular abbot of Wat Paknam who promoted a distinct meditation technique (*wicha thammakai*).² One of Khun Yay’s students, Lady Prayad Pattayapongsavisuttatibodi, donated seventy-seven acres of land in Pathum Thani (about forty kilometers north of Bangkok) to create a separate space for their practice and to build a new community. Under the direction of Phra Dhammachayo, the temple’s abbot and notable student of Khun Yay’s, Phra Thattacheevo (the assistant abbot), and other Dhammakāya Foundation administrators, the Dhammakāya community grew exponentially, and it became an official *wat* (a temple with monks in residence) in 1977. Over the past fifty years, the Temple has expanded in Pathum Thani with the addition of numerous temple buildings, monuments, and monastic and lay residences, and it now frequently draws hundreds of thousands of people to its major festival celebrations and special events.

For decades journalists and scholars have covered this new religious movement’s phenomenal growth as well as the numerous scandals and controversies that have plagued it. The Temple’s first large-scale scandal occurred in the late 1980s when its expansion displaced local farmers and produced a series of protests. At the time, former Prime Minister M. R. Kukrit Pramoj “concluded that the Dhammakāya Temple is actually in the business of selling ‘religious pleasure,’ similar to other ways of selling happiness such as setting up recreation clubs or fishing parks” (Suwanna 1990: 402). These criticisms of expansionism and commercialism reached a fevered pitch in the late 1990s when the Temple promoted a series of miraculous events and “asset-sucking” (*dud sap*) amulets in its fundraising campaign for the *Mahathammakai Chedi* (a *stūpa*), which became the focal point for the Temple’s branding (Rungrawee 2002; Mackenzie 2007; Scott 2009). Since then, there have been several attempts to arrest the abbot, Phra Dhammachayo, on charges related to the misuse of temple funds. In 2017, the world watched as Dhammakāya practitioners blocked the entrance to the temple when police and military units sought to arrest the abbot on charges related to a collapsed credit union (Head 2017). Photographs of the standoff circulated widely in the in domestic and international media for weeks, and once again raised questions about the integrity of the Temple’s administrators and the authenticity of its practices.

² The Dhammakaya meditation technique combines aspects of normative *samatha* (tranquility) meditation and *vipassana* (insight) meditation with a distinctive focus on experiencing and knowing the *dhammakāya* (*wicha thammakai*, Thai; *vijjā dhammakāya*, Pāli) within one’s self. Practitioners describe this as an experience of *nibbana*, which they envision as both a state of bliss and peace in this lifetime as well as a place where enlightened beings dwell after death.

Given the unprecedented number of controversies, one might assume that the Temple would follow the decline of other scandal-ridden religious organizations and lose support among its faithful and struggle to recruit new members. While some practitioners have chosen to disassociate themselves from the Temple and a few have become vocal critics, most prominently Mano Mettanando Laohavanich (a former Dhammakāya monk), the Temple has managed to maintain a sizeable following, as evidenced by the large crowds at its major events. Two years after the standoff, for instance, a reporter noted how “thousands of monks and white-clad temple members held candles in a stunning, perfectly choreographed expression of devotion,” on Makha Bucha Day, which signaled how the Temple had “quietly rebounded” [from the credit union scandal] and continued “to hold several high-profile annual events” (*The Straits Times* 2/20/2019).

How can we account for this continued support for a Temple so embroiled in scandal and controversy? Part of the answer is the reason for its success in the first place. The Temple’s phenomenal growth rests on its distinctive form of meditation practice that emphasizes this-worldly benefits (from increased wealth and reduction in anxiety to better test scores and clearer skin), its ability to repackage or rebrand traditional practices, such as meditation and merit-making, in modern packaging (such as prizes with different tiers of giving), and its successful marketing and fundraising campaigns that utilize modern media (books, videos, audiocassettes, billboards, mass-mailings, radio, television, internet, and social media platforms) (Apinya 1993; Scott 2009). Through these various strategies, the Temple and its Foundation have sought to present Dhammakāya Buddhism as a religious practice perfectly suited to modern life and sensibilities, but firmly grounded in “traditional” Buddhist values. In so doing, the Temple has sought to establish itself as a “centre to teach and exemplify ethical practice” while adhering “to the Dhammakaya tradition of meditation and adaptation of traditional values to modern society.”³ The Temple’s message of “adaptation of traditional values to modern society” is reflected in its savvy marketing of meditation kits and self-help videos and books that target a “growing well-educated and entrepreneurial Thai middle class who lack the time to ordain, study large tomes of Buddhist scripture, or meditate for several hours a day in the forest” (Michaels and McDaniel 2020: 259). This marketing strategy has proven to be effective for all age groups, including middle-class teenagers who are attracted to the “consumption experience” of Dhammakāya practice (Kritsadarat and Elliott 1999). In fact, one of the principal ways in which the Temple has promoted this new religious community is through its youth initiatives and marketing.

The success of the Temple’s youth-focused programs and marketing campaigns are another reason why the Temple has managed to sustain and grow its membership. From the beginning, the Temple’s identity was linked to youth piety as it sought to build a base of modern, educated, and middle-upper class practitioners. Phra Dhammachayo was introduced to Dhammakāya meditation while he was a business student at Kasetsart University (one of Thailand’s leading private universities), and he became the abbot of the temple at the early age of 25. As the administrative leader of the Dhammakāya Temple and its foundation, he built the Dhammakāya community with a

³ From a pamphlet distributed at the Temple in 1999.

focus on families and multi-generational practitioners. Photographs of children meditating alone or families meditating together have widely circulated in Temple publications and media. For instance, in one 1998 publication, we see a photograph of a family (a mother, father, and two daughters), all of whom are wearing the standard white Dhammakāya uniforms while meditating outside near a tranquil stream; they all have tranquil expressions on their faces (*Kalyanamit* 1998).⁴ The photograph reinforces the idea that a happy family is a family that meditates together. In addition, Dhammakāya practitioners have frequently populated Buddhist student groups on Thai college campuses, and Temple publications laud the fact that a majority of its monks have college degrees. As the Temple grew in size, the focus was extended to younger students as well. Dhammakāya videos, flyers, magazines, websites, and social media frequently showcase children meditating and making merit. These Dhammakāya promotional materials offer a dramatically different impression of the Temple from the one presented in the domestic and international news, where headlines highlight religious and legal controversies over the Temple's aggressive fund-raising, commercialization of Buddhism, financial malfeasance, and promotion of heretical teachings.

The Dhamma-heir Program and Temporary Ordination

A common theme in contemporary scholarship on Buddhism in modern Thailand is the changing role of the sangha (monastic community). Prior to the religious and educational reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, temples were the educational centers for local communities (Keyes 1991; Kamala 2007: 43–45). Young men frequently ordained for several years in order to receive a formal education, which would help them secure good employment in the future. Some were not considered “ripe” (*suk*) for marriage or adulthood if they had not spent at least one rainy season as a monk (Phya Anuman Rajadhon 1954). With the structural reforms of the sangha (Sangha Acts of 1902, 1941, and 1962) and the creation of a modern secular educational system, however, fewer and fewer young men ordain as novices to receive an education and even fewer remain permanently as monks.

The Dhammakāya Temple addressed this problem by introducing it first, and perhaps most successful, youth-oriented program: the Dhamma-heir (*Dhammadāyāda*, Pali; *Thamthayat*, Thai) Program. Beginning in 1972 as a two-week meditation retreat for college-aged students, it has grown into a two-month-long summer training program for young men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. The program consists of training in Dhammakāya meditation, dhamma (teachings of the Buddha) lessons, and physical training. One participant describes his experience in this way:

Dhammadāyāda training is the beginning of changes. Changes from comfortable habits like living in a luxurious house, surrounded by beloved ones, to dwelling under the *klod* (a mosquito net umbrella) in the midst of the rice field with no other shelter. Moreover, there is no sound of heavy traffic, no interference from others, only quietness. There are no colorful clothes because we only wear white. There is also no sight or sound of dissent. Dinner is not served because *Dhammadāyāda* must observe the eight moral precepts. Our

⁴ This image is in an advertisement for a telecommunications company (UCOM group) which is commonly found on the back cover of the Dhammakāya Foundation's magazine, *Kalyanamit*.

confused daily activities were left behind. Our only duty is to practice mindfulness with diligence (Pholwat Naklux n.d.).

Program participants follow the eight precepts of a devout lay follower (*upāsaka*, male).⁵ In Thailand, it is common for older Buddhists to undertake the eight precepts, but in this instance, the Temple formalizes the undertaking of the eight precepts as an act of collegiate piety. Dhamma-heir participants also engage in activities commonly linked to forest monastic practice, such as the practice of sleeping outdoors.

The Program is an innovative take on the practice of temporary ordination in Thailand. The Dhamma-heir picks up on this idea of meditation and renunciation as rites of passage for young adults as it markets this program to college students. One former Dhammakāya monk claims that the “main incentive for the trainees is to ‘pay back the price of milk to their mother’” (Mano Mettanando Laohavanich 2012); in other words, the practitioner dedicates merit and shows gratitude to his mother through participation in the training. According to one Dhammakāya publication, participants may either use this experience to advance to a further commitment as a novice monk (*sāmanera*) at the Dhammakāya Temple, or if he chooses to remain as a layperson, he will use his training for “the benefit of himself, his society, his nation, and the world” (Pholwat Naklux n.d.).

In 2010, the Dhammakāya Temple initiated a new program that did require ordination as a novice. The “Mass Ordination of 100,000 Monks” program aimed to attract novices from every village across Thailand. This program was not exclusively for young men, but a majority of the participants were college-aged. According to the Dhammakāya Foundation, this has led to a decrease in the number of deserted temples:

Every year, there are a lot of people interested to participate in the program and even extend their stay in monkhood and are assigned to different temples in their hometowns, resulting in the decreasing numbers of deserted temples.

In the most recent record of the National Office of Buddhism, in November 2557 B.E. (2014), the numbers of deserted temples has been decreased down to only 4,000 temples (“Mass Ordination” 2020).⁶

The program is offered twice a year: once during summer school break, and once during the months of the traditional rainy-season retreat. The photograph on the English version of the webpage shows regimented rows of men in white, holding robes with their hands clasped, in front of the

⁵ These training rules are to refrain from: 1) taking life; 2) taking what is not given; 3) sexual misconduct; 4) false speech; 5) the use of intoxicants; 6) taking food at an unreasonable time; 7) dancing, singing, music, and improper shows; the use of garlands, perfumes, and unguents; and things that beautify and adorn the body; and 8) the use of high and luxurious beds.

⁶ On this web page, Dhammakāya official provide a link to *Thai Rath* newspaper article (November 22 2557 [2014]) about abandoned temples.

Mahathammakai Chedi.⁷ Dhammakāya testimonials of young men who have ordained at the Dhammakāya Temple are readily available on the Temple's website and on YouTube.

At first, the Dhamma-heir program was exclusively for male college students, but over time a similar program was introduced for young women. The Ladies Dhamma-heir Program offers the experience of temporary renunciation for young women without the controversy of ordination. In the late 1990s, the Temple faced public criticism when reports emerged that it had ordained some of these young women as novices (*sāmanerī*), which is an ordination that is not sanctioned by most religious authorities in Thailand. The official *bhikkhunī* order of nuns died out in the Theravāda tradition hundreds of years ago, and since “the lineage of the women's order was not preserved in a continuous line to the present age,” many conservative Theravāda Buddhists conclude that new ordinations are not legitimate (Jordt 1988: 31). In 2001, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (*Bhikkhunī Dhammananda*), a professor of Buddhist Studies at Thammasat University, ordained as a novice in Sri Lanka (and subsequently as a *bhikkhunī* in 2003) and has spearheaded the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand, but female ordination remains controversial (Seeger 2006). Eight- or ten-precept nuns (*mae chi*), who don white robes and shave their heads and eyebrows, do reside at the Dhammakāya Temple, but apart from the notable exception of Khun Yay Ubasika Chan (Scott 2010), they tend not to be showcased in Dhammakāya promotional materials. By contrast, the Ladies Dhamma-heir participants are featured prominently in Dhammakāya videos and social media. One promotional video (Kidyai Gydi 2019a) describes the purpose of the forty-nine-day program as helping young women cultivate mental and physical health through Buddhist training.

The Dhamma-heir programs for men and women produce not only a certain kind of Buddhist—one who is trained in Dhammakāya meditation and traditional Buddhist ethics—they also create a community of well-educated young practitioners who serve as an evangelical arm for the Temple at their respective universities, and as mentors for younger Dhammakāya youth. They frequently lead discussions and tours of the temple during large Temple events, and they are showcased in Dhammakāya media. The Dhamma-heir program was one of the first highly organized programs for young adults, but in the decades since its creation the Temple and its Foundation have created a number of new programs that focus on the cultivation of virtues within Dhammakāya lay youth, from studying the *Maṅgala-sutta* to becoming a so-called “V-Star.” One of these new programs, Super Kids Summer Camps (Smart Camp; Adventure Camp; International Camp; and Leadership Camp), seeks to replicate the Dhamma-heir Program for some of the Temple's youngest participants. These Dhammakāya camps take place over a few days and focus on meditation and applying the Buddha's teaching to everyday life. One camp's promotional poster claims that the camp is recruiting children who “want to go UP!” and that they can learn to be “smart and good children” through fun activities and learning good habits. According to Dhammakāya promotional materials, the camp encourages imagination and teamwork, and fosters good virtues within children (dmc.tv. 2019).

⁷ The caption under the photograph reads: “This project has been made possible by the support of the entire Sangha Community, the Committee on Education, Religion, Arts and Culture Group, the House of Representatives, along with more than 25 organizations.” (“Mass Ordination” 2020) This statement serves to assert broad support for the Temple from government and religious agencies.

Ethics Contests

Since the early 1980s, the Dhammakāya Temple has promoted its teachings to school-aged children through a series of ethics contests, which were based on the *Maṅgala sutta*. For decades, the Temple has used the *Maṅgala sutta* as the foundation for its promotion of an everyday ethics for lay persons—both young and old. Ethical conduct (*sīla*) is an essential part of the Buddha’s Eightfold Path, and for laypersons, the five precepts (to refrain from killing a living being, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from the use of intoxicants) constitute a general guide for ethical behavior. Dhammakāya practitioners expand their discourses on lay ethics beyond these five precepts by focusing on the thirty-eight blessings in the *Maṅgala sutta*.

This text is widely known in Thailand and other Theravāda countries, but not as a guide to lay ethics. It is commonly chanted by monks for protection against illness, ill-will, and other inauspicious occurrences. The text contains a list of thirty-eight blessings, from freedom from foolish acquaintances, to the cultivation of respect, humility, and gratitude. When monks chant this text for protection (*paritta*) they use the power of ethical conduct (*sīla*) as a force against misfortune. Dhammakāya practitioners utilize this idea of protection, but rather than focusing on the magical power of *paritta* chanting, they emphasize how the study of the text can develop “real happiness” within the mind (Dhammakāya Foundation 1999: 10).

The *Mongkhon Chiwit* (Auspicious Life), a Dhammakāya publication based on the *Maṅgala sutta*, specifically targets a younger audience. This text was sponsored by the student organizations at nine of Thailand’s post-secondary educational institutions. Swearer argues that the text “reads like an ethics primer similar to the Ministry of Education’s *sīla* (ethics) curriculum” (1991: 663). The tone of the *Mongkhon Chiwit* clearly demonstrates how the Temple uses the *Maṅgala sutta* as a self-improvement manual for all practitioners:

The Buddha taught the thirty-eight levels of dhamma practice in the *Maṅgala-sutta* for the progress and happiness of the world. They are simple enough to read but difficult to put into practice. . . . Those who truly put into practice the steps of the *Maṅgala-sutta* will improve their lives whether they be a layperson or monk. Indeed, following them leads to the very highest level of Buddhism. (*Mongkhon Chiwit*, cited in Swearer 1991: 663)

The Temple’s emphasis on personal morality for the “progress and happiness of the world” reflects its branding as a modern temple for a new age. Swearer argues that the *Mongkhon Chiwit* explicitly addresses the confusion felt by many college students as they navigate among different authoritative sources for knowledge of the world and themselves (1991: 664).

Given the privileging of the *Maṅgala sutta* as the quintessential text on Buddhist ethics, it is not surprising that it is the basis for the Dhammakāya Temple’s student ethics contests. The first of these was the “Moral and Ethics Contest,”⁸ which began in 1982 with approximately 382 student participants from high schools all over the country; it was held in conjunction with the ethics and peace exhibition at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. By 1998, there were over one million

⁸ This contest is now called the “Path to Progress” contest, but it is essentially the same format as early iterations.

participants from over 4,000 different schools. University students continue to aid in the implementation of the exam. The program received support from Ministry of Education as well as the royal family, whose members awarded prizes to the winners (Dhammakāya Foundation 1999: 4). Today, “several million students” participate each year, which helps them to “cultivate their virtues and develop them into wholesome individuals for their family, community, society, and the rest of the world” (en.dhammadakaya.net 2020). On the Temple’s contest webpage, young children are photographed holding copies of *Mongkhon Chiwit*, which remains as the seminal ethics primer for students.

Another ethics contest, the “World Peace Ethics Contest,” which began in 2008, similarly instructs and quizzes students on the thirty-eight blessings of the *Maṅgala sutta*. The stated objectives for the most recent World Peace Ethics Contest are:

To promote young people to learn basic moral principles that are universal and accessible to people of any race, religion and creed, so they have Right Livelihood.

To instill creative potential in young people by encouraging positive personal qualities in daily lives, leading to a happy environment in both family and society.

To teach young people to become well-rounded citizens in quality and morality, so they can build our society and nation to success, happiness and peace (*The 13th World Peace Ethics Contest 2020*).

Students in Thailand and in schools across the globe now participate in these contests. Local, national, and international awards are granted to the recipients. The Temple promotes the winners on social media and exhibits their photographs at the Temple and local universities.

Be a V-star!

The latest iteration of a Dhammakāya youth ethics program is the V-star (Virtuous-star) Program for students of all ages. Its stated goal is to cultivate domestic and international V-star students who can make a difference in their communities. As with previous programs, it highlights the difficulties faced by young people today:

Due to the lack of ethics among youths that result from the advancement of technology and the spread of materialism and consumerism, other social problems arise; e.g. drugs issues, family issues, crime and many other issues, which have been increasing in seriousness overtime. The solution to these problems cannot achieve a sustainable result without the development of juvenile ethics as well (IMEC 2017).

The V-Star Program goes beyond merely recognizing student achievement in the ethics contest; it promotes values that will lead “to a brighter future for the nation” (V-Star 2020).

The program identifies five values as “Universal Values of Goodness:” cleanliness, orderliness, politeness, punctuality, and meditation. The Dhammakāya Foundation website provides detailed descriptions of each of these values—all of which cultivate characteristics of an effective student as well as those of an ideal child. Cleanliness refers not only to personal hygiene and nutrition but also

to the maintenance of clean spaces, from “wiping your kitchen to scrubbing your toilet bowl.” This creates an atmosphere conducive to spiritual training. “Having a dirt-free environment and body also gives you a positive state of mind.” Orderliness relates to tidy bedrooms and organized study tables as well as organized bags (the website has a photo of a messy purse and an organized one). Politeness refers the golden rule as well as to the cultivation of good manners and the right state of mind (acting without the hope of gaining something). The punctuality section describes the importance of finishing tasks on or before the designated time, and takes aim at the idea of “Filipino Time,” which refers to the idea that specific times are flexible.⁹ The last virtue is meditation (or rather a focused mind with a particular form of consciousness). Meditation leads to “a higher level of awareness and inner peace,” which will lead to changes in your life and those around you. The meditation described in this section of the website is a simple form of *samatha* (calming) meditation rather than the more elaborate *dhammakāya* method (V-Star 2020).

The use of these five “Universal Values of Goodness” to cultivate a particular kind of young person closely mirrors the Temple’s self-conscious promotion of itself as temple suited to values of the contemporary age. Many first-time visitors to the Temple comment on its “clean, quiet, orderly appearance (*sa-at, sa-gnop, pen rabiap*)” (Zehner 1990: 416). The Temple’s clean appearance manifests externally its “immaculately kept grounds” as well as its strict code of conduct for monks and laypersons (Zehner 1990: 416); it is quiet as it is located outside of the city and no stray dogs are allowed (a common sight at other temples); and order is maintained through dress codes (white uniforms for lay people) and a strict daily routine. Even large-scale events are carefully orchestrated to cultivate a normative sense of calm.

The V-Star celebrations at the Dhammakāya Temple demonstrate this sense of calm and order, both at the temple and within the student participants themselves. The V-Star Unity Day brings together hundreds of thousands of school children from across Thailand (in 2012, they purportedly had 1,000,000 students in attendance); prior to participating in the event, students have to satisfy the “moral-standard requirements.” The day is full of activities from an ethics quiz, to exploring the “world’s largest exhibition on the Buddha’s life story,” to watching a “stunning 3D movie on heaven and hell.” Promotional videos advertise these activities and combine them with videos of V-Star students meditating and paying respects to the *Mahathammakai Chedi*. The 2014 V-Star Unity video portrayed thousands of students holding pictures of Phra Dhammakāya (a distinctive Dhammakāya interpretation of the “essence” of the Buddha) in front of the *Mahathammakai Chedi* as fireworks lit up the sky. The video ends with the narrator saying that Thailand’s V-Star students will be a “catalyst for youth all over the world who will witness the sight to become virtuous themselves and to unite to make World Peace a reality” (Dhamma Meditation Channel 2014).

V-Star video testimonials offer insight into how the Temple promotes its young exemplars. One video showcases a young woman, Nan, from Nakhorn Srilamduan Wittaya school in Sisaket Province, who embodies the V-Star characteristics of a good Buddhist. She collects bread from a

⁹ It is ironic that the Foundation chooses to label this tendency for “flexible time” as Filipino since many of my interlocutors refer to this same idea as “Thai time.” In my conversations, the notion of “Thai time” was always presented as a superior way of viewing time in contrast to a rigid and inflexible “*farang/foreign time*.”

monk and offers it to fish at a local temple, deposits coins in a donation box, places gold leaf on a Buddha image, and offers flowers to and bows before the temple's principal Buddha image. As the video presents her pious acts, Nan informs us that people experience different levels of happiness in this life based upon the merit they have accrued. The video then shifts from the temple setting to the school where administrators praise Nan and talk about the importance of cultivating morality for young students. Nan is pictured studying and meditating at school as we learn that she was selected to be a V-Star leader for her school's *Kathin Samrit* program. This Dhammakāya program is a youth-focused version of one of Thailand's most popular festivals (*thod kathin*), when laypeople offer new robes to monks following the conclusion of the three-month-long rainy season retreat. The video then shows students preparing for the *Kathin Samrit* program and Nan paying respect to her mother (washing her feet and bowing). Nan states that her family often took her to temples and modeled good behavior for her. The video's final scenes show Dhammakāya monks arriving at the school and receiving the gifts from the students while the school's president claims that the program helps students to be good leaders and teaches them that meritorious actions will lead to happiness and a brighter future (Kidyai Gydi. 2019b). The video successfully conjoins normative Buddhist practices with a youth ethic that manifests in all parts of life.

DMC Media Programming

The Dhammakāya Foundation has proved to be exceptionally adept at marketing Dhammakāya activities, including its youth-focused programs, to the wider Thai public and international community through its savvy use of media technologies and local and global networking. In 2002, it launched its own satellite television channel, DMC (Dhamma Media Channel), which promoted Dhammakāya dhamma instruction, meditation, and activities twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week.

DMC or Dhamma Media Channel broadcasts its programs twenty-four hours a day to promote dhamma knowledge and morality. These programs are produced by the Dhamma Education for the Environment Foundation. DMC offers a variety of interesting programs such as the "Inner Dreams Kindergarten School," "Good Questions, Good Answers from Luang Phor Thattacheevo," "Paying Homage to the Great Dhammakaya Cetiya," meditation lessons, morning and evening chanting, "DMC News," and many other programs (Dhamma Media Channel 2020).

Many of these programs showcase young practitioners and target a younger audience. From its inception, the channel offered programming aimed at young children, including animated cartoons. Some of these cartoons retell stories from the Buddha's former lives (*jātaka* stories), which are enormously popular moral tales in Thailand, while others are original stories.

The Dhammakāya animated stories focus on the cultivation of Buddhist ethics from the perspective of young children. One cartoon on the DMC website focuses on proper conduct for young girls, the precept against stealing, and the strength of family bonds (DMC *Boontoh Part 3 Episode 15* 2013). This cartoon begins with a young girl, Pakbung, eating cookies as she walks with a dog, Boontoh. The dog tells her that it is inappropriate for a girl to walk while eating cookies, so when a hungry eagle appears, Pakbung shares her cookie with him. The eagle tells Boontoh and Pakbung that

he is hungry because someone always steals his food. They discover that the thief is a squirrel who is stealing food for her adopted kittens. The friends then discuss the merits of this act (feeding hungry babies), but ultimately conclude that stealing violates the second precept and leads to a rebirth in hell. When the squirrel's kittens go missing, the squirrel realizes the pain that she inflicted on others, and she is overjoyed when they are eventually reunited. The story ends with a conversation with Pakbung and her aunt. The aunt highlights the squirrel's love for her adopted children and her willingness to admit being wrong, and Pakbung promises her aunt that she will be a good girl and not do anything wrong. Another cartoon focuses on cultivating a good attitude while doing chores (DMC *Walking Meditation Episode 2* 2019). A young boy and girl are planting flowers in front of their house when a monk passes by on his alms rounds. The monk asks how the children are doing. The young girl replies that she is exhausted and does not enjoy her work; the young boy says that he too is tired, but that he is happy and proud because the flowers will be used on a pilgrimage. The monk admires the young boy's attitude and states that good intentions lead to beneficial results. The monk tells that children that the secret to happiness as a child and as an adult is to have the right frame of mind. One should be happy when doing good deeds. Both of these cartoons focus on a common topic within Buddhist families—the cultivation of merit (good karma) and the avoidance of demerit. The popular Thai idiom, “do good, receive good; do bad, receive bad” captures the correlation between good action and beneficial results and the performance of bad actions and future karmic punishments.

Other DMC animated stories focus explicitly on the next-life results of this-life karmic activity as they speculate on the future rebirth of recently deceased persons. In a series of “Law of Karma” videos, Phra Dhammachayo offers his views on the rebirth destinations of family and friends. In one video, we learn the rebirth destination of a grandfather who had made lots of merit (went frequently to the temple and provided herbal medicine to the sick) during his lifetime, but who had also engaged in cock and fish fighting and made money selling live crabs (dmc.tv *He loved performing merits* 2005). His granddaughter contacted the abbot to inquire about her grandfather's fate after he died from throat cancer. She expressed worry about the possibility of an unfavorable rebirth since her grandfather's symptoms, including difficulty breathing and spitting up blood, closely resembled those of his cocks following a fight. Phra Dhammachayo explains that the grandfather died from throat cancer as a direct result of killing animals and participating in cock and fish fighting, but that he was reborn as a handsome and fangless *yakksa* (ogre) in Catummaharajika heaven due to the balance of his good and bad deeds. The video provides an overview of all of the grandfather's deeds and a view of his rebirth destination.

DMC also disseminates sermons on the dhamma by Dhammakāya monks. Some of these specifically address issues of concern to young people and their parents. One video, for instance, addresses the use of social media (dmc.tv *Happiness is easy to find* 2020). In the video, two monks state that smartphones are now considered an essential part of life, but that dependence on them can generate unhappiness. They argue that using social media can lead young people to compare their lives to others, which fosters greed and unhappiness. This, in turn, might lead young people to lie to their parents or even become prostitutes in order to purchase consumer products that are promoted on social media. The monks state that social media makes it easier to accumulate bad karma. Kids get

addicted to watching movies and playing games and become lazy. They ignore studying and working hard. Sometimes, they even forget to eat or drink and die watching video games. Following this discussion of the negative impact of social media on the lives of Thai youth, the two monks then redirect their discussion to the ways in which young people can properly use social media. They suggest that people only watch content that interests them, and that they should be cautious not to lose their identity through false comparisons. Moreover, they should move their bodies and change positions more frequently so as not to damage their physical health. They can use social media in productive ways by posting, commenting on, and sharing good content and by avoiding the use of bullying words and sharing inappropriate content. In essence, the monks present a “middle path” for using social media. Rather than outright rejecting its use, they argue, in a typically Buddhist fashion, that one can use it as long as it is with the right intention and in a skillful manner.

Conclusion

The sight of thousands of young Dhammakāya monks, female Dhammadāyāda trainees, and young primary and secondary students at the Temple during celebrations and in promotional photographs and videos serves to tacitly underscore two key ideas: 1) the Dhammakāya Temple attracts young followers by promoting youth activities and forms of religiosity, and 2) the Dhammakāya Temple continues to thrive in terms of its membership, fund-raising, and domestic and international outreach despite decades of criticism and scandals. From the beginning, the Temple created a youth network through university groups. This laid the foundation for a youth-focused practice that addressed the specific needs and concerns of students, and provided a blueprint for connecting the Dhammakāya Temple to schools across Thailand and in other countries. This cadre of young participants has played a role in maintaining the Temple’s legitimacy as a viable religious institution in Thailand. Photographs of college ordinations, ethics quiz winners, and family meditation sessions offer a dramatically different impression of the Temple from its characterization in the national and international press. More so than ever, the Temple uses their faces to promote its programs and special events, which serves to brand the temple as modern, popular, and relevant. One recent YouTube video, for example, showcases how young practitioners are helping to maintain the health of the Dhammakāya community during the COVID 19 pandemic (iDream 2020). The Temple’s various youth initiatives, from full ordination to meditation retreats, ethics contests, television programming, and the extensive use of social media, provide opportunities for the Temple to both showcase its youth participation and to build a sustainable Dhammakāya community.

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