

Buddhist Amulets

By Alan Surrey

Several years ago, a Thai Military General purchased a Buddhist Amulet for US\$250,000. The amulet had a long, mysterious history and it was widely believed that it could protect whoever was wearing it from bullets. To prove the point, one evening, after drinking too much whisky, the General ordered a subordinate officer to fire his pistol at point blank range. The subordinate officer reluctantly obeyed the 'direct order' and fired at the General's chest – killing him instantly.

The belief in the power of amulets is widespread in Thailand. Just look at the rear-view mirror of any vehicle. Most are adorned with amulets and garlands - perhaps with good reason as on average, 41 people are killed every day in road traffic accidents. Thai Buddhist amulets can be divided into two main categories; the first are ancient images of the Buddha. These were cached images in the form of small tablets and were usually stored in ancient Stupas, temples, or caves. These ancient images were made from terracotta (Nur Din) or metal alloy (Nur Chin).

The second category is more recent and are votive images of revered monks, Devas or Arahants. These date to the last 100-150 years. There are three most common types of new period Thai Buddhist amulet; Nur Phong or mixed-powder based amulets, Rian Phra, medals or coins and Loop Meun, three dimensional miniature statues. The highly collectable Somdej Wat Rakang votive amulets are made with shell lime, Phong Vises (holy powder), assorted flowers from shrines, rice remains from Somdej Phra Phutdhacharn's meals, lotus, banana, ashes from incense urns, honey and tang oil. Some particular amulets made by certain monks or temples are believed to bring the wearer Kong Gapan (invulnerability from weapons and firearms), and Keow Klab (avoiding and survival from accidents and mishaps).

The practice of wearing amulets for protection dates back to the beginning of civilisation and was common in most cultures, races and religions. Mormons believe 'magic underwear' can protect you from knives, fire, bullets and Satan. Catholics believe in the power of the St. Christopher medallion. No image of the Buddha was ever made during his lifetime as he discouraged idolatry, magic and superstitious practices. It is widely believed the production of Buddhist amulets began with the arrival in Northern India of craftsmen and artisans who accompanied Alexander of Macedonia five centuries after the Buddha's Parinibbana (passing away).

If you google 'Buddhist amulets' it is evident that a whole industry has grown up around the collection and trade in Thai Buddhist amulets. Websites and magazines dedicated to the subject thrive in Thailand. Daeng whose older brother is a senior monk at Wat Arun in Bangkok has an impressive collection. He believes the amulets do offer protection from evil and harm but qualifies it with "You must be good for them to work."

Kanchan has a collection of over two hundred amulets. Her prize possession is an amulet with a portrait of Pra Popiem, an eminent monk who lived at Wat Kholak in Prachuap Khirikhan and who died in 1949. It was consecrated by Pra Popiem during his lifetime. The amulet was given to a her uncle who fought in the Vietnam War. He survived numerous close calls with death while in Vietnam and when he died of natural causes it was passed onto Kanchan's mother and then onto Kanchan. The

amulet is over 80 years old and is a fine example of Nur Chin – an amulet made of metal alloy. Kanchan believes it protects her from harm especially from the “ghosts” at the local hospital where she works. She estimates its value at around one hundred thousand baht. US\$4,000.

I was given a votive amulet with the seated image of Pra Popiem by Phra Ruoy a senior monk at Wat Kholak. I was wearing it when a dog ran into my motorbike while I was travelling at about 50 kilometres an hour along a quiet side road. I landed on my back on a grassy verge and sustained only minor cuts and bruises. Friends tell me I avoided serious injury because of the amulet – and so the mystique in an amulets individual history grows. Cynics might argue that if the amulet was really protecting me, I wouldn't have had the accident in the first place.

Because certain types of amulet are highly sought after, inevitably counterfeits have appeared on the market and you need the eye of an expert to tell the difference. Ott has been trading in Buddhist amulets for over 20 years. He is an expert and has a stall opposite the Night Market in Prachuap Khirikhan. Buyers, many of them policemen can be seen studying the amulets through a watchmakers loupe – an essential tool for any collector - the minute detail in some pieces is astonishing and one can easily understand why collectors are so passionate about the subject. “You must be careful when you purchase an amulet” said Ott “fakes are aged artificially and it can be hard to tell the difference unless you know what to look for.” Prices of Ott's amulets range from two hundred to several thousand baht.

Ott has several amulets for sale which promote virility. Made of wood, they are approximately 2-3 inches long and are in the shape of an erect penis – they act as a kind of spiritual Viagra. The wood used is usually from an auspicious tree which may have been consecrated by monks as Ajahn Brahm on YouTube states that some monks draw the line in consecrating the piece once the image has been carved.

Whether or not the amulets really do afford protection from harm, what is clear is that most Thais believe they do and it is this power of belief that fuels the trade and collection of Buddhist amulets. It may not have much to do with Theravada Buddhism but it has everything to do with Thai culture. Buyer beware - as the Thai General discovered, they do not come with any written guarantees.

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