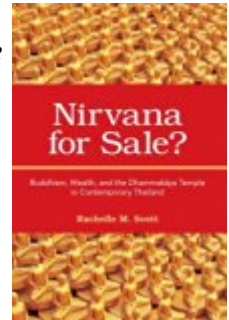


Rachelle M. Scott. *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakāya Temple in Contemporary Thailand.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiii + 242 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-2784-3.



Reviewed by Justin T. McDaniel

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The Dhammakāya Temple is the largest Buddhist structure in Thailand. For the past forty years, it has grown from a relatively small meditation and “self-help” movement to an extremely financially successful operation that offers meditation retreats, seminars, inspirational sermons, and public service programs. The leaders of the Dhammakāya Temple have been praised for opening up meditation instruction and practical Buddhist teachings for the growing middle class in Thailand and harshly criticized for commercializing and overly simplifying Buddhist practice. This tension has attracted a number of scholars to study its history and practices. Initially I was skeptical about this book as there have been several studies of the Dhammakāya Temple over the past fifteen years and I thought I knew all that there needed to be known about the subject; however, this book is so much more than just a study of the Dhammakāya Temple and movement. It is a very clearly written and complex study of Buddhism and wealth more broadly. It does not lament the commercialization of Buddhism or

consumerism in Thai society like most studies of the Dhammakāya. Indeed, Rachelle M. Scott emphasizes in the introduction that “my analysis ... will not seek to either prove or disprove the authenticity of pre-wealth forms of religiosity ... rather I am concerned with the dynamics of religious tradition—how particular religious discourses and practices are situated in reference to real or perceived pasts in order to authenticate (or reject) their place within the tradition” (pp. 15-16). Throughout her study, Scott demonstrates that there has been a long relationship between wealth and Thai Buddhism long before the modern period.

There are many laudable qualities of Scott’s work. The book provides a solid historical summary of the temple, and I was intrigued especially by her interviews and by the extent of the temple’s marketing campaign. Furthermore, her focus on Khun Yai’s influence on the modern temple and comparative overtures to the Soka Gakkai and Foguang Shan in Japan and Taiwan respectively are illuminating (although some reference

to the growth of prosperity Christianity in the Philippines would have been helpful). Let me also state clearly, that this book is vastly superior to the recent book by Rory Mackenzie on the subject of the Dhammakāya movement (2006), as well as most of the many articles that have been published in the last fifteen years by other scholars. Although *Nirvana for Sale?* lacks some historical depth (which has recently been made available because of the wonderful historical research in Catherine Newell's dissertation [2008]), it is a solid ethnographic study that will prove to be an invaluable resource for students and scholars alike. It could easily be used in Buddhist ethics courses, or in larger non-Asian studies courses like "religion and capitalism" or "prosperity religions."

The greatest contribution to Thai and religious studies is Scott's discussion of the relationship between wealth and Buddhism. Allow me to reflect for a moment on the state of the field in the study of Thai religion and wealth and then note why Scott's book is so refreshing. The commodification of Buddhist objects (like the Dhammakāya Buddha images and amulets) and commercialization of Buddhism has generally been approached by scholars as a reflection of a growing crisis in Thai Buddhism and the rise of religious commercialism. There is a formidable literature on value/exchange and commodification theory, including groundbreaking work by Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Objects: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (1992), and Fred Myers, *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (2001), as well as Arjun Appadurai's well-known edited collection, *The Social Lives of Things* (1986). However, this work is often ignored and commercialization is seen by scholars of Thai Buddhism as connected to the growing globalization of Thai culture (usually blamed on the West). Many scholars, Thai and non-Thai, those Scott cites as well as those she does not, and many amateur commentators on Internet blogs, listservs, and chatgroups have lamented this commodification. Most of these critics have very little appreciation for the

history of Buddhist material culture and so are surprised by its apparent growth now. Most studies in English or by elite, liberal social critics are characterized by shock. These critics are offended by the prices of amulets or new Buddha images, the excessive trading, the prominent display, and the miracle stories. They seem somewhat surprised by materialism in Buddhism, as if it is a new phenomenon. Some studies express this shock in a different way: They explain it away. They reduce amulets or images to empty signifiers onto which those uneducated in Buddhist doctrine place their lower-class frustrations, modern anxieties, insecurities over the Islamic insurgency or the global economic downturn, fears regarding health, and petty aspirations for wealth (it is comfortably easy for elitist scholars born with wealth to criticize the nonelite for wanting to be wealthy). They relegate this display of wealth and the promotion of prosperity to social scientific illustrations of globalization, commercialization, or doomsday prophecies about the imminent end of true Buddhist values or the deleterious effects of Westernization. They argue that amulets and other "magical practices" are tools of oppressors, fake science, or the sad symbols of the poor trying to compete in a dangerous world. These are studies that are both condescending and rife with longing—longing for a Buddhism that is more in line with a certain enlightened rationality and that eschews materiality in favor of an undefined spirituality.

Here is where Scott's work is different. Although this is an ethnographic study of the modern Dhammakāya movement, some of the particular strengths of the book are when Scott turns toward the past. For example, she notes that Thai Buddhist and Pali literature either composed or popular in Thailand has long lauded wealth. She notes the existence of *setthi* (wealthy person) stories in premodern manuscript traditions; and the promotion of Buddhist practice as wealth producing in northern Thai chronicles, like the *Cāmadevīvamsa*, the *Jinakālamālīpakaranam*, and the

Tamnān Doi Ang Salung, as well as popular *jā-takas* and the *Traibhūmikathā* (pp. 29-30). She also shows that “for a majority of practicing Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia, merit-making is central to their self-understanding of Buddhist religiosity, as evidenced in the vernacular literature and material culture of Theravāda Buddhism” (pp. 92-93). Although I would have liked to have seen her make use of material culture in her argument (i.e., show more examples of murals, stories, and images that promote the connection between Buddhism and wealth), unlike most scholars working on contemporary Buddhism, Scott acknowledges the long-term existence of these aspects of Thai Buddhist culture. I am hoping her book will inspire more work on this subject.

While Scott’s work is much more nuanced than that of other scholars working on this subject, there are problems with the way she presents her material and the sources that she relies on. She has a tendency to overemphasize the Dhammakāya as a product of the rise of the middle class in Thailand, and its effective use of communication technology, or as a general symptom of “modernity.” To support this, she offers parallel comparisons of the Dhammakāya movement to the Soka Gakkai and the Foguang Shan, which also draw on middle-class donations and embrace technology. However, she largely sidesteps the possible noneconomic and technological reasons that the Dhammakāya has grown in popularity over the past forty years particularly and tends to rely on defensive statements made by Dhammakāya leadership more than offering her own rebuttal to criticism of the movement’s methods. I wondered as I read her book if she saw the Dhammakāya movement as simply a socio-economic phenomenon or a valuable contribution to the contemporary teaching of Buddhist ethics. However, she does qualify her arguments by noting that there is a danger in seeing the Dhammakāya movement as simply a “new religious movement.” Indeed, she states that classifying it in this way

suggests that it is either “inauthentic” or “a departure from what the community deems to be normative” (p. 53). She argues that the Dhammakāya Temple literature emphasizes that it is a normative part of the Thai Buddhist sangha, but its techniques of using media and technology are new. Therefore, its methods are new, but its teachings are traditional. Along these same lines, I particularly liked her section beginning on page 163 in which she writes, “global consumer culture has influenced Thai patterns and ideologies of consumption, it is neither determinative nor monolithic.” It is qualifying statements such as these that need to be more prominent in this book. For example, chapter 5 which I think is the weakest of an otherwise strong book, moves from this qualification to write primarily about the liberal and mostly English-speaking critics of commercialization, like Phra Payutto, Suwanna Satha-anand, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Phra Phaisan, David Loy, Sanitsuda Ekachai, and others. This characteristic is a product of her choice of sources. Scott relies on too few Thai sources. Most of her textual sources come from English language newspapers and she has worked with mostly Thai scholars who are fluent in the English language. There is much in Thai on the Dhammakāya, not only historical information but also contemporary opinion pieces, blogs, court documents, etc. There are also Thai television commentaries that were not consulted. Scott clearly has Thai language skills and reads widely, but overall, her book could have benefited from more Thai language research and more time spent in the field. For example, in my interviews at Wat Pak Nam in Thonburi I noted a much greater tension between followers of Luang Pho Sot (the “founder” of the Dhammakāya method of meditation) and the Dhammakāya movement based in Pathum Thani. Scott notes the tensions within the Dhammakāya tradition, but does not give adequate weight to the alternative voices. It is the liberal, anti-Dhammakāya voices which she reads and consults that dominate the book. If she had included more “internal” criti-

cisms by practitioners at Wat Pak Nam or disaffected followers, she might have been able to highlight criticisms of the Dhammakāya movement that have less to do with commercialization and more to do with the actual science of their meditation methods or ethical teachings. Moreover, when she uses the work of the former monk Phra Mettanando, Phra Payutto, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Sanitsuda Ekachai too extensively, particularly in chapter five, her own voice gets buried under theirs.

Finally, as a side point, she paints a rather one-sided portrait of royal “reformers” (see especially, pp. 9, 10, 42, 62). However, there is ample evidence that King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn did not simply want to remove the protective, magical, metaphysical, commercial, and miraculous aspects of Thai Buddhism. They were not anti-superstitious zealots, maniacal centralizers, or unabashed modernists. If anything, their writing on religious subjects reveals a curious speculative attitude and ethnographic character. There is no doubt that they saw Central Thailand as the rightful center of political power and themselves as virtuous and absolute rulers; however, this political control and the rhetoric of orthodoxy did not often carry over into actual, on the ground policy (or policy that was ever actually implemented) that mitigated the diversity of ritual, intellectual, and liturgical practices in the realm(s) they aimed to tax and administer. A great diversity remains in Thai Buddhist ritual despite the nineteenth-century legacy of royal reform. Scott notes this diversity often in her book but has a tendency to characterize nineteenth-century royal reformers as enemies of religious diversity.

However, these are rather small distractions. In general, Scott’s book acknowledges the diversity of Thai Buddhism of which the Dhammakāya is one part. Despite my minor criticisms, this book is clear, well organized, and accessible to both students and scholars. The link between the financial crash of 1997 and the rise of criticisms of the

Dhammakāya Temple is particularly interesting (though it might have been expanded). I also like her effort at “historicizing discourses on the ‘crisis in Buddhism’” (p. 186). Her photographs (of which thirty are included in the book) are striking. In the end, Scott has made a great contribution to the study of prosperity religions, as well as the fields of Thai studies and Buddhist studies.

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