

Educational Philosophies and Celebrity Monks: Strategies for Communicating Buddhist Values to Thai Buddhist Youth

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With over 90% of Thai citizens identifying as Buddhist, how are Buddhist values communicated to youth? In the past, the temple was the center for learning, where elders taught their grandchildren how to chant and pay respect to monks. But in contemporary Thailand, this system is quickly losing influence. Because of this, a number of strategies have recently developed to communicate Buddhist teachings to Thai youth. This paper investigates two significant strategies: private schools with Buddhist-inspired curricula and media targeted towards Thai youth. The first part of this article focuses on the Buddhist education philosophy of Than Ajahn Jayasaro, who is the spiritual director of two schools in Thailand. The second section highlights the media produced by Phra Maha Wutthichai Vajiramedhi and Phra Maha Sompong Talaphutto, who hope to reach younger generations with relevant topics, which they infuse with Buddhist teachings.

Keywords: Thailand; Buddhist education; media; Theravada Buddhism; communication; Buddhist monks; Thai society

One of the pillars of Thai society is religion (*sasana*).¹ In theory, this means religious freedom, but in practice, religion, for many Thais, refers explicitly to Buddhism. The refrain, “To be Thai is to be Buddhist,” is part of a wider discourse often heard concerning the Thai nation-state.² This intertwining of Buddhism with Thailand has led to increasing anxiety about the future of this religion’s influence within Thai society. With more than ninety percent of Thai citizens

¹ There are three pillars of Thai society, represented by the Thai flag’s three colors of white, blue, and red. White represents purity of religion. The second pillar, nation, represented by red symbolizes the blood of the people. A third pillar, monarchy, which is shown through the blue color in the center of the flag, represents royalty. Buddhism is popularly, but not officially, considered the national religion, although the pillar of religion is commonly associated with Buddhism (Chalermsee 1997: 2).

² Part of this discussion in Western scholarship has been the idea of Buddhism as Thailand’s civic or civil religion, which implied tolerance towards religious others. This idea was prominent in the 1990s (Keyes 1999; Swearer 1999), before violence in southern Thailand brought such harmonious notions into question (McCargo 2009).



identifying as Buddhist, an important question for contemporary Thai Buddhists is: how are Buddhist principles and values communicated to the next generation?

The rise of consumerism is one of the main factors contributing to a feeling among Thai Buddhists that their religion may be losing its influence (Schedneck 2021a). Thai and foreign scholars characterize Thailand as undergoing an unprecedentedly rapid social change with increased access to technology and a globalized economy leading to shifting social norms (Karnsunaphat et. al. 2017). Instead of temples, shopping centers are increasingly the main social centers (Vorng 2017: 59). External religious threats are also seen to be part of the decline, with both Muslims and Christians being perceived as increasing in numbers and influence by some members of Thai Buddhist society. Buddhist nationalist groups like the Buddhism Protection Center of Thailand (BPCT) have existed since 2001. This group of about 3,000 Buddhists, both laity and monks, devotes its time to “defending Buddhism,” mostly through political means and dispensing information to people about threats to Buddhism (Katewadee 2013: 122). Its members see Buddhism as the main resource to reinstitute perceived lost values in the country and to combat global influences and external religious threats. Organizations like the BPCT advocate for structural change through government policies. High-profile monks see the possibility of other structural changes through inserting the dhamma into areas of interest for youth: education and media. Creative monks working in education and production of media have developed several new strategies targeting Thai youth. This paper investigates two such strategies: Buddhist oriented private schools and the media productions of two of Thailand’s most well-known monks.

Since the late 1990s, but more visible by the 2010s, private schools offer a Buddhist curriculum featuring Buddhist models of education. The first part of this article focuses on British monk Than Ajahn Jayasaro (b. 1961), a disciple of the Thai Forest tradition in the lineage of Ajahn Chah (1918–1992). In particular, I analyze his philosophy of Buddhist education articulated in numerous writings, talks, and interviews while acting as the spiritual advisor to several private schools. In the second part of the article, I turn to Venerable Phra Maha Wutthichai Vajiramedhi (b. 1973) and Venerable Phra Maha Sompong Talaphutto (b. 1978), two monks hoping to reach younger generations with simple, easy to understand, and relevant topics, which they infuse with Buddhist teachings by using media such as TV, social media, books, and cartoons. Both examples of 1) Ajahn Jayasaro’s model of Buddhist-oriented schools and 2) Buddhist teachings packaged for Thai Buddhist youth and the middle class by Phra Maha Vajiramedhi and Phra Maha Sombong demonstrate the strategies used within Thai society to ensure Buddhism remains one of the nation’s core pillars.

Buddhist Education in Thailand

Traditionally Buddhism and education were intimately linked through monastic schools for novice monks. Sending young boys to the monastery to learn the doctrine of their religion, along with reading and writing from senior monks, was a common practice in Thailand (Wyatt 1969: 1). This system was in place until the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1869–1910), when his government created its own institutions for primary, secondary, and higher education (Phra Kru Arunsutalangkarn 2016: 10). Today temple schools remain a place for learning Buddhist dhamma and Pali as well as modern,

secular subjects. However, due to poor funding and lack of resources, these schools are primarily for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Phra Kru Arunsutalangkarn 2016: 11). Phrayudh Payutto states that much of the monastic community only exists because state education has not entered rural parts of Thailand equally. He writes, “There are always some novices around [in Thailand’s city temples], but they have come to be novices from the far away countryside where the State education system has not yet reached. This is the cause of an ever-increasing lack of monks who are leaders in the countryside, which goes hand-in-hand with a decline of the temple and the Buddhist religion” (Phrayudh Payutto 1987: 13). Phrayudh Payutto is highlighting the significance of the country and city, the lower- and middle-class divide in Thailand, and its implications for the monastic institution.³

While conducting research on Buddhist monastic education, I was told by a monastic teacher at the Wat Suan Dok Chiang Mai campus of Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya University that 99% of monks in the education system are from poor families. Another teacher summarized his students this way: “The vast majority . . . are from rural farming communities, children of parents with little or even no education. In my current class of twenty-three students, not one has a parent who has finished high school. If the students needed to fly to Chiang Mai, it was usually their first time on a plane and, for the most, their first experience living in a city.” When I asked a group of college monks why they chose to move to Chiang Mai, one answered, “We are all very poor. This is our only chance to learn English.” And a temple school teacher told me that most of the boys attend for three reasons: (1) their families are poor, (2) they are orphans or minorities, or (3) their parents want them to be novice monks because they think their sons will be safer in the temple and their monastic robes will protect them from any trouble.⁴

Although these boys are given a Buddhist education, they do not obtain the same quality of education which state schools or especially private schools can provide. Because Buddhist educational institutions accept all students who seek to improve their knowledge, there is a wide range of ability in the classroom, which can be difficult for teachers to manage (Schedneck, et. al. 2019). This means there is a market niche for those middle-class families who want to give their children a Buddhist education but would not send their boys to poorly funded monastic schools, and in most cases cannot send their girls. For those families who can afford a private school education, private schools with Buddhist values fill these gaps.⁵ Private schools with Buddhist-inspired curriculums were not established to replace temple schools but to offer an alternative to secular private schools and Christian schools, as I discuss below.

³ Phrayudh Payutto estimates that more than 90% of the monks and novices in Bangkok temples are from the countryside (1987: 11).

⁴ I collected this information during research for a book project in Chiang Mai during June–July 2018. The full context is in Schedneck (2021b).

⁵ Temporary ordination programs, like novice summer camps during school holidays, are increasingly promoted by temples to fill this gap for boys in state schools. However, these temporary programs are not equivalent to an entire education system.

Buddhist Education in Ajahn Jayasaro's Schools

One of the main visionaries behind Buddhist educational philosophy, or Buddhism as an education system, as he calls it, is British monk, Than Ajahn Jayasaro,⁶ who is currently the spiritual advisor of three schools: Thawsi primary school outside of Bangkok, Panyaprateep secondary school in Nakhon Ratchasima, and Panyaden International School in Chiang Mai.⁷

His schools stand as an example of the Buddhist approach to education.⁸ In 1990, the Thawsi primary school was founded by Bupaswat Rachatanun in Bangkok. Thawsi's philosophy is that education should involve more than acquiring knowledge for the purpose of earning money. Bupaswat believes that Buddhism points the way to perfect human development (*phatthana manut thi sombun baep*) and dhamma practice is the method towards this correct and authentic education (*kansueksa thi thuktong lae thae ching*).⁹ In 2009 he established a secondary school, Panyaprateep, whose tagline "Buddhist Wisdom for a Changing World" is part of the first objective of the Panyaprateep Foundation: "To support the development of Buddhist education based on the Buddhist principle of the Threefold Training of conduct, emotional intelligence, and wisdom."¹⁰ The most recent of Ajahn Jayasaro's Buddhist schools, Panyaden, was founded in 2010 in the northern city of Chiang Mai.¹¹ The founder, Khun Yodphet Sudsawad, wanted to establish a Buddhist school because she felt this kind of education was lacking in her city. As a wealthy businesswoman she was in a position to fulfill her dream, building a school focusing on EQ (Emotional Intelligence) instead of IQ. She believes that the best education you can get is the Buddha's teachings because you have to experience it directly by yourself, without any supernatural figure or other person to believe in. After living in Bangkok and experiencing her daughters' education at Thawsi School for two years, she hoped she could find something similar in Chiang Mai. When she did not, she enlisted Ajahn Jayasaro to endorse her idea and set to work building a Buddhist and environmentally friendly or "green" school. The Panyaden School website promotes their school as one which students learn Buddhist principles about life, namely that it is "richer and deeper than working to only consume."¹²

Because of Ajahn Jayasaro's multiple writings and talks promoting Buddhism as an education system, he was sought out by the founders of these schools. He has thus become an integral part of Buddhist-approach private schools in Thailand. In his Buddhist-inspired curriculum, Ajahn Jayasaro is less interested in the study of the Buddha's life story, Buddhist scriptures, the sacred language Pali,

⁶ Ajahn Jayasaro is a senior Western monk who was fully ordained in 1980. After a brief tenure as abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, or the International Forest Monastery, from 1997–2002, he has been living in a secluded hermitage in the foothills of the Khao Yai Mountain range in Nakhon Ratchasima since 2003.

⁷ His biography can be found on the Panyaprateep Foundation Website.

<https://www.jayasaro.panyaprateep.org/aboutus>.

⁸ <http://panyaprateep.org/wp/ศาสน์ถึงมวลชน/ศาสน์จากผู้อำนวยการ/>

⁹ <http://thawsischool.com/ประวัติความเป็นมา/>

¹⁰ See website: <https://www.jayasaro.panyaprateep.org/aboutus>.

¹¹ Personal communication with Khun Sudsawad Yodphet on June 2, 2013.

¹² See <https://www.panyaden.ac.th/>.

or Thai Buddhist practice than in the moral values of Buddhism.¹³ The most significant and clear formulation of Buddhist values for Ajahn Jayasaro is his “Twelve Wise Habits”: non-violence (*avihimsa*), generosity (*caga*), enthusiasm (*chanda*), using the senses wisely (*indriya-samvara*), patience (*khanti*), moderation (*mattanuta*), loving-kindness and compassion (*metta-karuna*), honesty (*sacca*), concentration (*samadhi*), mindfulness (*sati*), perseverance (*viriya*), and wise reflection (*yoniso manasikara*). Each month, one of these values is highlighted through school assemblies and classroom discussions.¹⁴ Ajahn Jayasaro believes the cultivation of these values represent the best possible education. In his role as Spiritual Advisor, Ajahn Jayasaro visits these schools three to four times per year, teaching in the classrooms and offering a dhamma talk for parents, teachers, and staff after school.

In an interview with the *Bangkok Post* (Nanchanok 2015), Jayasaro reflected that Thailand, as a Buddhist country, did not incorporate Buddhism into its schools enough. He expressed the opinion that many Thai people do not know their religion’s basic ideas and values, most likely because of the influence of Christian private schools. He believed this secular education would result in Thai Buddhists who did not understand the essential teachings of their own religion, and produce Thai leaders who were not informed by Buddhist values (Nanchanok 2015).

In a series of videos posted by the Thawsi School leaders, Ajahn Jayasaro answers various questions about Buddhist education. He distinguishes Buddhism from Abrahamic religions, which he classifies as belief systems. Buddhism, in contrast, is an education system, in which human beings have the potential to liberate themselves through a clear understanding of the way things are. Ajahn Jayasaro believes that Buddhism is a complete and perfect form of education, not simply a preparation for life in the capitalist system.¹⁵ He further contrasts Buddhist education with secular education, and Thailand with the West. He states that Thai Buddhists should not be concerned with focusing on academic skills exclusively, an idea that has come from the West.¹⁶ He contrasts a Buddhist education with a secular Western model, which he characterizes as having no moral or emotional development, consisting of skills and memorization with the end goal of pursuing a career. Education, Ajahn Jayasaro believes, should not be based on the marketplace or economic development but on spiritual development.

When discussing the growth of international schools in Thailand, which are usually secular endeavors without Buddhist values, Ajahn Jayasaro has some concerns. This kind of education could leave a vacuum in the Thai child, who would grow up having no appreciation for their culture, traditions, or religion.¹⁷ These kinds of sentiments assumes that all Thai children are Buddhist, and that Buddhism is the only source of religion or culture for the entire country. It also assumes that an

¹³ Ajahn Jayasaro discusses this in his dhamma talk recorded in Malaysia titled “Buddhist education” and posted on the Forest Sangha Website. <https://forestsangha.org/teachings/audio/speakers/ajahn-jayasaro?language=English>. Accessed July 15, 2019.

¹⁴ I received these emails as a parent of a former Panyaden student. I also communicated with former school director of Panyaden, Neil Amas, about the implementation of the Twelve Wise Habits during the school year.

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pEe9rUsm64&list=PL722C61CC917F355D&index=1>. Accessed July 15, 2019.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRoS4r5QEek&list=PL722C61CC917F355D&index=4>. Accessed July 15, 2019/

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgXwgHtrhQs&list=PL722C61CC917F355D&index=6>. Accessed July 15, 2019.

important way to increase Buddhist values is to make them available beyond the temple monastic education.

His schools are aimed at members of the middle class who want to maintain their identity as good, moral, lay Thai Buddhists, and who want their children to attend schools with a good reputation but without the full-time commitment of monastic life. The *Bangkok Post* characterizes this trend of private Buddhist-approach schools as embodying a “desire to embrace a ‘slow living’ way of life.” This slow life includes an interest in meditation, organic food, environmental consciousness through growing one’s own rice, and living in clay houses, with an educational focus on life skills (Nanchanok 2015).¹⁸ “Slow life” has been adopted predominantly by trendy, middle-class Thai Buddhists who believe that the practical skills Buddhism teaches are more effective in dealing with the challenges of everyday life than standard academic knowledge. In order to live a less competitive lifestyle without a high-stress job, while still being able to afford private schooling, one needs to already be in a comfortable income bracket.¹⁹

Middle-class parents are responding to the anxiety and fear of creating over-worked and consumption-addicted future members of Thai society. They have found their children stressed in conventional private schools with heavy homework loads. Growing up intensely focused on studies and becoming successful doctors and entrepreneurs themselves, these parents want something different for their children (Nanchanok 2015). Parents, although concerned about the lack of academic reputation at Buddhist schools, find that the Buddhist values, which are meant to increase emotional intelligence and pro-social behavior, especially for younger children, are worth the possible lack of job market preparation.²⁰ Sophorntavy Vorng (2011: 68), in her research on urban space, has found that the middle and upper classes of Thailand seek status symbols and instruments of social distinction. As Bourdieu (1984) has argued, choices of lifestyle and consumption are key processes of status differentiation and class markers. The difference and exclusivity of schools such as Panyaden align with these symbols of a particular middle-class way of life, which is less focused on material possessions and more on markers of a “slow life,” which values emotional intelligence over academic achievement.

Another group of monks is working on increasing youth interest in Buddhist teachings. Their communication strategies utilize various kinds of media meant to attract youth to Buddhism—presenting a friendly and fun exterior to the religion.

¹⁸ Slow Life became trendy in Thailand after the publication of Leo Babauta’s *The Power of Less* (2009). This lifestyle book asks one to set limits and to focus on creating new habits, which make life simpler. In Thailand this manifests in aspects of sustainable living, including organic products, maintaining health in nature, and being open-minded (<https://www.krungsri.com/bank/th/plearn-plearn/how-to-slow-life-to-rich.html>).

¹⁹ An article in Thai media outlet, Sanook, asserts that in order to live a ‘slow life’ one must have some kind of savings or passive income (<https://www.sanook.com/campus/1386229/>).

²⁰ This observation comes from my involvement as a parent at Panyaden International School from 2015–2017.

Monk Celebrities

In Thai Buddhism, there are diverse possibilities within the monastic life, but only very few monks are labeled by lay people as celebrities, or *Phra Celeb*.²¹ This label means that the monk is nationally known and recognized because of their exposure in a wide range of media. *Phra Celeb*, exemplified by the two monks I discuss here, Phra Maha Sombong Talaputto and Venerable Vudhijaya Vajiramedh, see a decline in the morals of Thai society, but they also offer solutions.²² Looking through bookstores and even 7-11 convenience stores in Chiang Mai and Bangkok between 2014–2017, I found these nationally known monks to be the most creative and prolific writers among Thai Buddhist monks. They each have authored over one hundred books with original ideas, cartoons, illustrations, and design concepts, along with humor and personal stories.²³ These book designs allow Buddhist teachings to fit into the general landscape of media for Thai youth in general.

In their writings, these monks fault modern lifestyles for what they see as Thai Buddhists taking a superficial approach to Buddhism. These *Phra Celeb* instead hope to communicate a more meaningful and relevant message. Both of the monks discussed here have qualities attractive for Thai Buddhists to receive their message: proven textual knowledge of Buddhism packaged in modern media in entertaining ways.

Phra Maha Sompong

Phra Maha Sompong is an accomplished monk who earned the highest degree of the Pali language exam at nineteen and received a master's degree in Social Work from a prominent Thai university.²⁴ His dhamma teachings in print and in person all fall under his main concept of “Dhamma Delivery.” He delivers dhamma in short, pithy resolutions to problems in his TV show called “Luang Phi Maa

²¹ These monks are known as monk celebrities by some Thai people because of their presence in media platforms such as TV and public sermons. Their books also feature their faces so that they have become well-known across Thailand. Another connotation of this term would be an older, senior, and high-ranking monk, who would be very important in the Thai monastic hierarchy. Sometimes, another group of monks could derogatorily be called a celebrity (*celeb*). This group would be monks who live a high-society (*hi-so*) lifestyle, which is upsetting to Thai people and seen to be breaking their monastic rules. For example, see:

<https://today.line.me/th/pc/article/รู้ตัวแล้ว+พระเซเลบ+เซสที่รูปลงเฟซบุ๊กจากตุลา+ใช้ชีวิตกินอยู่ในกุฏิศตวรรษ-98enQr>.

²² Very little has been written about these monks in Thai or English. The main scholarly works about both of these monks are two Master's theses in Communications from Chulalongkorn University. Chaveemon Sukpaibool (2010) focuses on the preaching of Phra Maha Wudhijaya Vajiramedhi, and Chontima Chuchart (2009) analyzes the communication strategies of Phra Maha Sombong.

²³ I contacted the monks' publishers, Busy Day for Phra Maha Sombong and Amarin for Venerable Vajiramedhi, but they were unable to share the sales data for the monks' books. Thus, I do not know how many people have purchased their books, but the number of books they have published indicates their popularity as authors.

²⁴ Passing the 9th level of the Pali exam is a highly respected accomplishment within Thai society and among many Thai monks. Neither Phra Maha Sombong, nor his temple where he is the abbot, Wat Soi Thong, has websites.

Biographical information about him can be found on his Thai Wikipedia page:

https://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/พระมหาสมปอง_ศาลปกครอง.

Laew.”²⁵ All his books focus on simple teachings for daily life. Examples include *Dhamma Haha* (2013), *Dhamma to Know and Read* (2016), and *Already Know Very Happy* (2012). His collection titled *Dhamma Delivery Happy 24 Hour* (2008) is intended for teens to live a happy life. Another important book in this regard is *IPhra: Dhamma 3G* (2011), which uses the formats of Facebook and computer screens to frame his message, which is filled with jokes and advice for teenagers and young adults.²⁶

I will discuss one of his books in some detail to convey how he communicates Buddhism, especially to youth. His books usually have some form of the words “happiness” or “laughter” in the titles, and the covers usually depict the monk himself smiling or include many cartoon images of monks and lay Thai people smiling and laughing together. The most important book in this context is *Dhamma Ha* (2012), which is a series of sayings from Phra Maha Sombong. The first pages discuss the importance of laughter, boasting that the practice increases one’s life by seven days (2012: 9). When considering the issue of technology, he states that its presence doesn’t necessarily make our morality decline; instead, we must use it to develop ourselves (2012: 29). On the subject of love, he advises readers that if they want to spend their lives with their current boyfriend or girlfriend, they should let go of previous romantic partners (2012: 32). His guidance in this book emphasizes practical advice from Buddhist practices and teachings, applicable to young people’s daily lives and major life decisions.

Although he has published many books, Sombong is most well-known as a preacher (*nakthet*). Companies and public places, such as malls, invite him to give sermons to their workers or the general public. His style is informal and can resemble Thailand’s most well-known stand-up comedian, Udom Taephanit, also known as Note Udom.²⁷ According to the caption of a video posted by the Bangkok Post of Phra Maha Sombong preaching to high school students, he “ridicules traffic police.”²⁸ Here he is not teaching a lesson about Buddhism, but about the nature of Thai culture and Thai police. He contrasts the police in Thailand with those of European countries, who send a fine in the mail if someone has committed a traffic violation. In Thailand, by contrast, he jokes that when someone is caught running a red light, instead of a ticket, there is bargaining. He uses hand gestures of four, three, two, and one, while impersonating the dialogue between a driver and police officer to show the amount of money they are negotiating. The students in the audience find this very funny. In the end, he states that most police officers are good, about ninety eight percent, but most Thai people are unlucky, because they always seem to run in to the bottom two percent.

²⁵ Luang Phi means venerable brother and hints at Phra Maha Sombong’s informal style. Instead of using the more formal titles Phra Maha (great monk) or Than Ajahn (venerated teacher), Phra Maha Sombong asks his audience to consider him in a more casual way.

²⁶ 3G here refers to the speed of the internet.

²⁷ In a communications analysis of Phra Maha Sombong’s messages, Chonticha Chuchart (2009) has found that he imitates comedians in his speech and that his communication strategies are humor, narration, imitation, as well as references to current issues and experiences. These strategies are intended for, and well-received by, youth and teenagers.

²⁸ The video can be viewed here: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/vdo/thailand/499089/abbot-ridicules-traffic-police-during-sermon>.

Wankwan Polachan, historian of Thai comedy, writes that monastic performances at funerals used to be not only an occasion for merit-making but also fun (*sanuk*). As monks saw it, “both monks and devotees need relief from boredom” (Wankwan 2014: 440). She continues, “Thais are disinclined to take anything too seriously, and strive always to seek fun, even in disasters. Religious activities often turn into occasions of hilarity” (Wankwan 2014: 440). This occurred through dancing and jokes by monks to gain attention from their audiences until King Chulalongkorn outlawed these comic performances, finding the vulgar slapstick offensive and disrespectful to Buddhism (Wankwan 2014: 441). Phra Maha Sombong brings comedy back to the monastic life, but in a tame way, similar to Note Udom’s comedic style. Both are “*sanuk*: frivolous, unaggressive, and nonconfrontational” as they allude to social problems in a light-hearted and non-critical way (Wankwan 2014: 451). Both make observations about Thai society in order for people to laugh at themselves and their cultural norms.

In an article about Phra Maha Sombong’s TV personality and style, Tanit Toaditthep and Sakul On-Ma find the main goal of the monk’s presentation is to be friendly and funny, so the audience will not to be worried his teaching will be too sacred and serious (Tanit and Sakul 2017: 18). As one advertisement for his talk at a book fair states, “When thinking about listening to sermons, many people shake their heads because they think it will be boring and make them sleepy. But there is one preacher monk who tries to make listening to the dhamma not boring at all until it has become a popular trend in the country [to listen to him].”²⁹ He makes his talks easy to understand through examples and stories from Thai village life, or even Korean soap opera plots, which are widely beloved in Thailand. On one popular Thai Buddhist website “Buddhist Duties and Buddhist Etiquette,” the authors summarize the appeal of Phra Maha Sombong: he spreads Buddhism to the new generation (*run mai*), he has broad knowledge (*ruchak yang kwang kwang*), and he continuously publishes books that are contemporary (*yuk patchuban*). Sombong has stated that the “dhamma does not have to be in the temple [*wat*]. The dhamma can go anywhere,” and this is why he goes to preach in schools for students to hear the dhamma. By intentionally not using Pali language terms, he believes that the new generation of students will think that the dhamma is not boring (*mai na buea*).³⁰

In Phra Maha Sombong’s speeches and writings, he observes the ways Thai society has modernized and accepted commercialism. His message demonstrates his empathy with laity about how hard it is to live in the world as a good Buddhist and he offers simple advice to help. Besides discussing deep Buddhist topics in an entertaining way, he also comments on Thai society, using observational comedy similar to a stand-up comedian. But instead of chastising Thai Buddhists, he works with their faults to demonstrate to his audience the nature of desire and how to live in the modern world with dhamma. In this way, Phra Maha Sombong ensures Buddhist values remain present in Thai society, but not through the traditional spaces of temples and temple schools. Instead, he is trying to get youth to see Buddhism and the dhamma through a pragmatic lens that can help them in their day-to-day lives and relationships.

²⁹ This is translated from the advertisement to promote Phra Maha Sombong’s talk at the 2012 Mahidol University Book Fair. https://stang.sc.mahidol.ac.th/bookfair2012/talk_1_1.htm.

³⁰ This quote was taken from the website mentioned above: <https://sites.google.com/site/class23102/phra-mha-smpxng>.

His effort to reach youth has not been popular across all levels of Thai Buddhist society, however. Criticism of Phra Maha Sombong's communication style began in September 2021, when he and his co-host, former monk Phra Maha Praiwan Worawano, went on Facebook Live, discussing current events and politics in Thailand, with a comical tone. The over 200,000 viewers overwhelmingly enjoyed their exchange, full of laughter and informal slang. While some senior monks reviewing the Facebook Live session found it to be a useful way to reach the younger generations, others found it problematic and lacking in content related to the dhamma and Buddhism. Critics believe that the dhamma should not be trivialized by monks acting like comedians (Mongkol 2021). Thailand's National Office of Buddhism stated the livestreaming could continue if the monks added more serious dhamma and less joking. However, Phra Maha Sombong stated that he felt pressure to leave the monkhood due to his style of preaching.³¹ Because of this, Phra Maha Sombong decided to disrobe on December 29, 2021, and has stated plans to pursue business and political interests.³²

Phra Maha Vuttichai Vajiramedhi

Although not a preacher nor a comedian, Phra Maha Vuttichai Vajiramedhi is well-known among Thai Buddhists. Recognized by his pen name, W. Vajiramedhi, or nickname, Than Wau, he is a scholar, thinker, author, and lecturer. A representative of "*thamma inthren* [dhamma in-trend],"³³ he came to prominence in Thailand while he was still in his youth, using technology to spread Buddhism to all generations, with a special focus toward young people.³⁴ He is foremost a scholar monk, describing himself as obsessed with books since his youth, with an interest in general knowledge as well as Buddhist teachings.³⁵ He is also a *Phra Celeb*. As the author of over two hundred books, several of which have been translated into multiple languages, his name is omnipresent in the Buddhism section of Thai bookstores.³⁶

³¹ "‘Giggling monk’ told not to be discouraged, keep teaching.' *Bangkok Post*. Posted on October 11, 2021. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2195991/giggling-monk-told-not-to-be-discouraged-keep-teaching>.

³² "พระมหาสมปอง ประกาศสัปดาห์ทำธุรกิจ-ลุยงานการเมือง?" [Phra Maha Sombong Announces he will Disrobe, turn to Business and Politics?]. *TeeNee News*. Posted on December 17, 2021. <https://tnews.teenee.com/etc/169189.html>.

³³ The news outlet Kapook features Vajiramedhi, identifying him as part of a group of Thai Buddhists making Buddhist teachings more relevant today. Kapook labels this 'in-trend thamma' (*krasae thamma inthren*). <https://highlight.kapook.com/view/133472>.

³⁴ His biography can be found on a few English-language websites. See one from his meditation center called Cherntawan: <https://www.medithai.ru/en/about-us/>. At twenty-one he became a fully ordained monk and studied Pali, passing the highest level.

³⁵ He describes himself this way in an interview with The Buddhist Channel: www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=9,1515,0,0,1,0#.XNLVWdNKicZ.

³⁶ Not every Thai person is in favor of Phra Maha Vajiramedhi. He has been criticized for comments made during the political crisis in 2010, when the red shirts rallied in Bangkok. Suluck Lamubol, of Prachathai, writes that Vajiramedhi is popular among the middle-class Bangkokians, but not among the red shirts because "His followers tweeted his saying during the 2010 red shirt crackdown that 'killing time is more sinful than killing people,' a statement that many red shirts recalled bearing a strong resemblance to Phra Kittiwuttho, a militant monk who in the 1976 student massacre said, 'killing communists is like killing fish and giving them as alms for monks.'" "Understanding Thai-Style

Phra Maha Vajiramedhi is not a typical Thai abbot who is mainly concerned with temple building projects. Instead, he has built institutions for learning and meditation. In 2007, he established the Vimuttayalaya Institute to promote Buddhism and solve social problems.³⁷ In 2009, he founded the Cherntawan International Meditation Center, where the objective is to offer mindfulness training as a way to create peace in the world. At this center, one of the goals is education, to spread Buddhism to the world through preaching, teaching, and lecturing (Tanit and Sakul 2017: 17). The curriculum for the meditation center has a two-day program for students, focusing on managing desires, with practical advice for what to do when you get angry, greedy, or overcome with delusion about yourself and others (Tanit and Sakul 2017: 18).³⁸

His commitment to youth can be seen in many aspects of his monastic life. He has preached at Chiang Rai Kindergarten School on Children's Day, focusing on the power of youth's wisdom. He believes that young people need both knowledge and dhamma to make them into good citizens. In 2016 he held a Children's Day event at his center called "World Happiness Depends on the Power of Wisdom from Youth" (Tanit and Sakul 2017: 20). He has also contributed to Buddhist textbooks for grades one through six within the Thai public education system.³⁹ He has directed a significant amount of his attention to Buddhist youth because, as he states, "Children are seedlings for the future. We have to give them good fertilizer." He writes so much because he wants the younger generations to be able to use Buddhist teachings as a tool to solve everyday problems, which he calls applied dhamma. He feels that this information is currently lacking because the writings of well-respected teachers like Prayudh Payutto (b. 1938) and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–1993) are inaccessible to the majority of Thai people.⁴⁰

Many of his books are published by Amarin Dhamma books. Amarin was interested in Vajiramedhi's new ways of spreading the dhamma and worked to promote his Buddhist books so they would be able to compete with other genres (Tanit and Sakul 2017: 19). His series of children's books called "Good Kids Stories with V. Vajiramedhi" (*nithan dek di kab Wau Vajiramedhi*) gives prescriptive and didactic lessons to children in story format. These books each have a lesson, featuring one child who follows the "right" path and one who follows the "wrong" path. Most of these focus on following the Five Precepts, such as the First Precept to avoid harming living beings, *Good Kids Aren't Mean (dek di mai khi klaeng)* and the Second Precept to avoid taking things not given, *Good Kids Don't Steal (dek di mai khi tu)*. In the series are specifically Buddhist activities such as *Good Kids Give Food-Offering (dek di*

Buddhism." Posted February 28, 2014. <https://prachatai.com/english/node/3883>. He has also been criticized for acting more like a "celeb" than a monk. Mahavongtrakul, Melanin, "Without a Home." *Bangkok Post*. Posted on December 10, 2018. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/social-and-lifestyle/1590946/without-a-home>.

³⁷ The Vimuttayalaya Institute's Facebook page has over six million followers and Vajiramedhi's Twitter account has about three million. His Facebook page is found here: <https://www.facebook.com/v.vajiramedhi/posts/thailands-vimuttayalaya-institute-and-its-founding-directorthe-venerable-vvajira/10150922479000877/>. His Twitter account analytics are here: <https://www.trackalytics.com/twitter/profile/vajiramedhi/>.

³⁸ The Cherntawan International Meditation Center website is: <https://www.medithai.ru/en/about-us/>.

³⁹ His biography in the back of each of his "Good Kids Stories with V. Vajiramedhi" states this information.

⁴⁰ Achakulwisut, "Taking it to the Streets." *Buddhist Channel*. Posted July 31, 2005. www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=9,1515,0,0,1,0#.XNLVWdNKicZ.

tak bat), referring to merit-making, and *Good Kids Pray* (*dek di suatmon*), referring to Buddhist chanting at night. When the children act “good” they feel good and are successful and productive. For example, in *Good Kids Pray*, when one of the characters starts to practice Buddhist chanting at night with his family, he is able to pay attention in class and answer the teacher’s questions because of his new focus and ability. Vajiramedhi’s strategy in this series is to tell stories of children’s everyday lives, where they can imagine themselves as the characters in order to “have Dharma instilled deep within them from their earliest days of learning.”⁴¹

It is clear that Vajiramedhi deems youth to be essential to perpetuating Buddhism in Thailand, which is made especially clear in the book *Good Kids Know the Important Buddhist Days* (*dek di ruchak wan samkhan*). After explicating the different Buddhist holy days to a group of children, Phra Maha Vajiramedhi concludes, “Now you know all about Buddhist important days. So let’s come and do merit-making together. As long as you pay attention, nothing can change or harm Buddhism.” And the final page of the book states, “Please keep these days in mind. Cultivate a Buddhist heart. We are Buddhists who are joyful and smiley. We will carry on our tradition to the next generation.”⁴² Here an imperative to maintain Buddhism is apparent.

Other popular books for children and youth authored by Phra Maha Vajiramedhi spread the dhamma through cartoons and new media technologies. For example, because Thai youth like to read cartoons, Vajiramedhi has created a dhamma cartoon, *Satima, The Genius Monk*. In contrast to the usual comic book fare of violence and general unwholesomeness, *Satima* is a curious and diligent character who uses reasoning and logic to fix problems. For Vajiramedhi, *Satima*’s actions express the dhamma, which will contribute to increased Buddhist values in Thai society.

His book, *Twitter Dhamma*, publishes some of Vajiramedhi’s many tweets, short snippets of dhamma in 140-character format. He tweets lessons about one’s kamma, how to treat others, how to forgive and aphorisms such as “One who gives the best receives the best,” and “a mindful person has only magnificent days and nights.” Similarly, in *How to Practice Dhamma Online* Vajiramedhi offers sayings about wisdom, self-development, and family, among other things. Vajiramedhi’s books are a kind of educational supplement to ensure that younger Thai Buddhists receive information on religious values. He creates media within the consumer marketplace in order to spread the dhamma and encourage Buddhist youth to read and learn on their own.

Vajiramedhi’s first book, *Dhamma Titpik* (Words of Wisdom), was popular among Thai Buddhists. It was promoted as a fun, easy to understand book, which makes readers smile. In the book, Phra Maha Vajiramedhi uses the dhamma words and sayings of many famous Thai monks such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Ajahn Chah, among many others, and summarizes them in a language suitable for younger generations.⁴³ His books’ promotional materials convey the impression that Thai Buddhists often associate the dhamma with elderly people and language that is “high” or difficult to

⁴¹ Before each of the books in the series “Good Kids Stories with V. Vajiramedhi,” the opening introduction states the same purpose I have quoted above.

⁴² These quotes are part of the bilingual translations used in this book (2014), whose story and illustrations are by Kittiya Leekrongsakul and Romrat Paramatikul, published in Thailand by Amarin Publishers.

⁴³ This advertisement comes from the educational bookstore chain in Thailand, SE-ED: <https://se-ed.com/s/bKQm>.

grasp. Phra Maha Vajiramedhi's purpose is to change this perception of the dhamma. He has stated in an interview with *Positioning*, a Thai magazine, that although his dhamma books are not bestsellers in the book industry, they do represent a change (*chut plian*) in making the dhamma trendier (*thamma inthren*). Instead of spreading Buddhism by sitting in his room quietly writing, Vajiramedhi has been invited to give countless teachings and lectures.⁴⁴ He attributes this to the way he writes and speaks about Buddhism in Thai, in contrast to how Buddhism is typically spread. At the temple, the language is too high (*udom khati koen pai*), and therefore confusing. So he uses worldly language (*phasa chao lok*) instead of the traditional temple language (*phasa wat*). Typically, dhamma books are given away at temples, but with bookstores selling Phra Maha Vajiramedhi's books cheaply, his writing can reach a much wider audience. He believes that the dhamma should be in every corner of Thai society, because where there are people, there should be dhamma.

From all of his media it is clear that Phra Maha Vajiramedhi believes that a return to Thai Buddhist values will make Thai society better and more harmonious. By focusing on youth, he hopes to cultivate this change in Thai society, diverting young people from materialism and consumerism and helping them to reflect on the Buddha's teachings. The media of *Phra Celeb* appeals to young people in Thailand, who are literate and familiar with new media such as Twitter. Although Vajiramedhi and Sombong's books are not expensive, leisure time to read and be interested in dhamma books is more likely available to those with comfortable lifestyles. The middle class can afford these consumer goods and create an aesthetic for themselves through these consumptive practices. *Phra Celeb* utilize this target group, who have surplus time and money, to instill Buddhist values into Thai society.

Adapting the Dhamma

Most Thai Buddhist lay people associate "listening to the dhamma" with monastic sermons on Buddhist holy days in temples. While researching a sermon on Asanha Bucha Day at Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai, anthropologist Julia Cassaniti found that most people reported feeling "bored" (2015: 225). Cassaniti concluded that the genre of the Buddhist sermon is thought to lack any quality of entertainment (2015: 225). In contrast, both Phra Maha Sombong and Phra Maha Vajiramedhi attempt to insert some levity into their Buddhist sermons and writing.

Buddhist-oriented schools also participate in adapting the dhamma, hoping to generate accessibility and a foundation of Buddhist teachings and morality for younger audiences. Private schools like Panyaden and Thawsi, which utilize Ajahn Jayasaro as their spiritual advisor, communicate Buddhist values through their curricula, which they hope will become embedded in the lifestyles of their students. As an international school, Panyaden particularly emphasizes general Buddhist values rather than the stories and important figures of Thai Buddhism. This is important for non-Buddhist, non-Thai families who send their children to this school. They are attracted to the cultivation of these basic human-centered values. Buddhism as an education system, for Ajahn

⁴⁴ His interview with *Positioning* can be found here: <https://positioningmag.com/8877>.

Jayasaro, allows Buddhist values to be inserted more into Thai and global societies, although he sees these values as most important for Thailand.

Writing about pre-modern northern Thailand, Anjalee Cohen reminds us that “one’s village community—bound by kinship ties, shared Buddhist and animistic beliefs, and local community groups—played a significant role in shaping one’s sense of self” (Cohen 2009: 166). However, today the village structure is decreasing due to increased mobility, urbanization, and modernization. From 2009 to 2019, the degree of urbanization in Thailand increased more than 8 percent. Although Thailand’s urban population is just over 50 percent, this recent growth demonstrates a significant shift, which is worrying for some Thai Buddhists (Schedneck 2021b: 22). Prominent Thai lay Buddhist and social activist, Sulak Sivaraksa has argued that “Buddhism does not know what to do” with the complexities of modern life and urban societies like Bangkok (Sulak 1996: 73).⁴⁵

Phra Maha Vajiramedhi has a plan to utilize this complexity. By incorporating modern technologies, he endeavors to increase Buddhism’s influence: “We have to reach out and use all modern means and media to get dhamma to the people. If the Sangha fails to do that, it will eventually lose its role in contemporary society. It would become like one of those decaying old *chedis* [stupas] in Ayutthaya once very sacred and important but now just a mark on the road for people to make a U-turn.”⁴⁶ By targeting youth and creating media about Buddhist values, Phra Maha Vajiramedhi and Phra Maha Sombong aim to make Thai Buddhism flourish for future generations. This is the work of adapting the dhamma: by packaging it as values for education, cartoons that demonstrate proper behavior, and entertaining comedy, these monks hope the dhamma will return to its prominent place within Thai society.

Buddhist private schools and media in the forms of cartoons, books, and entertaining dhamma talks are all strategies for communicating Buddhist values to Thai Buddhist youth. These projects are concerned with the state of Thai society. Because these monks perceive a problematic rise of consumerism, materialism, and shopping malls in Thai society, they aim to propagate Buddhism to youth. They are trying to build a society which can in some sense replicate the idyllic Thai Buddhist village, where the center of activity and morality was Buddhism. Though not bound up in animism and ancestral lineages as the village that Anjalee Cohen describes. Rather, this is a disenchanting, “rational” Buddhism aimed at modern, educated, Thai youth. To increase Buddhism’s presence in modern Thai society, monks are adapting the dhamma not just in traditional Buddhist spaces. *Phra Celeb* use the capitalist systems of media platforms, attractive to middle-class, technologically savvy youth, in order to spread the dhamma and prevent any further decline of Thai Buddhist influence. Ajahn Jayasaro’s schools appeal to the distinctive taste of middle-class parents who want their children to grow up with emotional and social skills, rather than the typical stressful academic education.

Although these projects do not explicitly name other religions, such as Christianity or Islam, as a threat, they are, along with consumerism, part of the background of concern. Buddhist-oriented

⁴⁵ For a summary of contemporary issues and problems in Thai Buddhist society, see Schedneck (2021a).

⁴⁶ Achakulwisut, “Taking it to the Streets.” *Buddhist Channel*. Posted July 31, 2005. www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=9,1515,0,0,1,0#.XNLVWdNKicZ.

schools take Christian schools as their model with the goal of spreading Buddhist values. For many Thai Buddhists, Islam, especially in Thailand's "deep South" border provinces where the majority of citizens are Muslim, is perceived as a threat to Buddhist dominance. Thus, Buddhism is being communicated and transmitted in new ways to preserve this Buddhist majority culture in Thailand. Although this trend is a reaction to the perceived dangers of consumerism, at the same time, *Phra Celeb* utilize processes of commodification to "repackage" the dhamma to young people in aesthetically pleasing ways, which are compatible with consumer culture. Highly regarded Buddhist monks who are well-versed in traditional Buddhist teachings are reaching out to young people, creating a confluence of the traditional and modern in their transmission of Thai Buddhism to the next generation. Phra Maha Vajiramedhi and Phra Maha Sombong are most concerned that Thai Buddhist youth will not know how to navigate the world using Buddhist values as they grow up. Because of the perception that Buddhism is losing its influence, they are working to ensure that the values they believe will make Thailand a better place are instilled into Thai Buddhist youth.

Although these monks are popular in mainstream society for their efforts to adapt the dhamma, their work is not without critics. Especially Phra Maha Sombong has been censured for his communication strategies on Facebook Live, which has led to him leaving the monastic life. However, it is not yet clear what effects such efforts are having on youth. To date there is no research on how young people are responding to these attempts to repackage the dhamma. It would be useful for future research to investigate how students at Buddhist private schools and youth consumers of Buddhist media are responding to these efforts and whether their values are being influenced.

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