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Research Article

Making Merit, Making Waste: Buddhist Offerings and Environmental Sustainability in Contemporary Thailand

John Johnston
Mahidol University

Chaiyaporn Phayakhrut
Thammasat University

This article examines the environmental impact of popular offerings to Buddhist monks in contemporary Thailand. The two most common types of offerings to monks, morning food donations (*pindapata*[1]) and monastic gift sets (*sanghadāna*), are analyzed from the perspective of environmental sustainability. While these offerings constitute important material interactions between the laity and Thai Buddhist monks, they are also significant sources of plastic waste. This research estimates, for example, that every year hundreds of millions of single-use plastic containers are donated to Thai monks in morning food offerings. The relationship between these offering practices and the Thai Buddhist monastic code (Vinaya) is examined through the lens of sustainability. Efforts to reduce the negative environmental consequences of Thai Buddhist offering practices are also presented in this research. Methods to address these problems include increased use of tiffins and leaf wrappers, donation of food directly to temples, and other more sustainable options to current practices.

Keywords: Thai Buddhism; Theravada monks; food offerings; plastic waste; environmental sustainability; *pindapata*; *sanghadāna*

Buddhism is frequently positioned as a belief system aligned with responsible and sustainable interactions with the natural world. Major Buddhist tenets, such as compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), non-harming (*ahimsa),* dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and right conduct (*sīla*), are interpreted as inherently supportive of a more ethical relationship with the natural environment. New terms have entered the Buddhist vocabulary in recent years such as eco-Buddhism, Green Buddhism, eco-dharma, and eco-karma. The edited volumes *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (Tucker and Williams 1997) and *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics* (Keown 2000) are representative of the variety of research related to Buddhism and environmental ethics that encompasses Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. Edelglass demonstrates how diverse Buddhist schools and concepts are increasingly interpreted from the perspective of environmental sustainability, stating, "Eco-Buddhism is now integrated into much contemporary Buddhist rhetoric" (Edelglass 2021: 14). Authors focusing on the relationship between Buddhist thought and environmental ethics have found eager and supportive global readerships (e.g., Macy 1991; Snyder 1995; Kaza 2019). The assumption that Buddhism is supportive of environmentalism is frequently echoed in works on Thailand. For example, *Thailand's Sustainable Development Sourcebook* states that "The Buddhist belief in cause and effect and the interdependence of all human beings with nature speaks to the most vital principles underlying sustainable development" (Algie 2015: 208).

[1] All italicized terms are transliterations of Pali unless otherwise marked.

While Buddhism is typically presented as intrinsically supportive of environmentalism in numerous influential works, this connection is not universally accepted. Prabath Sirisena states that "Some eco-apologists, for example, ascribe an ecological significance to seminal Buddhist doctrines such as paticcasamuppāda (dependent co-arising) and anattā (not-self) in ways that seem to transcend their conventional religious confines, especially in Theravada Buddhism" (Sirisena 2024: 11). Most comprehensively, Johan Elverskog provides a counterpoint to the notion that Buddhism and environmentalism share common values. Elverskog convincingly demonstrates how the perception of Buddhism as uniquely concerned with the environment is a modern construction, stating that "Ecological awareness is not inherent in the Buddhist tradition itself" (Elverskog 2020: 10). The view that Buddhism was historically engaged with environmental concerns, particularly on its drive eastward across Asia, is particularly problematic. However, the environmental transformation of contemporary Buddhism is also acknowledged by Elverskog, who states, "Buddhism has changed, and it is having a positive environmental impact in the world today" (2020: 72).

In the context of contemporary Thailand, much international attention has focused on tree ordination as an overt Buddhist act intended to defend the natural environment. The work of Susan Darlington, Charles Strain and others have brought tree ordination in Thailand to a global audience (Darlington 2012; Strain 2016). In this ritual, trees are ordained as monks, with monk's robes tied around the trunk, which helps protect the tree and surrounding forest from destruction. However, Darlington reveals that tree ordination has broader significance, stating, "The movement is not about trees per se, but the monks and the people with whom they live and work who must deal with the direct consequences of environmental destruction" (Darlington 2012: 4). Tree ordination is particularly associated with rural northern Thailand and so-called Forest Monks that live simple lives dedicated to meditation and other practices in a rural setting. Forest Monks live closely with nature and typically exhibit increased concern for the environment.

Tree ordination is an important demonstration of concern for the natural environment among a small segment of Buddhist monks and laypeople in Thailand. Specific trees and forests have been protected and preserved through these efforts. Tree ordination is also symbolic of how Buddhist ethics can inspire defense of the natural environment in Thailand. However, it should be understood that tree ordination is very uncommon in Thailand, especially when compared with customary Buddhist practices such as daily food offerings to monks. Tree ordination is so rare that many Thai monks and laypeople have not heard of the practice. Thus, however admired these Forest Monks are in society, their impact in creating large-scale change may be limited. Speaking of such monks in Sri Lanka, Sirisena observes that "forest monastics have not been the ones to instigate broad changes in modern societies, either in the basic patterns of interaction with laity or in the worldly activities of lay Buddhists" (Sirisena 2024: 23).

Less often discussed are widespread practices in contemporary Buddhism that negatively impact environmental sustainability. As Buddhism is an ancient religion with over 2,500 years of history, certain practices from earlier eras, such as aspects of alms gathering, have unintentionally developed into environmentally unsustainable activities in the contemporary context. The monastic codes, or Vinaya, were written many centuries ago and obviously do not explicitly address current concerns such as plastic waste. This paper examines two important types of offerings from laypeople to Buddhist monks in Thailand, morning food donations (*pindapata*) and monastic gift sets (*sanghadāna*), and demonstrates that these practices currently come at a high environmental cost. The hundreds of millions of single-use plastics and other unsustainable goods that currently dominate monastic offerings in Thailand may be categorized as a type of Buddhist waste.

Most studies on sacred waste have concentrated on how objects that are assigned elevated or sanctified status, such as religious icons and other altar items, are discarded. The pioneering work of Irene Stengs brought needed attention to the subject of sacred waste and its problematic discarding, particularly in the context of

commemorative culture (Stengs 2014: 235). Examination of Buddhist waste reveals how "the exhaustion and death of artifacts trouble Buddhist practitioners and adherents and that their disposal can become a burden since people recognize endurable values in sacred and animated items" (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2022: 3). Brox draws attention to a wide range of waste created by Buddhist consumption, stating "Buddhists also generate other types of waste, such as the excess from religious practices (for example, food offerings), sanctified leftovers (abandoned family altars), dead actants (Buddha statues), poisonous emissions from the production and transportation and consumption of mass-produced Buddhist commodities, and the everyday garbage that litters Buddhist places" (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2022: 3). The everyday Buddhist waste produced in contemporary Thai practices, such as single-use plastic packaging in food offerings, is a polluting byproduct of religious activity. Saskia Abrahams-Kavunenko explores related issues in Buddhist waste generated in Mongolia, including excessive plastic packaging of Buddhist food offerings, stating, "...food offerings wrapped in plastic, take on a new kind of materiality that lingers problematically" (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022: 145). In multiple cultural contexts, single-use plastic food packaging is attractive to both food merchants and donors of Buddhist food offerings due to factors including low cost, impermeability, and easy availability.

In the Thai context, the widespread use of single-use plastics in everyday Buddhist food donations appears at odds with contemporary, conceptual associations between Buddhism and environmental ethics. The everyday practice of Buddhism and the rhetoric of environmental responsibility clash in contemporary Thailand. Mounds of plastic waste accumulated at Buddhist temples seems particularly out of place. As Gauri Pathak observes, "Pollution is thus the contravention of sociocultural and political systems that determine what matter belongs where" (Pathak 2023: 169). The accumulation of plastic waste at Buddhist temples does indeed seem out of place given the increased religiocultural expectations that Buddhism is meaningfully connected to environmental sustainability. This study compares the rhetoric of environmentalism with commonplace offering practices in Thai Buddhist material culture. Examination of the significant plastic waste created by Thai Buddhist offerings begins with analysis of morning food offerings and monastic gift sets, the two most common types of offerings to monks in Thailand. The response of monks to plastic waste problems is shown to be complicated by cultural expectations and monastic restrictions. Alternatives to single-use plastics in Buddhist offering practices are also presented.

Pindapata—Morning Food Offerings to Buddhist Monks in Thailand

Every morning in Thailand, from small villages to great urban areas, monks silently go on their morning alms rounds, seeking food donations from laypeople. Known as *pindapata* (Thai: *bindabat*), alms gathering by monks is one of the most fundamental and tangible connections between the monastic sangha and laity in Thailand. *Pindapata* is defined as " 'food dropped (into the bowl)'; almsfood; what monks receive in their morning walks in search of food" (Tilakaratne 2016: 167). Morning alms gathering, with monks quietly and calmly carrying their alms bowls back to temples after gratefully accepting food offerings from the public, is an iconic and indispensable part of Buddhist culture in Thailand (Figure 1). Describing *pindapata*, Tilakaratne states, "This is a spectacular scene every morning in Southeast Asian countries. Thousands of monks walk on the roads and byroads in the early morning to accept food from people lined up on either side" (Tilakaratne 2016: 97). The seeking of food donations by monks through direct appeal to the public has likely been a daily occurrence in Thailand since the spread of the religion in the region in the seventh century (Woodward 2005: 81). This interaction thus has extremely deep historical roots, is culturally significant, and for many Thai laypeople constitutes their primary interaction with Buddhist monks.

Thai Buddhist monks are entirely dependent on food offerings from the laity for their nourishment, and indeed for their survival. Monks must be given food that is ready-to-eat as they are not permitted to cook food. According to widespread Theravada belief, "the Buddha did not allow the monks to grow, cook, or even store

Figure 1: Monks making morning alms round (*pindapata*) in Bangkok; photo by John Johnston.

food items" (Kuramasuwan et al. 2013: 27). The restrictions forbidding monks to cook and store their own food creates further dependency on offerings of prepared food from the laity.

Importantly, laypeople consider the donation of food to monks as a particularly effective means of making merit, or *puñña* (Thai: *thamboon*). Seeking merit is a fundamental practice among Theravada Buddhists and inspires numerous forms of support to the sangha. *Puñña* is defined as "merit accumulated by performing meritorious deeds; good or meritorious deeds themselves" (Tilakaratne 2016: 167). Through the development of merit, the Theravada layperson expects more desirable outcomes in their present or future lives. On the subject of merit, Darlington states, "Theravada Buddhists consider giving alms to monks a powerful form of accruing religious merit toward a better rebirth or even better conditions in the current life. Monks serve as 'fields of merit' because they provide the opportunity for laypeople to make merit through their gifts" (Darlington 2012: 252). Offerings to monks, including donation of food and other goods, are perceived as very important means of making merit.

In addition to making merit, morning food offerings also provide the laity with an opportunity to directly interact with monks, typically receiving chanted blessings (Thai: *rapporn*) in recognition of their *dāna*, or generosity. Borchert asserts that *dāna* from laypeople to monastics is primarily a selfless act, stating "monastics provide access to the teachings of the Buddha, they do not return the gift of alms [from the laity] in any explicit way" (Borchert 2020: 58). However, *dāna* to monks functions precisely as an explicit means of gaining merit, almost functioning as a spiritual currency transferred from monks to laity in return for donations. Receiving chanted blessings is considered an important benefit of monastic donations. As Payutto states, "the daily alms round reflects the reciprocal nature of the relationship between monks and laity" (Payutto 2010: 19). Through the *dāna* of *pindapata*, the laity receives perceived spiritual benefits in exchange for food and other goods.

Increased societal prosperity may result in Buddhist overconsumption in the context of merit-making activities.[2] For example, while one bag of food may be viewed as creating merit, the donation of three bags of food might appear even more meritorious, creating the conditions for a spiritual economy of merit inflation. In terms of environmental impact, larger quantity Buddhist donations are not necessarily better donations. The commercial dimensions of modern Thai Buddhism contrast with the way the religion is popularly

[2] Leading social activist monk Phra Phayom Kalayano, when asked if larger donations lead to gaining greater merit, described the viewpoint as "stupid" and stated that monks should educate the laity that this is a false understanding of Buddhist donation. Interview conducted at Wat Suan Kaeo, Nonthaburi province, June 9, 2022.

characterized. As stated in *Thailand's Sustainable Development Sourcebook*, "The dharma, which teaches that worldly consumption and pursuits are fundamentally unsatisfying, can act as a healthy check on unbridled consumption and creates a mindset compatible with the goals of sustainable development" (Algie 2015: 208). However, the religious impetus for increased consumption, specifically the desire to make merit, challenges the viewpoint that Buddhism promotes restraint in materialism and consumerism.

The engagement between monks and lay Buddhists in *pindapata* is an important part of both religious life and monastic food culture in Thailand. The monastic codes, as set forth in the Theravada Vinaya (the section of the Buddhist canon devoted to monastic rules), contains numerous and specific instructions on how to conduct the collection of food offerings and even how this food should be consumed. Of special interest in this study are the rules pertaining to the practice of obtaining food offerings from the public and the prohibition against monks commenting on or declining what is offered to them. On this matter, the Vinaya states, "the monk is content with whatever almsfood ... with whatever lodging" (Payutto 2010: 19). The instructions to accept nearly all food that is offered to them with dignified silence creates a barrier for monks to critique offerings that may be unhealthy or environmentally unsustainable.

While the Pali Vinaya observed in Thailand sets forth 227 rules for monks, the main points are condensed in the Fourteen Observances. According to Sopanawatee and Pariyattiphattanabundit, "The Fourteen Observances in Theravada Buddhism serve as foundational principles that guide the conduct of Thai monks, promoting order and virtue in their adherence to these duties" (Sopanawatee and Pariyattiphattanabundit, Wongharn Phrakhru 2024: 123). This set of required monastic observances provide "...foundational principles that promote virtuous behavior, fostering faith and devotion among practitioners. Adherence to these practices not only cultivates beautiful manners but also establishes monks as trustworthy and respected figures, serving as a merit field for humanity and contributing to the stability of Buddhism" (Sopanawatee and Pariyattiphattanabundit, Wongharn Phrakhru 2024: 123). The inclusion of instructions on how to properly accept food donations from the laity in the Fourteen Observances highlights the importance of this everyday act in monastic conduct. Seeking food donations is the twelfth of the Fourteen Observances and includes numerous instructions on how monks gather almsfood (Sopanawatee and Pariyattiphattanabundit, Wongharn Phrakhru 2024). The Pali Vinaya provides precise instruction on the practice of alms collection, stating:

> Observe if the person wishes to offer food by noticing their actions, such as stopping work, rising from their seat, or handling utensils. When offering food, open the monk's robe with the left hand, bow the alms bowl in with the right hand, and use both hands to support the alms bowl while receiving the food, without making eye contact with the giver (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University 1996: 233–34).

The practice of collecting and consuming donated food by Thai Buddhist monks is best characterized as a communal experience, particularly in large monasteries. Monks go on alms rounds in single file groups, with the highest-ranking monk walking at the head of the line followed by monks of descending rank. A layperson often follows the group of monks to consolidate food offerings and carry the donated items. Upon returning to the temple with donated food, the gathered items, usually placed in numerous single-use plastic containers, are prepared for monks to eat. The donated food is divided by type, such as rice, curries, noodle dishes, fruit, sweets, and beverages, and placed on tables or trays. This process of setting out food in dozens or even hundreds of single-use plastic containers is typically facilitated by laypeople, often *upāsaka* dressed in white, or other non-monastic helpers. These laypeople are key contributors of labor and orderliness in Thai temples including *pindapata*.

The relationship between monks and the acquisition and consumption of food offerings is discussed by Thai Buddhist thought leader and prominent monk P. A. Payutto. The widely admired social commentator states,

"In the teachings that lay down the way in which monks and nuns should make use of the requisites offered to them, it is stressed that they should consider the reason and purpose of their consumption, as in the traditional phrase for monks *paṭisaṅkhā yoniso piṇḍapātaṁ*—wisely reflecting, I take alms-food. Whatever is consumed must firstly be reflected upon wisely" (Payutto 2016: 33). Monks are meant to show moderation in the volume of food they collect and consume. On maintaining modest needs, the Vinaya states, "The monk is content with a robe sufficient to protect the body, with alms food enough for his belly's need" (Payutto 2010: 30). The Vinaya also states that two to three alms bowls full of food is the maximum that is allowed to be collected (Pali Canon Online). Only when a monk has collected a large amount of food are they allowed to decline further food offerings.

One exception to humbly and reverently accepting all donated food is set forth in the Vinaya. There are some meats that are forbidden for monks. In these cases, which are highly unusual from a contemporary perspective, monks must reject ten types of meat: human, elephant, horse, dog, snake, lion, tiger, panther, bear, and hyena flesh. These types of meat are termed in Pali as *akappiyamaṃsa* or inappropriate (Kanthik and Khiewngamdee 2018: 335). The fact that other foods do not appear on the list of forbidden offerings is indicative of how the monk is meant to graciously receive all food with only rare exceptions. The acceptance of nearly all offered food is intended to maintain the positive intentions of the donor and thus monks are mandated to accept offerings with dignified gratitude. However, the cultural expectation of silent acceptance for all that is offered to monks creates barriers to critiquing and revising offering practices with unintended, negative consequences.

Single-Use Plastic Containers—Environmental Burden of Buddhist Food Offerings

Single-use plastic containers are a characteristic feature of daily food offerings to Buddhist monks in contemporary Thailand. The predominance of single-use plastics in food donation practices raises important and timely questions about the environmental sustainability of *pindapata*. The number of single-use plastic containers acquired by monks each morning is staggering, creating a monastic food culture dominated by plastic waste (Figure 2). After researching the subject for several years, including field observations, participation in *pindapata*, and numerous interviews, we consider the scale of the problem of plastic waste in monastic food donations to be deeply troubling. As of 2023, there were 256,219 monks in Thailand (National Office of Buddhism, Thailand 2024). It is estimated that 15 percent of monks do not collect morning alms due to advanced age, illness, or high ecclesiastical rank. A further 5 percent are "forest monks" (Thai: *phrapa*) and do not normally collect alms. We estimate that 204,975 monks (about 80 percent of the monkhood) participate in daily alms gathering. On average, a typical monk acquires ten single-use plastic containers, primarily small bags, per day. This figure takes into account that urban monks generally gather more single-use plastic containers than monks in rural areas. Therefore, our estimates and observations suggest that every day Thai monks acquire approximately 2,049,750 single-use plastic containers, which amounts to roughly 750 million per year. This estimate does not account for the 33,924 novice monks per year (National Office of Buddhism, Thailand 2024) who enter the monkhood for varying periods of time (from one day to numerous months), so the actual figure of single-use plastics that monks acquire through food donations is probably even higher.

Single-use plastic containers are undoubtably convenient for the donation of almsfood. These containers help keep the foods, such as curries, noodles, rice, and desserts, separated from each other rather than placing all the food into an unappetizing mixture within the alms bowl. The bagged food is also more easily divided and shared with other monks and the public through the customs of communal dining and excess food distribution to the needy. Single-use plastics in Thailand are very inexpensive, which benefits donors. Changing to more sustainable food packaging, such as recycled paper containers, would increase costs for consumers/donors, thus creating a financial disincentive to convert to more sustainable packaging used in Buddhist food offerings. Single-use plastic water bottles are also frequently donated to monks. As tap water is not potable in Thailand,

many monks depend on these donated bottles for drinking water. It is therefore not uncommon to see hundreds of water bottles kept at temples—another serious challenge for the environmental sustainability of Thai Buddhist monastic culture.

Figure 2: Donated food in single-use plastic containers acquired by just three monks in a single morning; photo by John Johnston.

Rather than the longstanding tradition of setting forth from temples on foot and going directly to private homes for *pindapata*, monks in many urban areas now use transportation, typically a van, to reach morning food markets where they conduct their alms gathering. Markets are convenient places for laypeople to buy food and immediately make donations to monks. Merchants, primarily in food stalls, also frequently provide food items for monks as part of their morning routine. Alms gathering in markets and commercial areas, however, increases the dominant role of single-use plastic food containers in *pindapata*. Commercial food markets, where monks deliberately choose to seek alms, are the most plastic-intensive commercial food environments in Thailand. With few exceptions, these food businesses make extensive use of single-use plastics, often with plastic bags contained one within another like a Russian nesting doll of plastic waste. As a result, monks often return from their daily alms rounds with dozens, if not hundreds, of single-use plastic food containers (Figure 3).

While this may seem like a minor matter given the global scale of the problem of single-use plastics, the amount of waste from Thai Buddhist morning food offerings is particularly concerning in the context of a religious tradition increasingly associated with environmental ethics. The massive plastic waste involved in *pindapata* is a troubling contemporary characteristic of this ancient practice.[3] Large mounds of used single-use plastics are often found at many temples. The discarded plastic waste is sometimes burned, further compounding the negative environmental impact of monastic food donation.[4]

Our interviews have indicated an ever-greater reliance on single-use plastics for monastic food donations during, and persisting after, the Covid-19 crisis.[5] According to monastic sources, the custom of occasionally

[3] It is worth noting how the status of single-use plastic food containers shifts during the process of making Buddhist offerings. Specific plastic containers are temporarily assigned elevated status when they actively contain food offerings designated or donated to monks. This special status is especially apparent during the process of donating the item to the monk, typically by placing the item in the monk's alms bowl. However, once the food is consumed, the plastic container returns to mundane status and thus can be can be discarded like regular, everyday waste.

[4] Numerous studies indicate that many foods donated to monks are responsible for serious adverse health consequences. The prevalence of high cholesterol, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity among Thai monks is a major concern (Varaha 2018: 14). As many as half of all Thai monks struggle with obesity (see Kuramasuwan et al. 2013: 27). Thus, it is not only single-use plastic packaging that is problematic in monastic donations, but often the foods contained within them.

Figure 3: A monk selects food from dozens of single-use plastic containers for his main meal of the day; photo by John Johnston.

eating a small bowl of food as a guest of donors during *pindapata* has become much less common due to the persistence of social distancing. Instead of serving food to monks for immediate consumption in a bowl that would be washed and reused, the common custom now is to contain the food in plastic bags. Thus, social distancing during the pandemic may have inadvertently encouraged even more reliance on plastic packaging in Thai Buddhist food culture. The increase of single-use plastics observed in Buddhist food offerings during the Covid-19 crisis is consistent with the explosive growth of plastic waste in Thailand during the pandemic. Based on data from the Thailand Environment Institute, the United Nations Environment Programme states that during the Covid-19 crisis, "plastic waste has increased from 1,500 tons to a staggering 6,300 tons per day, owing to soaring home deliveries of food" (UNEP 2021). The dramatic increase in the use of single-use plastics during the pandemic has further normalized the widespread generation of plastic waste in Thailand.

Some leading voices within the Thai monastic community are responding to the challenges of environmental sustainability, including calls for reform within Thai Buddhist culture. Influential monks are best positioned to initiate change in contemporary Thai Buddhist practices. For example, Phra Phayom Kalayano is a strong voice for greater engagement with social concerns and sustainability by the Thai Buddhist sangha. As one of the best-known monks in Thailand, he has a strong and loyal following who value his real-world application of Buddhist ethics through outreach efforts and Buddhist activism. Phra Phayom has converted the large grounds around his temple into a center for sustainable practices and environmental caretaking. Phra Phayom has spent four decades as a Phra Nak Pattana, or social outreach monk, working directly to improve lives. Through seventeen social development projects, he is deeply engaged with practical efforts to increase sustainability and eliminate unnecessary waste (Wanchareon 2018). Phra Phayom has played a pivotal role in sustainability projects and his practices have attracted support from both government and private enterprises. As a result, Phra Phayom's projects have widely impacted Thai society and raised consciousness about the ecological consequences of overconsumption, including practices within Buddhist material culture. Rather than being restrained by cultural expectations of a quiet monk accepting nearly all donations, Phra Phayom is outspoken about the need to change Buddhist practices, including monastic offerings, to address environmental sustainability.

[5] Interview with monks at Buddhist Research Institute, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, November 2024.

For example, Phra Phayom Kalayano believes "the monk should play a leading role to encourage the lay practitioners to be aware of the environmental problem. The three duties that monks should do are: to teach, to be a model, and to change the temple to be a more natural environment."[6] While Phra Phayom was not specifically speaking of plastic waste in Buddhist practices, his activist approach to reforming Buddhist offerings and call for more sustainable activities stands in contrast to the cultural expectation that monks should silently and gratefully accept nearly all types of donations. Speaking to the *Bangkok Post* about health concerns with almsfood, Phra Maha Narong stated, "monks were not allowed to reject food offered by the faithful" (Chareonsuthipan 2016). Thus a conundrum has developed—monks are well suited to provide guidance on improving food offerings for health and sustainability, but they are discouraged from voicing such concerns both in the monastic code and according to traditional cultural norms.

Sanghadāna—Monastic Gift Sets and Environmental Sustainability

The donation of *sanghadāna* (Thai: *sangkatan*), or monastic gift sets, is another very common and important act of offering between the laity and monks in Thailand that typically occurs at temples. While *sanghadāna* literally means "generosity to the Buddhist community" (referring to monks), the term is widely used in Thailand to specifically refer to prepackaged sets of goods for monks. The items in these gift sets may include flashlights, batteries, toiletries, medicine, food items, and other basic goods. Because the Vinaya proscribes monks from touching money and making purchases, these offerings are intended to provide monks with daily life necessities that they otherwise could not obtain. As with morning food offerings, gift sets for monks are viewed as an important and direct means of gaining merit by the laity. Many laypeople bring these gift sets whenever they visit temples, their popularity evident in their widespread commercial availability.

However, here plastic is also found in abundance. The gift sets are often contained within plastic buckets or basins and usually wrapped in plastic film (Figure 4). They typically contain low-cost, low-quality goods contained within unrecyclable plastic film. Not only religious supply stores, but supermarkets, convenience stores, and a wide variety of other shops all sell these sets, making them one of the most visible aspects of Thai Buddhist material culture today.

Privately, numerous monks express concern about the lack of quality goods, general impracticality of items, and the environmental impact of these gift sets.[7] Typically, the items are very cheap—the type of products found in 20 baht stores (the equivalent of dollar stores in the United States). Not only are the items typically low quality, monks report that many items are out of date, broken, or otherwise unwanted. However, because monks are forbidden from refusing these gifts, or even critiquing them, the laity continues to give sets filled with inferior, plastic-intensive items that are soon discarded, thus creating more waste.

Indeed, rather than actually providing what monks need, these gift sets appear more oriented towards the conveyance of merit to the donor. They are often donated to fulfil a desired outcome for the donor via the accrual of merit, with the contents of sets often related to a specific, desired outcome for the donor. Merchants running Buddhist supply stores often advise donors on the best gift sets for realizing their goals. For example, if purity or cleansing from a difficult time or wrong act is desired, a gift set containing soap, shampoo, and towels is appropriate to help promote spiritual purification of the donor. If the donor is concerned about health and illness, medicines and health food items are deemed appropriate. Alternatively, if the donor desires a positive romantic outcome, the gift set typically contains items in pairs, such as two toothbrushes, two tubes of toothpaste, etc.[8] These practices clearly indicate that offerings may be more about what the donor desires rather than what the recipient needs.

[6] Interview with Phra Phayom Kalayano by the authors, Wat Suan Kaeo, June 9, 2022.
[7] Communication with numerous monks who wish to maintain anonymity.
[8] Interviews with Buddhist goods merchants including Mrs. Somporn Yingyongyungyuen, April 12, 2022.

Figure 4: Monastic gift sets (*sanghadāna*) sold at a large retailer in Bangkok; photo by John Johnston.

A large quantity of donated monastic gift sets is burdensome for monks. One strategy to limit the number of sets offered to monks, long deployed in Thai Buddhist material culture, is to allow the same gift set to be offered to monks multiple times. In a case of enlightened re-gifting, monks may receive gift sets from laypeople and confer blessing upon them. The monk then returns the set to a temple caretaker or religious goods merchant, who then resells it. This process may be repeated multiple times until the gift set is actually needed and used by the monks. This process of reselling and re-gifting the same offering helps reduce consumption and is more aligned with the monk's actual, simple needs while still conferring merit to multiple groups or individuals. Rather than simply being a commercial trick, this strategy has ecological benefits, as this type of re-gifting helps limit waste. However, some critics note that reselling the same gift sets presents a monetary temptation to monks. Instead of returning the money for the resold set, which should be donated to the temple, these funds could be quietly kept by monks. Therefore, some abbots forbid this type of reselling and re-gifting.[9] As will be discussed below, more sustainable approaches to monastic gift sets have been developed that still allow for the donation of goods and the perceived conveyance of merit.

Strategies to Reduce Environmental Impact of Thai Buddhist Offerings to Monks

Currently, widespread use of single-use plastics in Thai Buddhist practices is not a common concern among monks, laypeople, or society at large. For example, the top two Buddhist universities in Thailand, Mahamakut University and Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, both offer courses on Buddhism and environmentalism and host conferences related to sustainable development, yet these theoretical concerns very rarely translate into actions to address the ecological burden created by certain Buddhist practices in Thailand. The significant plastic waste associated with Thai Buddhism is practically an invisible issue in Thailand. Promoting past practices and seeking modern innovations may provide sustainable options for Thai Buddhist offerings moving forward.

[9] Interview with monks at the International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, January, 2025.

Less than a century ago, the practice of offering food and other daily life needs to Thai Buddhist monks did not involve plastics or other unsustainable materials. Rather than using plastic containers, food was typically deposited directly into the monk's alms bowl. This system was particularly well suited to the donation of rice that would not be mixed with wet foods. In rural villages, placing rice directly into the alms bowl without the use of single-use plastic containers continues to be a common, and environmentally sustainable, practice (Figure 5). Resurrecting this practice throughout the country, even just for rice, would be a positive step towards improving the environmental sustainability of monastic food offerings.

Reviving the Use of Leaf Wrappers

Emphasis on new solutions to polluting practices may neglect ancient methods developed during a period when human impacts on the natural environment were comparatively minimal. While the role of plastics in food donations is a daunting problem now, for centuries the donation of food was environmentally sustainable. In Thailand, prepared foods were traditionally wrapped in large leaves, a custom that persists for certain foods, such as sticky rice and steamed curries wrapped in banana leaves. Currently, the use of leaf wrappers in monastic food donation is more common in rural areas. The most popular leaves used for containing food are banana leaves, pandan leaves, teak leaves, bamboo leaves, and lotus leaves are also utilized in specific regions. Increasing the traditional practice of wrapping food with organic materials such as leaves could help reduce reliance on plastic packaging in food offerings. Due to the large volume of such leaves in tropical Thailand, it is unlikely that collection or cultivation of these leaves would create further environmental concerns. Increasing the use of organic materials and reducing the role plastics in Buddhist offerings recalls similar circumstances of plastic Buddhist offerings in Sikkim. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa observes, "The challenges associated with the disposal of plastic gets to a central issue with plastic: despite its usefulness, beauty, and flexibility as an offering it is ultimately impermanent, but cannot be disposed of as easily as other forms of historical offerings, including bamboo, milk products, and cloth, that are biodegradable" (Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2023: 9). Overcoming the convenience, utility, and low cost of plastics in Buddhist offerings and replacing them with traditional, lower impact materials requires greater commitment among donors.[10]

In an effort to reduce reliance on single-use plastic containers in Buddhist food offerings, some monks now seek food donations using tiffins, or stacked and covered food containers, rather than using the traditional covered alms bowls (Figure 6). Tiffins allow the laity to provide food without the use of plastic containers. The various trays permit segregation of different types of food. The laity can directly deposit food into a section of the tiffin rather than using numerous plastic containers. Tiffins may be carried alongside, or instead of, the traditional alms bowl. Some Buddhist supply stores have begun selling tiffins for use in *pindapata*. Proper use of tiffins could help eliminate a significant number of single-use plastics currently used for the donation of almsfood.

Delivery of Food Directly to Temples

In addition to morning alms rounds conducted by monks, food may also be delivered by the laity directly to monks at temples. Increasingly, laypeople deliver the food to temples once a week and on special Buddhist festival days.[11] Some temples even schedule one day per week when monks forego the morning alms rounds and have food brought to them by local laypeople. This arrangement appears to be more popular in rural areas. In these cases, laypeople typically prepare the donated food in their homes rather than purchasing it from markets and food stalls. The food is usually placed in large trays or tiffins rather than in single-use

[10] Plastics used in unsustainable Buddhist practices and related problems with disposal recalls work on Buddhist prayer flags by Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia and others (Bhutia et al. 2024), in which polyester flags are replaced with biodegradable alternatives.
[11] Interviews with monks and laity, particularly at Wat Nong Luang, Suphanburi Province, April 10, 2022.

Figure 5: Laypeople in a village in northern Thailand placing rice directly in alms bowls; photo by anonymous monk.

Figure 6: Tiffins, or stacked food trays, for sale in a Buddhist supply store in Bangkok; photo by John Johnston.

plastic containers. This practice greatly reduces plastic waste associated with *pindapata*. Following the food offering, monks conduct prayers, deliver sermons, partake in the meal, and bestow blessings. The practice of delivering homecooked meals to the temples both preserves monastic-laity connections and helps increase the environmental sustainability of almsgiving. As with traditional *pindapata*, excess food from monastic meals is typically redistributed among laypeople or shared with absent community members in a further demonstration of the principle of generosity, or *dāna*.

While delivery of trays of food directly to the monks at temples diminishes the need for the morning alms rounds and thus decreases plastic waste, greatly reducing or eliminating traditional *pindapata* would be a major shift in the social dynamic of contemporary Thai Buddhist culture. *Pindapata* is deeply ingrained in monastic conduct and community expectations. Traditionally, "Alms gathering is a practice for monks entering [the monkhood] to become ordained in Buddhism to collect alms. It is one of the duties of monks and novices" (Pali sutta [Vi. Ju.]Thai] 7/367-368/ 235-236] as transl. by Sopanawatee, et. al. 2024: 329). *Pindapata* is a fundamental, daily act for thousands of Thai monks and novices. For much of the laity, the offering of food in the mornings is their primary interaction with the monastic community. While changes to Thai monastic food culture, such as *pindapata*, could be beneficial to sustainability concerns, the social and religious dimensions of these changes must also be considered and accommodated.[12]

Alternatives to Environmentally Costly Monastic Gift Sets

As stated above, monastic gift sets, or *sanghadāna*, are often filled with inferior goods and typically wrapped in plastic film. The gift sets are a further example of environmentally unfriendly yet popular Buddhist offerings in contemporary Thailand. Phra Phayom Kalayano, one of Thailand's most prominent monks, is deeply engaged with environmental activities and has developed sustainable alternatives to *sanghadāna*. At Wat Suan Kaeo in Nonthaburi province, where he serves as abbot, Phra Phayom does not permit donation of the typical, plastic-intensive monastic gift sets. Rather, he encourages laypeople to donate baskets of fresh fruit and vegetables. Such baskets are sold at the entryway to the temple (Figure 7). The baskets are presented to the monks, who bestow blessings upon the donors. Following the ceremony, the monks return the fruit or vegetables to those who offered them. These items, having been in the possession of the monks, are considered sacred and auspicious; their return symbolizes the transfer of these beneficial qualities to the donors' households. This exchange serves a dual purpose: the temple receives financial contributions from the sale of the baskets, while donors obtain both spiritual merit and the consecrated food to consume at home. This creative adaptation of a long-standing Thai ritual practice eliminates the accumulation of plastics and poor-quality items and thus creates a more environmentally sustainable and healthy form of offering.

Unsustainable Buddhist Offering Practices in Thailand in Broader Context

The environmental damage caused by common Buddhist offerings in Thailand exist within a wider context of everyday unsustainable practices in contemporary society. Thailand is one of the worst polluters of plastic waste when analyzed on a per capita basis. It is the 21st largest economy globally yet the sixth greatest source of plastic waste (Jambeck et al. 2015: 769). The numerous single-use plastic containers that fill monks' alms bowls are thus indicative of a wider problem. The markets and commercial areas that sell prepared food in billions of plastic containers primarily serve the general population, with the items donated to monks constituting a small percentage of massive plastic waste generated every day. The lack of sustainability evident in Buddhist offerings mirrors a much larger societal and environmental problem. However, as donations to monks are meant to be examples of religious generosity, mindfulness, and care for monks, the unsustainable nature of the

[12] Studies indicate that *pindapata* is an important source of exercise for monks and thus contributes to monastic health (see Varaha 2018: 16–17). Reducing or eliminating morning alms walks may significantly affect the amount of physical exercise undertaken by monks.

Figure 7: Baskets of fruit and vegetables sold as monastic gift sets (*sanghadāna*) at Wat Suan Kaeo; photo by John Johnston.

offerings stands in stark contrast with Buddhist ideals of non-harming, responsible conduct, and other ethics that are often viewed as aligned with environmental sustainability.

However, there are some signs of change. Thai Buddhist amulets made of recycled plastic, for example, found an interested and enthusiastic audience and quickly sold out. A series of amulets composed of recycled glass is also popular (Johnston and Phayakhrut 2024: 119–32). Recycled amulets are a deliberate, if rare, linkage between Thai Buddhist material culture and sustainability. These items particularly resonate with a younger generation generally more sensitive to environmental concerns. However, more sustainable alternatives for common objects in Thai Buddhist material culture and practice have not yet developed.

Speaking of Buddhist leadership, Brox states, "Buddhist environmentalism is a popular cause behind which they can unite. Yet, while they arrange green activities such as tree-planting, the 'brown' environmental issues of personal and institutional consumption are ignored" (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2022: 14). Phra Phayom Kalayano's activities at At Wat Suan Kaeo are an outlier to this situation. For example, he has encouraged the use of sturdier plastic bags that can be reused many times, rather than the typical single-use plastics. He states,

> "The problem comes from people being careless and choosing convenience without thinking about the environment. At our temple, we wanted to change this habit, so we made a simple rule: anyone who comes to the temple must bring one clean plastic bag that can be reused here. We don't want single-use plastic. The best way is to use things again and again, or recycle them."[13]

Through this grassroots initiative, Phra Phayom Kalayano brings attention to the crisis of plastic waste generated by single-use plastics in Thailand, a practice that dominates both the commercial marketplace and many Buddhist offerings.

Conclusion

Offerings to Buddhist monks in contemporary Thailand are fraught with environmental concerns, particularly the widespread use of single-use plastics. In this article, we have estimated that over 750 million single-use plastic containers are used annually in morning food donations. While *pindapata* is traditionally viewed as a religious act of generosity and merit-making, it currently results in a massive amount of plastic waste. A Thai monk commonly acquires numerous single-use plastic containers in just one morning of collecting alms,

[13] Interview with Phra Phayom Kalayano by the authors, Wat Suan Kaeo, June 9, 2022.

creating an environmental burden at temples and monasteries. Similarly, monastic gift sets, or *sanghadāna*, are plastic-intensive and typically filled with low quality, unsustainable goods. The negative environmental consequences of much of Buddhist material culture in Thailand is significant, particularly as they are directly related to a religion that is increasingly associated with environmental ethics. The everyday, plastic waste of Thai Buddhist practices stands in stark contrast to the rhetoric of increasingly "green" Buddhism. Based on fieldwork in Mumbai, Pathak observes, "Pollution is thus the contravention of sociocultural and political systems that determine what matter belongs where" (Pathak 2023: 169). In this light, plastic pollution seems particularly out of place when found in monk's bowls and Buddhist temples.

However, these negative environmental acts should not be overly associated with Buddhism. Commonplace Buddhist practices with negative environmental impacts mirror prevalent customs in contemporary Thai society at large, such as purchasing food in numerous single-use plastic containers. While Buddhist food offerings account for hundreds of millions of single-use plastics annually, general consumption of prepared food in Thailand accounts for billions of single-use plastics. Buddhism is a part of a larger picture of surplus and waste in contemporary Thailand. As Abrahms-Kavunenko observes, "Although Buddhism is often imagined in popular culture to run counter to materialism and the consumptive practices of capitalist societies, lay Buddhists and Buddhist institutions are very much entangled in the processes of wealth generation and consumption patterns that produce waste" (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022: 145). Monastic offerings that produce large-scale plastic waste are a prominent characteristic of current Thai Buddhist practices.

Attempts at reforming environmentally unsustainable Buddhist offerings provides encouraging alternative approaches to current practices. Placing food, especially rice, directly in alms bowls, the use of tiffins and leaf wrappers, and direct delivery of food to temples are all means of reducing plastic waste. The numerous instructions around food gathering defined in the monastic code (Vinaya) are extremely significant in Thai Buddhist monastic culture and practice. While some prominent monks, such as Phra Phayom Kalayano, can freely call for changes in Buddhist offering practices, this is not the case for most monks. The inability of monks to reject or otherwise critique food donations according to the monastic codes creates a barrier to open communication and reform of environmentally unsustainable Buddhist offerings. Monks are expected to quietly and gratefully receive nearly all offerings and dutifully confer merit to the donor, even if the donation negatively impacts their health or the natural environment. More sustainable alternatives to monastic offering practices offer the opportunity to better align contemporary Thai Buddhist practices and customs with environmental ethics.

The role of Buddhist leadership in driving societal changes in Thailand is a complex matter involving monastic restrictions and cultural expectations. However, when large-scale unsustainable practices are occurring within the Buddhist community and involve the most common types of offerings to monks, leadership from the Buddhist sangha is critical. Sirisena brings attention to "...the importance of distinguishing a Buddhist ecological ethic that would help the religious tradition formulate a basis to answer the challenges posed by the Anthropocene" (Sirisena 2024: 11). Buddhism, in its many forms and cultural settings, has much to contribute to emergent eco-ethics. However, Buddhist traditions must also address their own ecological liabilities to bridge the gap between the rhetoric of sustainability and reality of religious practices.

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