

**Prapheni Heet Sibsong:  
The Tradition of Merit-making with Ethical Commitment to the ‘Other’**

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**An overview of Prapheni Heet Sibsong:**

In Isan, the Northeast of Thailand, Prapheni Heet Sibsong or the twelve-month Thai-Isan tradition has formed the main doxastic structural bedrock and conceptual framework based upon which all socio-cultural, religious and ethical values are enacted and brought to full realization. The ceremonies incorporated in Prapheni Heet Sibsong create conditions of veritable relationship with oneself and others in the community. The calendrical ceremonies that have given social meaning to the passage of time by creating monthly cycles oriented mostly towards seasonal variations with its impact on agro-based economy, have imposed a cultural order on nature as well as ethical behavior-orientation of both the laity and monastics as a whole. Each of the ceremonies recalls and commemorates the basic beliefs of Isan people and its annual celebration establishes a link between past and present, as if the original events, for instance, the Bodhisattva’s life events (as re-enacted through verbal narration in the Boonphravet ceremony) are happening over again.

The series of these traditional ceremonies start with Boonkhaokam in the first month and ends with Boonkathin in the twelfth month. Here we shall describe in brief each of the twelve traditions before highlighting two of the traditions namely – Boonkumkhaoyai and Boonphravet for a detailed analysis. The first of the traditions i.e. Boonkhaokam is an after harvest ceremony and starts approximately in mid/late November every year. Since this ceremony is directly related to the spiritual purification of monks, the activities that mark the ceremony involve intensive practice of dhamma - listening to sermons, practicing of vipassana meditation, reading Dhamma books, etc.

The second in the list is Boonkhunlarn or Boonkumkhaoyai that we are going to discuss in some detail following this overview in order to understand the concept of ethical commitment to the ‘Other’, which is deeply embedded in the way of life of the Isan people. Like Boonkhaokam, Boonkhunlarn or Boonkumkhaoyai is also a post-harvest ceremony marking the beginning of the winter season in early January. The main activity of the ceremony involves merit-making by offering the giant paddy heap by the villagers. Monks are invited to individual households for chanting and blessing the harvest and the granary.

The third ceremony is Boonkhaojee that starts at the end of February or early March. While villagers take great delight in offering roasted egg-smearing newly harvested sticky rice cakes (*khaojee*) to the monks, the aroma of which pervades every home, merit-making is performed in observance of the great event of the Buddha’s time through the celebration of the Magha Puja Day.

The fourth ceremony in the series is Boonphravet, falling in the month of March. This particular ceremony that we are going to discuss in some detail along with the ceremony from the second month i.e. Boonkhunlarn or Boonkumkhaoyai, is the heart of Prapheni Heet Sibsong. During this ceremony, monks are invited to chant the Vessantara Jataka, the story of The Great Birth. Following this great ceremony is the traditional Thai New Year celebration, Boonsongkran, that is marked by great festivity and many commemorative activities like merit-making, sand pagoda construction, bathing of Buddha statues, pouring water in the palms of Buddhist monks, honoring

(*bangsakul*) ancestors' bones, releasing fish and birds for accumulation of merits through these wholesome actions, etc.

The next ceremony, immediately after the cool splashing of water at Songkran, is one of opposite temperamental feeling that corresponds to the gradual seasonal changes with increase in temperature and aridity as summer approaches. This ceremony is called Boonbangfai or Rocket festival and falls in the month of May. This festival originated from the influence of multi-cultural beliefs, an eclectic admixture of Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism with its emphasis on belief in spirits and fertility cults. Merit-making part of this festive occasion is a direct Buddhist influence; invoking the celestial deity, Indra and appealing for rain is a purely Brahmanical doxastic practice; worshiping of the guardian spirit is an animistic influence, and the shooting of homemade rockets at temple premises bear significant resemblance to symbolic values ingrained in indigenous fertility cults.

The ceremony that immediately follows the jubilation of the Rocket Festival is one of ablution and cleansing, both at the spiritual/mental level as well as bodily/physical level, and is known as Boonchamha or Boonberkbaan. During this ceremony, villagers take sand, small stones and water in a big jar and white consecrated thread to the central hall of the temple to be blessed by the monks and which are then carried back home as symbols of ablution and purification. Moreover, Buddhist monks are invited for chanting on two consecutive nights, and on the third day, meal is offered to them.

The next ceremony, starting in late July or early August, marks the commencement of the Buddhist Lent and is known as Boonkhaophansa. On the full moon during this ceremony, Asalha Puja is celebrated to commemorate the Buddha's deliverance of the First Sermon.

The ceremony that follows the Buddhist Lent is Boonkhaopadabdin, conducted with the purpose of dedicating merits to one's dead relatives and distant ancestors so as to alleviate the suffering of those who must have descended to the woeful abodes or lower realms of pain and misery. As part of this ceremony, villagers offer different food items such as: rice, sweets, fruits, areca palm and betel leaf, all well wrapped up in banana leaves, to the spirits of dead ancestors at early dawn in the village monasteries and wish them well-being and a good future life. Since Boonkhaopadabdin falls in the ninth month, most devotees usually make offerings of nine banana-leaf-wrapped packs to the spirits of the deceased. This ceremony in a way re-enacts the Buddha's advice to King Bimbisara to make merit and offer food to dead ancestors.

The ceremony that follows Boonkhaopadabdin is similar in spirit and is known as Boonkhaosak. Villagers make merit as usual and bring items to offer the monks with their names tagged on the offerings. Once any monk or novice accepts the offering, then a section of it is taken back home to be offered to the guardian spirit (*Phi-tahaek*) on the homestead and also to the dead ancestors for their well-being as well as the villagers' own happiness and prosperity.

The ceremonial sharing of food for ancestors is followed by the ceremony to mark the end of the Buddhist Lent, known as Boonorkphansa and falls in the month of October. Great ritualistic offering of alms food to monks (*Takbatra-devo*) is organized to mark the end of the Buddhist Lent.

The last of the Prapheni Heet Sibsong ceremony that immediately follows the end of the Buddhist Lent is, the robe-offering ceremony, known as Boonkathin. Ceremonial presentation of yellow robes and other necessary items to monks is the hallmark of this final ceremony in the entire corpus of Prapheni Heet Sibsong.

While each of the traditional ceremony is important in its essence and codified meaning and can be considered complete in itself, what impresses the present writer

most is the subtle connection between each of the ceremony. Taken in its sequential entirety, we recognize that the corpus of Prapheni Heet Sibsong begins with the ceremony of Boonkhaokam, the monastics' self-purification period and ends with Boonkathin, the annual robe-offering ceremony. Monks are the spiritual leaders of society and to play this specific role it is indispensable for them to lead a pure and chaste life. In order to lead a pure life, both in letters and spirit, monastics are expected to be mindful of all their actions – verbal, bodily and mental and any minor and major offences (except for the most severe ones that lead to defeat and immediate disrobing) of monastic disciplinary codes have to be amended through undergoing an extended period of perseverance and penance as laid out in the Vinaya Pitaka.

The entire corpus of Prapheni Heet Sibsong thus logically starts with the mindful awareness of living up to the ideals of a truly spiritual and renunciant life with diligence and full-hearted dedication through participation in Boonkhaokam and thereby setting the ideal example before the lay Buddhist community, who constantly supports the monastics' material needs of food, shelter and clothing. The trajectory of this mindful awareness connects itself to the other end of the corpus, i.e. monks as spiritual leaders are befitted to receive the annual robe-offering from the laity. On two end poles of the conceptual framework of Prapheni Heet Sibsong thus stand the monastics as spiritual watch guards and field of merit and between these two ends are inserted various ceremonies that help train the lay devotees and householders to practice along the spiritual path through emphasis on cultivation of such qualities as generosity, mindfulness, loving-kindness, etc. While Boonkhaojee and Boonkumkhaoyai highlight the deed of sharing the best part of one's hard-earned fruits of labor with monastics and community members, Boonkhaopadapdin and Boonkhaosak bring to fore the sharing of relished items for the departed ones. It is thus clear that ethical responsibility does not get limited to the living subject/s alone but is repatriated to distant and absent entities in some unknowable realm thereby reinforcing the idea of merit-making with ethical commitment to the other – the other either as a living presence or an absent presence. While rooted in the present, devout Buddhists dedicate merits to the past (dead ancestors) with the wish that the departed ones' future (a future that is always already distanced and can never ever be intelligibly explored by the devout), be better and worthy. Within the conceptual framework of all the ceremonies in Prapheni Heet Sibsong the connection of past, present and future time and the effect of one's actions on them are endorsed. As mentioned aforesaid, we shall now discuss in some detail two of the ceremonies that epitomize the cultivation of generosity, loving-kindness and responsibility towards the 'Other'.

### **Boonphravet:**

The Boonphravet ceremony, that marks the fourth lunar month and falls approximately in the month of March, is the most important ceremony in the entire corpus of Prapheni Heet Sibsong or twelve-month Thai-Isan tradition. The unique feature of this traditional ceremony is that specialized and trained monks are invited to different temples for chanting the Vessantara Jataka<sup>1</sup> (Thai, Isan: Vessantdorn Chadok)

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 547 Buddhist stories (Jātakas) illustrating the previous lives of the Buddha, the Vessantara Jātaka is most popular in Thailand and since long has been delineated in both poetry and visual arts. The Great Birth story relates the penultimate incarnation of Buddha as Prince Vessantara, the Bodhisattava. The core action of the story revolves around Prince Vessantara's perfection of the meritorious act of charity or *dāna*, which began with his generous act of donating the magical rain-giving white elephant to the drought-stricken denizens of the city of Kalinga, an act that outraged his own subjects and resulted in his banishment from the kingdom by his father, King Sonjay. His exile expedited the next phase of generous acts that unrolled initially with whole-hearted donation of all his earthly and palatial belongings to suppliants from every stratum of society, and eventually culminated with the giving away of his two beloved children, Kanha and Chali to the glutton Brahmin, Chuchok and his wife, Matsi to the deity Indra,

– the story of Mahachat or The Great Birth. This particular Jataka tale which delineates the penultimate birth-story of the Buddha as the Bodhisattva, before being finally born as Gotama Buddha, is extremely popular all throughout Thailand. The Mahachat sermon text is rich both in religious and linguistic information. Its religious significance is clear from the fact that it provides the foundational base of moral perfection, epitomized in the character of the Bodhisattva. The text provides innumerable examples of proverbs and didactic messages that listeners can reflect upon and bring into practice in day to day life in order to accumulate merit and enrich their lives in spiritual terms. The arrangement of Boonphravet involves a lot of time-consuming and expensive preparation on the part of the host temple and for the lay devotees to offer their help and support to every stage of arrangement is an act of merit-making symbolizing self-sacrifice, dedicated effort and devotional zeal.<sup>2</sup> The delivering of the sermon is an auspicious event and begins at early dawn so that the entire sermon can be delivered on a single day. Monks who have a high ranged voice train themselves to delineate the entire story (in 13 sections) in a unique recital style infused with distinct rhythms.<sup>3</sup> As recital-narrators, sung-sermon practitioner monks follow the story along each of the thirteen sections, known as *kan*, that totals to one thousand verses or *Gāthā* expanding

who approached Vessantara disguising himself in human form. The Romanized titles of all the thirteen sections of the story as used in the Mahachat sermon are provided here, from the Vessantara Jātaka as appearing in *The Mahachat*:

Kaan	Romanized Title	Translation	Number of verses
1	<i>Thotsaphorn</i>	Ten Blessings	19
2	<i>Himaphaan</i>	Himalayan Forest	134
3	<i>Thaanaakan</i>	Charity/Donations	209
4	<i>Vannaphravet</i>	Entrance into the forest	57
5	<i>Chuchok</i>	Chuchok, the Brahmin	79
6	<i>Julaphon</i>	Sparse Forest	35
7	<i>Mahaaphorn</i>	Thick Forest	80
8	<i>Kumaan</i>	The Royal Children	101
9	<i>Matsi</i>	Masti, Vessantdom's wife	90
10	<i>Sakkabap</i>	Indra's Words	43
11	<i>Mahaaraat</i>	The Great King	69
12	<i>Chaukrasat</i>	The Six Royals	36
13	<i>Nakhonakan</i>	Return to the Kingdom	48
<b>Total number of verses</b>			<b>1,000</b>

<sup>2</sup> For arrangement details of the ceremony see Dipti Mahanta, *A Critical Study of the Mahachat Sung-sermon from Isan*, Research Monograph, Bangkok: Buddhist Research Institute, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> In order to delineate the story effectively, sung-sermon practitioner monks have devised many different literary, stylistic and narratological techniques that have positively affected the proliferation, preservation and continuation of the tradition of this oral narrative form. These techniques have also helped to infuse great enjoyment, merry-making, spiritualism, subliminal bliss and solace to the process of listening to the sermon. Stylization represents the creativity of the practitioner monks in actual narrativization of the Mahachat sermon. The many different rhythms that have evolved over time represent stylistic features that are unique of the Isan Mahachat sermon. The most common style of rhythm used is *Thamnong-nai-phuk-nai-mud*, literally translated into English as “tying-wrapping rhythm”. It is the principal rhythm used by monks while chanting from manuscripts. It has the compositional characteristic of *Rai*, a traditional form of Isan verse. It is probable that this original rhythm has branched off with subtle variations at different localities throughout the northeastern region. A practitioner monk may master any one of the following three styles or all three depending on the locale, individual choice, ability and training. i) *Thamnong Lom-phad-phrao* is a rhythm that resembles the drifting of coconut palm fronds in the breeze. It is a slow kind of rhythm requiring alternate strong and weak or mild voice modulation similar to the effect of wind on coconut palm fronds. This rhythm is typical of Ubon Ratchathani Province. ii) *Thamnong Chang-thiem-mae* is a rhythm that resembles the movement of the elephant calf along the side of its mother. In this rhythm, the voice is alternately pressed and released but without complete release; sung at alternately high and low pitch but without producing the sound “eei-eei”. This rhythm is typical of Khonkaen and Chaiyaphum. iii) *Thamnong Kaah-ten-kon* is a rhythm that resembles the movement of a crow along lumps of clay. In this rhythm the voice is rendered as slow and fast alternately similar to a crow's to and fro jumping, flying off, and landing movement around lumps of mud in the paddy field. This rhythm is typical of Roi-et province. Since it originated in Suwanaphum district, this rhythm is also known as Suwanaphum rhythm.

over time and space and uphold the values of compassion and generosity – qualities that are reflected in the character of the bodhisattva in the story.

Compassion is one of the four divine qualities<sup>4</sup> that Buddhism emphasizes. It is believed that the Buddha himself practiced compassion and its corollary, charity to the highest possible level during his penultimate birth as the bodhisattva before being finally born as the Buddha. Human life would not only be spiritually dull and drab, but also all too brutal, if there is absolute lack of compassion. Compassion is a great virtue, the cultivation of which helps to keep vices like greed and selfishness at bay while bringing to full realization the ethical responsibility towards others. Such unwholesome mental states as egocentricity, egotism and megalomania can find suitable cure through the practice of compassion. When mindfully practiced to the highest level, it can purify one's body and mind leading to complete annihilation of all sorts of clinging and attachment. Only then the path of true renunciation can be treaded upon.

It is compassion that gave rise to other supremely admirable qualities in the Bodhisattva (Prince Vessantara) such as: loving-kindness, generosity, charity, selflessness, self-sacrifice, honesty, endurance, patience, moral courage and determination. Corresponding to the content of the Vessantara Jātaka, sung-sermon practitioner monks have improvised a unique style of rendition that renders the narration of the entire story very effective. Through their rendition the Bodhisattva, who is the epitome of moral perfections, becomes a living example and a perennial source of inspiration to lay devotees. Thus, it can be ascertained that sung-sermon practitioner monks play a significant role in propagating Buddhism amongst the laity. Usually the entire village community collaborates to help arrange the ceremony.

It is a common belief among lay Buddhists in Northeast Thailand that one who listens through the entire 13 sections of the Vessantara story on a single sitting accumulates enormous merit that ensures future birth during the time of Ariya Mettaiya<sup>5</sup>. The practitioner monks who are invited by host temples to deliver the sermon not only help unite the villagers in merit-making but also open up this opportunity to lay devotees to accumulate merits for the future. The ceremony is infused with great enjoyment, merry-making, spiritualism, subliminal bliss and mental solace. Didactic interpolations interspersed throughout the Mahachat sermon text direct the listeners to universal truths with an emphasis on realization of these truths through practice along the moral path. Mahachat practitioner monks would devote enough time in the course of delivering the sermon to clarify and repetitiously stress them so as to inspire and encourage the laity to put into real practice in life.<sup>6</sup> Suppose the Mahachat

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<sup>4</sup> The four divine or heavenly qualities or sublime states of mind known as *Brahmavihāra* that Buddhism emphasizes are *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (empathy or sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). For a clear exposition of this, see P.A. Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 236-238.

<sup>5</sup> The belief has arisen from the content of a non-canonical sutta called the *Phra Malai Sutta*. The content is as follows:

Thou all must inform educable beings  
Whosoever desire to meet the Future Buddha (Ariya Mettaiya)  
Ought to revere the teachings  
The Mahachat sermon  
Be frequently organized  
The 1000 verses therein be worshipped  
With ritual item in a 1000 sets  
Listen it entirely on a single day.

<sup>6</sup> The repeated words and phrases in the original Isan version are maintained in our translation below. The Isan version is from Phrakhu Sutasarapimol authored text *Phimpha Laeh Mahachat Sibsaaam Kanth Sammuan Isan* Sec. I. lines 80-118, pp. 8-10.

All listeners, brethren dear	father and mother reflect upon this
Consider deeply about charity	all generous deeds you have done
Did you gain mental benefits from them	I welcome you to introspect it

sermon delivering ceremony ceases to exist in the future due to a lack of nurturing ambience and changing life-style, it would inevitably lead to a hiatus in the entire corpus of Prapheni Heet Sibsong that forms the warp and woof of the Isan way of life.

### **Boonkumkhaoyai:**

Boonkumkhaoyai (previously known as “Boonkhunlarn”), literally translated into English as ‘merit-making by offering the giant paddy heap’, marks the second lunar month and falls approximately in the month of January. It is an ancient traditional ceremony that is held at the end of the harvest season in order to create harmony and mutual co-existence among all people in the village. The historical origin of the ceremony can be traced back to the inspiration drawn by Isan people from the story of the previous lives of both Kondañña, the first disciple of the Buddha to attain arahantship and Subhadda Paribbāchaka, a lay devotee who was the last person to be enlightened just before the passing away of the Buddha.<sup>7</sup> In Boonkumkhaoyai, villagers co-operate to form the giant paddy heap by donating unhusked rice for the purpose of supporting and promoting various projects related to community welfare and propagation of Buddhism. Viewed from the socio-ethical perspective, this particular agro-based ritualistic ceremony seems to epitomize the culture of merit-making ingrained in the traditional Thai-Isan way of life.

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Have your meritorious acts made you happy	smile and happy always
Observe it see it	when you donate and distribute
Your mind becomes delightful	beget felicity through and through
Whenever you donate	it is a great benefit
Meritorious action is reckoned thus	welcome you to continue the effort
Accumulate merit gradually	little by little it will increase
When you die this shall be your asset	gain great merits
Everyone has to die	nobody can live forever
All beings in the vast world	none can escape from death
But when you transmigrate	to another realm
Everything would depend on your action	good and bad all depends on your action solely
Whoever has done good deeds	has goodness accumulated
When dead these actions will lead to heaven	ascend to heaven and reside there
Whoever has done evil deeds	these actions will let you
Descend to hell	full of suffering and lamentation
All virtuous people	men and women engage in generous action
Accumulate morality and generosity	the reward you gain is certain
Accrue good deeds there would be no suffering	the world will extol in your praise
Welcome you all do good	people will admire you
Deviate from all evil actions	it will reduce your value
Make you devoid of value in yourself	only good and evil exist in this world
All other animals	like herds of cattle
And herds	of elephants
All decay and decompose	but their skin tusks bones
Still have some value	can be sold and bought
When people die all's over	just cremate the body
Nothing remains	that could be sold or bought
Like the poetry that has taught	Thai poet has ever composed
I leave this to you all laity	for you to consider and reflect upon –
“Bull, oxen, buffalo, elephant	that are old and unworthy of any work
Their tusks, horns	still bear importance and value in body
But when humans die	the whole body is valueless
Only good and evil actions persist	to adorn the world.”
The entire human populace	when dead and decomposed
Goodness and evil still exist	permanent in essence
Offer this message to each of you	read and investigate this dhammic truth

<sup>7</sup> Chob Desuankhok, “From Boonkhunkao or Boonkhunlarn to Boonkumkhaoyai” in *Kawpaikaboon*, Special Issue Jan – Mar (Khonkaen: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2009), pp. 18-19. For the story, see *Buddhist Legends Part I*, trans. Eugene Watson Burlingame, (PTS, 1995), pp. 204-205.

The originators of Boonkumkhaoyai were humble folks who tilled the soil. Their descendants and bearers of the lineage and rich heritage of the land who have successfully carried on the tradition till the present era are farmers too. Since the ceremony originated in rural Isan, where the majority of the population engages in farming as the chief means of livelihood, it can be assumed that right livelihood is endorsed in the very concept of Boonkumkhaoyai.

Topographically, Northeast Thailand is a dry and arid region with scant resources, but the farmers are an industrious lot and generally reap harvest twice a year. They mostly grow glutinous rice, the staple food of the region. And in Boonkumkhaoyai they generously give away a section of the produce that they have reaped with much toil and labor. Every grain of rice that they accumulate and donate for public welfare projects comes from effort, endeavor and perseverance. The tradition-bound rural Isan society that is relatively restraint upholds the philosophy of sufficiency economy and cherishes the culture-of-giving. Their approach in life, which is so clearly reflected in the traditional ceremony of Boonkumkhaoyai, manifests what Buddhadasa defined as ‘Dhammic Socialism’. According to this philosopher-monk, Dhammic Socialism (*dhammika sangha-niyama*) has three basic principles: the principle of the good of the whole, the principle of restraint and generosity, and the principle of respect and loving-kindness<sup>8</sup>.

Dhammic Socialism, which is said to characterize the original moral (*sīla-dhamma*) condition of individuals and society, is a hallmark of Boonkumkhaoyai. The participants in Boonkumkhaoyai have loving-kindness deeply rooted in their hearts; otherwise they would have been niggardly and reluctant to share the fruits of extreme toil and labor. The desire to share implies sacrifice, which in turn originates from an innate feeling of loving-kindness and compassion towards others. Mettā or loving-kindness is one of the four divine qualities that Buddhism upholds. The vices of greed and selfishness that are rampant in today’s consumerist culture can find suitable cure through the practice of loving-kindness. When mindfully practiced to the highest level, this virtue, which is rightly called heavenly abiding, can purify one’s body and mind leading to complete annihilation of all sorts of clinging and attachment. A major chunk of the Isan populace, still very much inspired by the richness of the traditional Buddhist way of life and thinking is guided by these qualities to a great degree. Therefore, despite material paucity in life, the village folks engage in different types of generous acts of which Boonkumkhaoyai is a distinct example. No matter how poverty-stricken Isan people might be, they do not pay lip service to religious ideals, but are real practitioners of loving-kindness, at least at the level of *dānamaya* or meritorious action of giving.

Merit-making is part and parcel of Thai Buddhist way of life in general and traditional Isan lifestyle epitomizes it fully. One can make merit, especially of the *dānamaya*<sup>9</sup> type or meritorious action consisting in giving, in diverse ways such as – by offering alms food, yellow robes and other requisites to monks, by making cash-donations for the construction of monks’ dwelling places (*kuti*) and temples, by financially supporting the ecclesiastical education of monks and novices, by bearing the cost of publication of dhamma books, by contributing to a funeral ceremony and last but not the least by giving one’s time and labor for various activities in a monastery. It is very interesting to observe how Isan people have traditionally entwined their lives with the culture of merit-making. Although merit-making in some urban settings<sup>10</sup> has

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<sup>8</sup> Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism*, (Bangkok: Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development, 1993), pp. 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> *Dānamaya* is only one out of ten bases of meritorious action. For a detail of all ten bases see *Dictionary of Buddhism* by P.A. Payutto, (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Press, 2000), pp. 109-111.

<sup>10</sup> One instance that immediately comes to mind is Wat Phra Dhammakāya that has fetishized the cult of accumulation of merit to an unprecedented degree while willfully misconstruing the teachings of the Buddha,

been adversely affected by the rapid modernization, consumerist culture and capitalistic mode of growth that took place in the last few decades, Isan people, on the other hand, have successfully preserved the culture of merit-making by still adhering to its pristine values and practicing it within the folds of the twelve-month tradition or *Prapheni Heet Sibsong*. Therefore, merit-making still exists as a spontaneously thriving customary practice and has not yet turned out to be a fetish and a means to ‘bartering’ of merit.

On every occasion of Boonkumkhaoyai ceremony, village folks are seen to circumambulate the giant paddy heap three consecutive times holding *tonphapa*,<sup>11</sup> yellow-robos and other offerings in their hands, before offering them to individual monks. On each such occasion, lay devotees rejoice in merit-making as they are aware that by doing so they are supporting the monastic order and are joining hands in the propagation of Buddhism. Their joint collaborative action is effective in keeping the age-old tradition of their forefathers alive. In the long run, the continuity of such collective effort will make the flame of dhamma glow with ever more incandescence rendering Buddhism a living tradition. The various socio-ethico principles that form the foundational base of Boonkumkhaoyai manifest to a great extent the philosophy of living for the ‘other’.

Boonkumkhaoyai is thus a Buddhist paradigm of balanced living based on holistic principles through which the great ideal of the Buddha’s teachings – ‘for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the many’ (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya*) – is manifested in its microcosm. This is a tradition that is exemplary enough to be emulated in its exact form or modified version by any concerned people. Suppose it is difficult to implement it in exact form due to various cultural barriers, one can at least imbibe the core essence of the ceremony in its spirit and practice it in a way that might be possibly appropriate in one’s own cultural background manifesting the underlying principles of commitment to selfless giving and communal welfare.

### **Moral benefits the participants in Boonpravet and Bunkumkhaoyai reap:**

As in any act of generosity, participation in Boonpravet and Boonkumkhaoyai is conducive to mental well-being and brings great happiness, satisfaction and solace to the humble devotees. Arrangement of the ceremonies and participation in them is regarded as a spiritual undertaking that is conducive to ethical practice and observance of the precepts. The observance of the precepts and realization of the significance of dhamma in life pave the way for deletion of defilements and temptations. When the path is clear and devoid of defilements, the mind gets ripe for higher spiritual attainment such as right understanding and right thought which form the foundational base of wisdom and that which eventually leads to ethical commitment towards the ‘other’.

Participation at both the ceremonies is enlivening since appreciative understanding of the Bodhisattva’s ideal of absolute generosity through the Boonpravet story and generous sharing of a part of the harvest as in Boonkumkhaoyai give rise to an attitude of endurance, sharing and priority of others’ need even in the face of personal hardships in life. The attitude of endurance and tolerance beget patience and forbearance. Participation in both the ceremonies is a merit-making act that involves direct contribution towards social welfare giving rise to radicalization of sincerity – sincerity to the act of merit-making, to the age-old traditions and to the

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especially the concept of non-substantiality (*anattā*). This temple has become a ‘haven’ for a section of ultramodern and affluent Thais who would prefer to go for an illusionary crystal ball meditation technique rather than make a sincere effort to understand and practice along the Three-fold training (*tisikkha*) in the true sense.

<sup>11</sup> A makeshift toy tree made of straw with many branches into which devotees needle in bamboo pins stuck with currency notes.



propagation of Buddhism not only for the good of oneself but also for others. Both the ceremonies involve collective undertaking that unites all participants giving rise to social harmony and solidarity. Mutual interdependence and harmonious co-existence are acknowledged and put into practice through the organization of the ceremonies. Thus the concept of 'my/mine' gets reduced when people take part in such community and collective welfare-based ceremonies. The desire to donate unmilled rice to form the giant paddy heap emerges from the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion and when the effort is seen to directly contribute to social and religious welfare it gives rise to empathetic joy. Participation in the ceremonies enhances the potentiality of accumulation of merits. Suppose one cannot see the result of such good actions directly, the preceding benefits in themselves can be regarded as the direct result of the meritorious act.

### **Conclusion:**

The various socio-ethical values that form the foundational base of Prapheni Heet Sibsong has strong impact on living out in day to day life the philosophy of the-self-for-the-other<sup>12</sup> by the Isan people in general. Through each of the ceremonies as incorporated in Prapheni Heet Sibsong, representation (for example, the heap of donated paddy) and conceptuality (the idea of generosity as a merit-making act) capture every aspect of meaning lived out in life wherein responsibility-for-the-other is being perpetually focused as the condition of possibility of all signification. Through the traditional enactment of each of the ceremonies innate capacities to be affected by the other is built up and the distance between myself and the other (whether the 'other' is an immediate reality as in the case of one's living kith and kin, someone from one's community, someone still alive but unacquainted with; or a distant absent-presence as in the case of a deceased relative or ancestors) is perpetually merged.

The traditional acts and activities of Prapheni Heet Sibsong run parallel to many teachings in the Tipitaka that recognize the self's relational dutiful recognition and ethical-behavior orientation towards the 'other', through for instance, the emphasis on development of all-encompassing loving-kindness (*mettā*) in the *Mettā Sutta*. For the ASEAN community to exist in harmony and mutual respect, the revitalization of this philosophical stance so well manifested through Prapheni Heet Sibsong is not only beneficial in the short term but also indispensable in the long run for giving rise to true understanding, harmonious co-existence, and solidarity, especially because the ten member countries are a melting-pot where diverse socio-cultural and religious elements perpetually merge and re-merge.

Keeping in view the fact that the realization of the slogan of 'unity in diversity' and the ideal of 'one vision, one identity and one community' of ASEAN is not an easy endeavor, in this paper we have taken note of the full-blown manifestation of the philosophy of ethical commitment to the 'Other' as manifested through Prapheni Heet Sibsong and hope that by highlighting the richness embedded in a marginalized cultural context we can bring to possibility, however hypothetical, its universal applicability in the greater context of the ASEAN community as a whole.

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<sup>12</sup> The philosophy of ethical commitment to the 'Other' is deeply embedded in the Buddhist way of life although in the context of Western philosophy it has only recently gained prominence through the theological justification and ethicization of the concept in the writings of Levinas.

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