

# MERIT-SEEKING IN PUBLIC : BUDDHIST PILGRIMAGE IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

by

James B. Pruess\*

A pilgrimage is a journey which is undertaken for the ostensible purpose of seeking a direct experience of ultimate reality at a sacred place. This experience and its associated ritual are understood by the participant to result in specific or generalised benefits. Pilgrimage, as a socio-cultural phenomenon found in many cultural traditions through the centuries, has recently received attention by anthropologists and other scholars.<sup>2</sup> This article will focus upon pilgrimage to a particular sacred place in contemporary Theravada Buddhist Thailand. During the description of the sacred place and the groups who administer, support, and use it as a center for their devotions, attention will necessarily be directed to the origins of Theravada Buddhist pilgrimage, its nature as a form of religious action in the Thai Buddhist tradition, the rituals performed by and benefits for pilgrims as they make contact with the sacred, and the character of pilgrimage as a patterned movement of devotees from home to sacred place. In addition, it will be argued that pilgrimage in Theravada Buddhist Thailand, while centered upon an individual experience of the sacred, reinforces meaningful religious concepts and social norms that are shared by the community of believers.

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\* B.A. University of Iowa; M.A., Ph.D. University of Washington. Field research in Thailand (1971-1972) concerned with Buddhist pilgrimage centers. Presently lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle.

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- 2) Bharati (1963, 1970), Bhardwaj (1973), Gombrich (1971 : 108-112), Gross (1971), Karve (1962), Obeyesekere (1966), Turner (1973), Vidyarthi (1961), Vredembregt (1962).

The sacred place chosen for attention in this article is the Shrine of the That Phanom Relic (Wat Phra That Phanom), situated on the west bank of the Mekhong River in northeastern Thailand. This shrine is the most well-known and well-attended pilgrimage center not only for this region<sup>3</sup> but for parts of neighboring Laos as well. It should be emphasized that the statements and conclusions about pilgrimage at Wat Phra That Phanom are applicable to other Buddhist sacred places in Thailand, except when otherwise noted. Local or regional differences in the content of ritual at sacred places, or the nature of the ritual cycle itself, will not be examined here.

### I. Pilgrimage and the Sacred

Sanctity may be identified with a wholly convincing truthfulness attributed by believers to an empirically unverifiable set of conceptions about the nature of existence which, to them comprises ultimate reality or (in Geertz's term) the "really real" (1966 : 28). This ultimate reality is the model and the setting for believers to interpret their experience and formulate appropriate patterns of conduct. According to Geertz (*ibid.* : 3-4, 28-35), both a coherent world view and an approved way of life are rendered reasonable and convincing by religious symbols which refer to the design of ultimate reality and whose meanings become activated for believers in the context of ritual action. The faithful impart unquestioned truthfulness not only to the conceptions of ultimate reality and its symbols, but also to those dimensions of physical space which are associated with meaningful symbols and which are proper settings for valued religious actions.

The Theravada Buddhist conception of ultimate reality is a view of the universe as impermanent, insubstantial, and conditioned by the intrinsic cause-and-effect principle referred to in Pali (the sacred language of the tradition) as *kamma* (Thai: *kam*). This principle states that

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3) The "northeastern region" (*phāk isām*: the term refers to an administrative grouping of provinces, rather than a strictly ethnic or geographic entity) is the area between the Phetchabun Range and the Mekhong River which, until the late 19th century, comprised a number of semi-autonomous Lao principalities, and whose inhabitants are still mainly ethnic Lao.

actions in the present are conditions which bring about future consequences. Actions defined as morally appropriate will produce favorable consequences for the actor, whereas morally inappropriate ones yield unfavorable results. An endless round of existences may be required for these actions to bear fruit, during which time additional volitional acts are committed that engender still further chains of consequences. The actor is thus enmeshed in an unending cycle of birth, growth, decay, dissolution, and rebirth which is activated by human craving and the illusion of an individual self.

This state of existence underscores the phenomenal, empirical world in which the individual Buddhist is immersed (Kirsch 1967: 127-128). The Buddhist devotee attempts to reach the plane of ultimate reality through the performance of religious actions. According to Buddhist doctrine, the painful cycle of successive existences, activated through individual "thirst," can be transcended in the state of salvation referred to in Pali as *nibbāna* (Thai: *niphān*). Salvation is to be achieved not merely in the observance of moral precepts and the performance of good works, but through the practice of meditation, the cultivation of mental discipline wherein insight is obtained into one's mental states and the nature of existence. The meditation practices of the monkhood form one class of religious actions directed toward the penetration of ultimate reality and the realization of individual salvation. However, for many contemporary Thai laity and clergy, *nibbāna*, while an important religious value, remains a remote objective to be achieved in a future existence. The religious actions of these believers are oriented toward the reduction of suffering rather than its elimination (cf. Spiro 1970: Chapters 2-5). They hope for a blissful future existence, as well as emotional and material well-being in the present life. These orientations are expressed in the performance of religious actions which (like the meditation practices) bring the devotee into contact with the principle of cause-and-effect that animates the plane of ultimate reality. The lever which facilitates this contact is the acquisition of merit (*dai bun*), or the "making of merit" (*tham bun*).

Merit is that quality which results from the performance of appropriate actions and the cultivation of appropriate states of mind. The

results assume the nature of intangible assets which influence the outcome of an individual's future state or condition. Demerit (*bāp*) results from inappropriate actions and states of mind. The balance of merit and demerit accruing to any individual eventually works itself out in the future circumstances of the individual according to the immutable principle of *kamma*.

Since merit is conceptualized by devotees as diffuse, intangible, and indeterminate, the results from meritorious deeds are less specific than the kinds of deeds themselves. Merit may thus be equated with well-being and satisfaction. Merit is quantifiable only in terms<sup>1</sup> of the nature and frequency of meritorious actions, which may be reckoned in order to calculate the probable merit to be received. The consequences of merit are indeterminate, in that the timing and appearance of beneficial results cannot be determined in advance by the performer of meritorious actions. Finally, merit can be shared with or transferred to others.

One form of merit-making is the act of veneration (*namatsakān*), the expression of devout recognition and commemoration of meaningful symbols in the religious tradition. Many rituals and ceremonies in Theravada Buddhist Thailand begin with the recitation of a Pali chant expressing veneration of the Three Gems: the Buddha (the teacher), the Dhamma (the religious truths which the Buddha taught), and the Sangha (the community of monks which transmits and best realizes the Buddha's teachings). As will be seen below, veneration may also be directed toward sacred objects such as Buddha-images or Buddha-relics. In all cases, the performance of veneration promotes the devotee's access to the merit-power stored in those objects to be venerated, a force which is believed to effect favorable benefits for the devotee.

In Theravada Buddhist Thailand, there are two expressions used to denote the concept of pilgrimage: *kānpainamatsakān* ("going forth to bow the head in veneration") and *kānpaisawaengbun* ("going forth in search of merit). From the latter expression (which is more commonly used in every-day speech) is derived the term which denotes the pilgrim as "a person who seeks merit" (*phūsawaengbun*). Pilgrimage, as merit-

seeking, is a religious action which provides access to merit and is viewed by believers as meritorious in itself. This merit pervades sacred sites at which are found certain symbolic representations of the Buddha, the teacher and model for the transcendence of ultimate reality. The local village or urban temple-monastery (the customary center for religious action oriented toward images of the Buddha and representatives of the Sangha) is one sacred domain for the faithful. However, those sacred places in Thailand which attract merit-seeking journeys are those at which objects directly associated with the Buddha have been established and/or at which the Buddha himself is believed to have made an actual visit during his lifetime. The following section will focus upon the character of one such sacred site in northeastern Thailand.

## II. The Qualities of a Sacred Place

The sacred object at Wat Phra That Phanom is an alleged "breast-bone relic" of the Buddha which has been installed within the base of a towering brick-and-stucco structure and thus not visible to the eyes of the faithful. Before considering the circumstances of this object's appearance at this spot near the Mekhong, attention must be given to the origins of Buddhist sacred places in general, and the sanctions for pilgrimage in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, which are attributed to the Buddha himself.

The *Mahā Parinibbāna Suttānta* (one of the texts of the *Sutta-Pitaka*) is concerned with the final days of the Buddha's life. Shortly before his demise, the Buddha enumerated to his disciple Ananda the four places which could be visited by devout believers: (1) the birthplace of the Buddha; (2) the place where the Buddha achieved Enlightenment (*nibbāna*); (3) the place where the Buddha preached his first sermon; (4) the place where the Buddha passed away (*parī-nibbāna*) (*Maha-Parī.Sut.* : V, 16-20). Devotees who die while journeying to any of these places are assured rebirth in the heavenly realms (*ibid.* ; V, 21-22).

In addition to four specific geographic locations, each identified with a significant event, the Buddha mentioned certain structures which could serve as objects of pilgrimage. In response to a question from Ananda concerning the disposal of the Buddha's remains after cremation,

the Buddha replied that they should be treated in the same manner as those of a "wheel-turning universal monarch," that is, wrapping the body in a certain fashion and burning it on a pyre, then erecting a mound or tumulus (*dāgaba*) to enclose the remains. Showing devotion to this repository, or honoring it with "garlands and perfumes" would bring joy and calmness of heart to devout believers, as well as facilitate rebirth in the heavens (*ibid.*: V, 24-26, 28).

While these words are attributed to the Buddha himself, the canonical scriptures, including the *Mahā-Parinibbāna Suttānta*, were the products of an oral tradition and did not appear in written form until several centuries after the Buddha's demise. It is possible that, after his demise, the followers of the Buddha sought those places associated with major events in his life, viewing them as sacred memorials or "reminders" of his earthly existence. This establishment of a hagiographic domain was a feature of the Hindu tradition in India prior to the Buddha. Places that attracted Hindu pilgrims were associated either with mythological figures and events, or with the lives of charismatic individuals. These places may have been regarded by the faithful not only as "reminders" of such events and persons, but as sites replete with meritorious value and supernatural power, promising favorable benefits for devout visitors (Bharati 1963: 145-147). The sites associated with the Buddha were probably similarly viewed by his followers and the devotees of his teachings. A canonical text authorized, explained, and gave sanction to the practice of journeying to these places for devotional purposes.

According to the *Mahā-Parinibbāna Suttānta* (VI, 51-62), the Buddha's remains were divided into eight parts and distributed to various rulers for enshrinement after the cremation. However, during the reign of the Buddhist convert Ashoka (274-236 B.C.; Buddhist Era 286-324), the construction and veneration of these repositories became popular, as part of a proliferation of Buddhist sacred objects in general. These developments accompanied changes in emphasis within the Buddhist tradition and its spread throughout the Indian subcontinent and into other parts of Asia. The monastic order accommodated itself more readily during this period to the religious needs of the laity; rather than the quest for

salvation by the world-renouncing monk, monastic teachings began to stress the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth, and the means by which the objectives of the laity (emotional well-being, favorable rebirth) could be realized (Conze 1951: 85-88). The establishment of sacred shrines and the phenomenon which Max Weber has called "the cult of relics" were seemingly designed to satisfy the devotional needs of the laity. Under the enthusiastic auspices of King Ashoka, Buddhist missions were sent throughout Asia, the seeds of devout Buddhist belief took root, and the resulting Buddhist communities required symbolic objects partaking of the truthfulness of their newly-acquired conception of reality for devotional purposes. A number of symbolic Buddhist objects were the means by which plots of ground in the mission territories became sanctified. These objects included the alleged relics of the Buddha (the term "relic" here will refer *only* to the parts of the physical Buddha-person remaining on the pyre after the cremation) and their repositories (*stupa*), the Buddha's personal belongings, the alleged "descendants" (saplings or seeds) of the Bo tree (*Ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, "Buddha's footprints" (impressions in rock surfaces), "Buddha's shadows" (outlines of the Buddha-person on rock walls inside caves or on hill-sides), Pali inscriptions proclaiming the Four Noble Truths, seats upon which the Buddha supposedly preached sermons, and (by the 1st century A.D.) sculpted images of the Buddha. With the exception of the personal belongings, examples of the above items have been discovered and can still be seen in Thailand.

The sacred places created by the enshrinement of these objects were perhaps symbolic substitutes for the four holy places of pilgrimage mentioned in the *Māha-Parinibbāna Suttānta*, in that they met the needs of devotees who resided at too great a distance from the originals. The Thai scholar, Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, suggested that the Pali inscriptions of the Buddha's words and the establishment of four additional sites associated with "miraculous events" in the Buddha's life appear to fulfill the same function (1926: 11, 35-36). The objects were symbolic because they could be viewed by devotees as "standing for" the Buddha, either directly (the relic as a remnant of the Buddha-person, the footprint as an impress of it) or indirectly (objects used by or in connection with

the Buddha). In addition, the sacred objects are symbolically linked to those places at which important events in the Buddha's life occurred. The birthplace of the Buddha becomes symbolized by the footprint, as a sign that the Buddha has "set foot" in this world; according to canonical hagiography, he is said to have taken seven steps in the direction of the north after his birth (cf. *Majjhimanikaya: Acchariyabhutadhama-Sutta*). The place where the Buddha achieved *nibbāna* becomes symbolized by the Bo tree under which he sat. The place where the Buddha preached the first sermon ("taming the Wheel of the Law") finds symbolic expression in the inscriptions or images of the wheel. The place where the Buddha passed away is represented by the *stupa* which was intended to enclose his remains.

To summarize, the four sacred places were originally established as "reminders" or memorials marking events in the Buddha's life. The diffusion of the faith into other areas and its contact with new devotees necessitated the foundation of additional sites which became sanctified by relics and other symbols of the Buddha. These sites may have taken on particular importance for devotees within journeying distance; as Rahula has stated for Sri Lanka, "Toe relics of the Buddha were regarded as representing the Buddha himself, and their enshrinement was as good as Buddha's residence in Lanka" (1956: 58). In Thailand, myths appeared which attributed the spread of the Buddha's teaching and the presence of sacred objects at various sites to the actual visits of the Buddha himself during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup> One such myth, presented in the *Extraordinary History of the That Phanom Breast-bone Relic (Urangkhanithān: Tamnān Phra Thāt Phanom Phitsadān)*,<sup>5</sup> "explains" the presence of the relic at Wat Phra That Phanom in northeastern Thailand, to which we now turn our attention.

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- 4) Not all sacred objects have their presence explained in this fashion. For example, only ten out of eighteen relic-shrines established over 200 years ago in north Thailand have myths which explain the existence of relics in connection with visits by the Buddha. The other relics appeared through King Ashoka's emissaries, or rulers or monks from other localities (cf. Sanguan 1965).
- 5) This work is a Lao text, recorded on palm-leaf manuscript (*bai-lān*). The version of this text (with commentary) in modern Thai is the source for the material in this section, and will be cited as *UT*.



In the myth, the Buddha and his disciple Ananda are said to have made an extended visit to a number of places in what is now northeastern Thailand and Laos. The goal of this airborne journey was a hill or knoll located in the kingdom of Sri Khotabun. In former times, this knoll had been the repository for relics of the three Buddhas (Kakusandha, Kona-gamana, Kassapa) who preceded the Buddha (Gautama) of the present era. Indra, the chief of the deities, informed the Buddha Gautama that the enshrinement of Buddha-relics at this site was a "custom" to be observed with regard to all "Enlightened Ones" (*UT*: 12). Upon arrival at the spot, the Buddha received alms from the ruler of Sri Khotabun and prophesied that the Buddhist religion would prosper throughout the region in the future. He promised that, after his demise, a "breast-bone relic" (*thāt hua ok*) would be brought from India to be established at the knoll as an object of veneration for both gods and human devotees (*ibid.*:11-14).

Upon returning to India, the Buddha entrusted one of his disciples, Kassapa, with the task of taking the relic to Sri Khotabun. At the cremation, the flames did not begin to consume the Buddha's corpse until the "breast-bone relic" had emerged from the coffin to hover above Kassapa's right palm. Kassapa and five hundred *arahants* ("enlightened ones") ascended into the air and transported the Buddha-relic to Sri Khotabun (*ibid.*: 21-22).

The expedition was met by the ruler of the kingdom (the younger brother of the king, now deceased, who had presented alms to the Buddha) and the lords of four other principalities whose territories extended from northern Cambodia to northwest Viet-Nam. Both rulers and monks proceeded with the construction of a repository in the shape of a kiln (*tau*) to enclose the Buddha-relic. The repository was built on top of the knoll. At its completion, the relic was installed within, along with gifts of wealth donated by the five rulers, who vowed to become devout Buddhists and to encourage the prosperity of the religion in their respective realms. Kassapa and the *arahants* returned to India, and the five rulers and their retinues departed also. Afterward, Indra and a host of subordinate deities descended from the heavens to venerate the relic and to decorate the repository with carved images of the five rulers and

their attendants (*ibid.* : 27-47), which can still be viewed at the present day.

Scholarly conjectures concerning the date of the original That Phanom repository range from the period of the early Khmer empire of Funan (*ca.* 1st-7th centuries A.D.) (*ibid.* : 3) to sometime during the 10th century A.D. (Boisselier, quoted in Damrong 1926 : 168 fn. 1). Several local monk-informants claimed that the structure was built eight years after the Buddha's demise (*ca.* 488 B.C.). In the centuries after its construction, the original structure in the shape of a kiln was subject to renovation and alteration. At the present day, the sacred *stupa* on the "knoll" (a plot of ground only 2½ meters higher than the surrounding area) is in the form typical for Buddhist relic-monuments in northeastern Thailand and Laos: a rectilinear tower whose various levels decrease in girth from the base, tapering upward to culminate in a jutting spire. The structure is made of brick, with a gleaming white stucco surface embellished with gold leaf designs that feature stylized representations of a Bo tree. The tower, soaring to a height of 57 meters, dominates the small Mekhong River town in which it is situated, as well as the flat countryside to the west of the river. According to the myth, this structure marks the site actually visited by the Buddha. As the repository for a Buddhist "reminder," it attracts numerous pilgrims from various parts of Thailand and Laos. Before considering the ritual performances of these pilgrims, brief attention must be given to the social setting of the sacred place.

The site is not only a pilgrimage center, but (as with most such centers in Thailand) is also a temple-monastery (*wat*). Hence its name, "Wat Phra That Phanom," "the Temple-Monastery of the Sacred Relic (or Reliquary) on the Hill" (Khmer *phnom*="hill"). The shrine "history" does not state when a monastic community was first established at the sacred place. After the first restoration of the *stupa* (at an unspecified date), three thousand individuals were designated as shrine attendants (*khā phra*) by the ruler of the local principality; they received clothing, implements, oxen, and land upon which to settle and establish seven villages (*UT*: 68-69). Their primary duties seem to have been the care

and upkeep of the sacred structure, the cultivation of shrine lands, and (perhaps) the provision of the harvested produce for a resident monastic community. In return, they were exempt from corvée duty and the payment of tax or tribute to the ruler (*ibid.*: 68, 79). Over the years, intermittent warfare in the region scattered these people into the forests, necessitating repeated royal grants of land and attendants. Aymonier, who visited the shrine in 1884, reported that there were two thousand attendants who (during five-hour shifts) guarded the compound, looked after repairs, venerated the Buddha-relic, and made offering of rice and other foodstuffs (1895: 236). During the early decades of the 20th century, the Lao territories bordering the Mekhong River (which had been conquered by the Siamese in the previous century) fell under increasingly centralized control from the capital at Bangkok; local principalities became administrative districts and provinces, while previously semi-autonomous local elites were transformed into Siamese government civil servants. In addition, with the abolition of "slavery," the support of the sacred place by rural agriculturalists became a matter of voluntary devotion rather than a royally-decreed obligation as attendants. The construction and repair of structures in the shrine precincts were likely to be undertaken by laborers who worked for wages. Funds to cover the costs of labor and materials were derived from donations by devotees and from government ministries with specific annual budgets. Finally, the resident monks and novices at the shrine were brought under the supervision and control of a centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy based in the capital at Bangkok.

The shrine of Wat Phra That Phanom is a temple-monastery, since its compound features a number of physical structures whose functions are related to the devotions of clergy and a local lay congregation (temple), or to the requirements of a community of monks (monastery). The spatial features of the compound may be viewed in terms of a division into two domains or areas, perceived by Thai informants and writers of shrine guide-books. The "Buddha's domain" (*phutthawāt*; Pali *vāsa*: abode, habitation) centers upon the reliquary; the "Sangha's domain" (*sangkhāwāt*; Pali *āvāsa*: monastery) comprises the dormitories, classrooms, and kitchen facilities used by or for the resident monks and

novices. Two structures can be described as ritual intersections for the two domains: the temple meeting-hall (*wihān*), where monks and laity join together in religious devotions, and the ordination hall (*bōi*), where monks perform ordinations and engage in the monthly recitation of the *Patimokkha* (rules of monastic discipline). Images of the Buddha are located in both of these buildings. The "Buddha's domain" occupies the central area of the compound, with the "Sangha's domain" gathered around the periphery.

The distinction between the two domains is pertinent with regard to matters of administration and finance. The abbot of the shrine is in charge of affairs in both domains. However, decisions concerning the activities of monks and novices are made on the basis of regulations and directives emanating from higher monastic authorities (ultimately the ecclesiastic Executive Board of Elders in Bangkok), whereas decisions concerning the "Buddha's domain" will also involve consultation with government officials of the Department of Religious Affairs in the Ministry of Education, and sometimes officials of the Fine Arts Department (concerning the restoration of structures in the shrine compound). In general, funds for the repair and construction of monks' dormitories and classroom buildings, as well as for religious education and provision of food, will be obtained from the local congregation and other merit-makers in the locality; in addition to these local sources, funds for the upkeep of structures in the "Buddha's domain" are derived from pilgrims and the national government. Since 1950, Wat Phra That Phanom has been officially designated a "royal temple" (*wat luang*), which entitles it to financial assistance from the government treasury, and gives it a high status rank in the national hierarchy of temple-monasteries.

In 1972, there were 35 monks and 41 novices officially residing at Wat Phra That Phanom. In addition, ten temple boys (youngsters who receive instruction from the monks and attend them as servants) and 22 "nuns" (*chī*: "white-robed female lay followers") formed part of the temple community. The activities of monks and novices here differ little from those of their fellows elsewhere in Thailand: study, meditation, leisure, ritual interaction with local laity. One elderly monk, however,

is stationed daily near the courtyard of the *stupa*, in order to assist pilgrims in their devotions (see below). During the annual shrine festival, when hundreds of merit-seekers inundate the precincts, all monks and novices provide services to the pilgrims or assist in the administration of the various activities.

The town of That Phanom takes its name from the shrine located in its midst. This riverside community of around 7,000 inhabitants is an administrative and marketing center for an agricultural district. A small lumber mill and a jute-processing plant are the town's sole industries. During the research period (1971-1972), there was some small-scale trade in foodstuffs with Lao villages on the other side of the Mekhong. The relationship between the inhabitants of the community and the shrine is somewhat stronger in the sacred realm than in the secular, as Wat Phra That Phanom is the only temple-monastery for the municipality. Many residents comprise the local congregation: persons who provide food for the monks and novices, who request participation of resident monks in life-cycle rituals, who send their sons to receive instruction and be ordained, and who form the body of devotees on all ceremonial occasions. The religiosity of the largely Theravada Buddhist townspeople finds its chief expression with regard to the shrine, its sacred object, and the resident monks. In contrast to the situation described by Gross (1971: 132) for the Brazilian shrine town of Bom Jesus de Lapa, a large proportion of the inhabitants of That Phanom town derive most of their income from activities *not* connected with pilgrimage, although *some* of these people may take advantage of the annual festival and the influx of pilgrims to augment their incomes. For example, local residents may rent portions of their property as parking-lots or pilgrim lodgings; women from villages in the area become temporary vendors of garden produce, while their husbands prepare concoctions of herb tea sold by the glass to pilgrims. Nevertheless, That Phanom is not a "pilgrimage-specialized" community to the extent of Bom Jesus de Lapa or Lourdes. Likewise, pilgrimage has not significantly contributed to the population growth and economic development of this community.

#### IV. Contact with the Sacred

The shrine at That Phanom is a place where the Buddha is believed to have made an appearance during his lifetime and at which a token of this visit, a portion of his physical person, is allegedly preserved. According to the tradition propounded by world-renouncing monks, these tokens are imperfect symbols of the "Buddha-essence": the concentrated spiritual force of a Being who transcended the cycle of birth and rebirth, desire and suffering (Conze 1951 : 80; Obeyesekere 1966 : 8). Since the Buddha is the historical model for this achievement, veneration of his relics is a highly meritorious action which promotes in the devotee "a mental disposition favorable to spiritual progress" (Conze 1951 : *op. cit.*), contributing to an auspicious rebirth. However, the relics of the Buddha, in all Theravada Buddhist societies, have been treated as representations of the Buddha which share his supernatural powers. As adamantine remnants of the Buddha's physical person, the relics have been attributed with certain magical characteristics, such as the ability to fly through the air and emit rays of light. References to demonstrations of these qualities occur frequently in Thai myths and legends, and "sightings" by devotees still take place at the present day. The That Phanom shrine "history" indicates that the "breastbone relic" exhibited these characteristics at the time of its installation, and during subsequent restorations of the *stupa* (UT : 22, 32-33, 45-46, 68). These "miracles" (*patihān*) are ordinarily interpreted as portents or auspicious signs concerning the future well-being of the persons who view them and/or the places where they occur.

The That Phanom Buddha-relic is thus a symbol of the "Buddha-essence," a representation of the Buddha, and an object possessing supernatural power. One can say that the function of a devotee's ritual interaction with the sacred object is to resolve the discrepancy between the "cognitive fact" of the Buddha's absence (i.e., no longer subject to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) and the affective belief in the Buddha's immanence in the object, a belief which guides ritual behavior with reference to valued religious goals (cf. Gombrich 1971 : 105; Obeyesekere 1966 : 8-9). Ritual behavior is undertaken in order to

acquire merit, and to tap the power residing in the object for the solution of specific individual concerns. The focus for these actions is the *stupa* that encloses the relic; linguistically, both relic and repository are denoted by the same term, "*phra thāt*," which can be glossed as "sacred relic" (Pali *dhātu* : "elementary particle") or "sacred reliquary". It should be noted that, while familiarity with the That Phanom myth was limited to resident clergy and interested local laity, the present author did not encounter any Buddhist pilgrim from the northeastern region who doubted the existence of a Buddha-relic within the *stupa* or the belief that the Buddha himself was somehow associated with the spot. The site as a sacred place appears to retain its aura of truthfulness for the majority of devotees.

Pilgrims at the sacred place may perform a number of appropriate meritorious actions: salutation of the sacred object, presentation of offerings, cash donations, recitation of prayers, clockwise circumambulation of the sacred object, and (less frequently) recitation of sacred texts, singing of devotional hymns, and meditation. The most frequently performed act of veneration (which takes place in the courtyard surrounding the *stupa*) involves prostration while facing the *stupa*, and the offering of flowers, candles, joss-sticks, and gold leaf. Prayers of a commemorative or propitiatory nature may be included in the devotions. In addition, there are standardized Pali words of veneration (*kham namat-sakān*) which are recited aloud by groups of pilgrims rather than individuals. These words (which have been in use, according to informants, "since ancient times") are as follows:

*"Purimāya disāya kaponakhirisamiṃ pabbate mahākassapēna dāpitam  
buddha-urangadhātum siraasā namāmi."*

("From the direction of the east, I respectfully venerate the breast-bone relic of the Buddha with Kassapa established at the hill of Kaphonakhiri.")

This phrase is repeated with regard to each of the other three cardinal directions (in clockwise order: south, west, and north). It is then repeated with regard to "above" and "below," thus making a total of six repetitions of the statement. (However, recitation of the statement

for zenith and nadir is often omitted by pilgrims.) The recitation ends with words directed to the top of the repository (*kham wai yāūt*):

*“Sēchatam suvanarachatam ratanaṃ ponitaṃ buddha-urangacetiyaṃ  
ahaṃ vanatami sapaṭā.”*

(“I worship the beautiful, finely-wrought top of the memorial of the breast-bone relic of the Buddha, jewel of delicate precision.”)

These Pali phrases (in Thai script) are emblazoned on signs attached to each of the four sides of the stone wall which separates the *stupa* from devotees. The signs are intended to serve as reminders and visual aids, since the phrases do not form part of the stock of ritual knowledge held by the majority of Thai-Lao Theravada Buddhists. These words of veneration are more frequently recited by pilgrims from the immediate locality, and their use is not regarded as essential.<sup>6</sup>

Bodily suffering or disfigurement is conspicuously absent from ritual at the That Phanom shrine. A nineteenth-century French visitor to the shrine was amazed to observe the amputation of the tips of the forefingers, which he claimed were “offered to the Buddha” by devotees (de Carné 1872: 133). However, present-day informants express their amazement at the very possibility of such actions, which were rejected by the Buddha himself. Penance for the expiation of sin (which may underlie “rites of mortification” at Christian shrines) is absent from the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Furthermore, the morbid nature of these actions runs counter to the pleasurable connotation of pilgrimage journeys.

The act of veneration brings the devotee into direct contact with the merit-power emanating from the sacred object. Merit is acquired through the presentation of cash offerings and gifts. Several collection boxes are located in the courtyard and inside the temple meeting-hall. Small amounts of cash are deposited into one or more of these boxes by pilgrims before leaving the shrine precincts. According to a sample of individual contributions recorded in the shrine registration book

6) Standardized Pali words of veneration (from the four cardinal directions) are found in use only at sacred places in northeastern Thailand and Laos.



during December 1971, the amounts of cash donated ranged from 1 *baht* (U.S. 5 cents) to 100 *baht* (U.S. \$5), with the majority of devotees donating between 1 and 10 *baht*. These donations are used to cover the expenses for the upkeep of the shrine; the collection boxes are opened and the contents removed by the lay custodians at the end of each month. Cash may be presented to the shrine by a group of pilgrims. The sum, collected prior to the pilgrimage, comprises the total contributions of the individual members of the group. These donations sometimes accompany the presentation of monks' requisites and other items, in which case the donation is made in the form of an artificial "tree" of bamboo and twisted cotton thread which is decked with banknotes of various denominations. According to a sample of 50 group contributions recorded during the shrine festival of 1972, the amounts ranged from 10 *baht* (59 cents) up to 327 *baht* (around \$16.35), with the most frequent donations between 100 and 150 *baht* (\$5-\$7). These donations are also used for maintenance of the shrine.

Monks' requisites (including both robes and other articles used by monks) are presented by members of a family or large groups of devotees at the shrine. These presentations are not limited to pilgrimage. However, the ceremony at Wat Phra That Phanom includes an adaptation of the meritorious act of giving which differentiates it from similar acts at local village temple-monasteries. The ceremony usually involves the active participation of a monk or layman who represents his group of pilgrims and a monk who represents the shrine. It takes place in the courtyard directly in front of the *stupa*. Most of the ceremonial presentations observed at Wat Phra That Phanom included the following recitations, divided into phrases uttered by the monk or lay leader and repeated in unison by the members of the group :

- (a) Veneration of the Three Gems (in Pali).
- (b) Veneration of the Buddha, which consists of the Pali formula, "*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhasa*" ("Veneration to the Blessed *Arahant*, the Fully Enlightened One"), uttered three times.
- (c) Veneration of the That Phanom Buddha-relic (in Pali).

- (d) Three Refuges (in Pali: "I seek refuge in the Buddha,—in the Dhamma,—in the Sangha").
- (e) Five Precepts (in Pali). These are formally requested (in a stock Pali formula) by the leader of the group, and are "presented" by the shrine monk to the group, who repeat them in unison: "I undertake to abstain from taking life,—from taking what is not given,—from going wrong in sensual matters,—from falsehood,—from intoxicants which cloud the mind."
- (f) Recitation acknowledging the presentation of gifts.

The last (in Thai, not Pali) is uttered by the shrine monk who accepts the gifts, and repeated in unison by the pilgrims. The words are translated as follows: "We respectfully present these monks' robes with all our services to the relic of the Buddha; may the relic of the Buddha receive these monks' robes which we have presented, so that advantage and bliss may accrue to all of us forever." The recitation is similar to that used when presenting requisites to monks and novices at a monastery, except that the expression "*phraboromathā*" ("exalted-relic") is substituted for "*phra phiksu song*" ("monks") as the recipient of the donated items. While the resident monks and novices at the shrine are indeed the recipients who will make use of these items, during the ritual presentation it is the Buddha-relic (as a symbol of the Buddha) which is understood to "receive" these items so that advantageous well-being (as merit) will be conferred upon the donors. It is as if the ceremony were a re-enactment of the Buddha's original visit in the myth, a return to the site to receive the devotions and gifts of present-day merit-seekers.<sup>7</sup>

In many instances, the act of giving offers the donor an opportunity to display certain elements of the merit-making performance. The monks'

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7) At several shrines in north Thailand, offerings of fruit and rice-cakes are presented to the Buddha-relic on certain specified occasions. These ritual offerings are prepared and presented by members of the local congregations, not by pilgrims. For a description of one such ceremony, see Pruess (1974 : 98-100). Occasionally, fruit, glutinous rice, condensed milk, etc., may be included among offerings presented at Wat Phra That Phanom, but these items are never expressly intended during the ritual as gifts to the "breast-bone relic."

requisites heaped on trays in the courtyard, the "money-trees" garnished with banknotes, seem designed for maximum visibility by others at the shrine. Some pilgrim groups from villages in the immediate locality transport their gifts to the shrine in a large, noisy procession of villagers, some of whom carry drums and cymbals. During the annual festival, pilgrims who did not bring monks' requisites with them were provided with these items by the shrine. The pilgrims, after a cash donation, received as many of these items (robes, fans, "money-trees") as they could carry. Musicians hired by the shrine then accompanied the pilgrims in a single clockwise circuit of the shrine compound. The procession stopped in the courtyard, where the items were "presented" to the relic in the ceremony described above. After the ceremony was completed, school-children picked up the requisites and returned them to the stall for "recycling" among successive groups of pilgrims. During one day of the 1972 festival (29 January), between 5.30 a.m. and 6 p.m., 638 pilgrim groups took advantage of this service offered to them by the shrine, an opportunity to display publicly their merit-making and to demonstrate to others their status as good Buddhists.

Of lesser importance in the repertory of performances at the shrine are those acts which draw upon the merit-power of the sacred place to bring about specific benefits in this existence, rather than to guarantee rebirth into a blissful future state. Pilgrims may make a request and promise an offering or an act of veneration if the request is successfully granted (the vow is referred to in Thai as "*bon bān*"). The results are contingent upon both the fulfillment of the vow and the correct meritorious behavior of the devotee (such as observance of the Five Precepts). During the research period, only about 15% of the sample groups were concerned with this type of activity; their requests for aid centered upon recovery from illness, guarantee of safety during an up-coming journey or change of residence, and successful childbirth. Monks at the shrine felt that these requests should be directed to the guardian deity of the sacred place, a seven-headed serpent (*nāga*) deity who, in 1957, made its presence known by entering the body of a novice and communicating its intentions to the abbot (*UT*: 116-117). Nevertheless, a guidebook prepared by That Phanom monks advises pilgrims who desire offspring to request assistance from the relic ("*khāu kap phraboromathāt*"), and this

conception was emphasized in the ritual of pilgrims who made various requests. The making of vows and requests seems to be guided by the affective belief in the Buddha's immanence in the sacred object, attributing it with a power which can be tapped through the mechanism of the vow in order to bring about favorable solutions to specific problems.<sup>8</sup>

This power may also be condensed in the form of items which can be obtained and taken home by the pilgrim, as momentos of the pilgrimage and as guarantees of present and future well-being. These items include consecrated water (*nam mon*) and protective amulets. At the shrine, devotees may purchase bottles of consecrated water which has already been prepared by the monks. Tiny amounts of detritus from the *stupa* (bits of stone which are scraped off the surface) are mixed with ordinary tapwater which is further consecrated by means of auspicious Pali chants (*mantra*; *Thai mon*) uttered by monks who drip wax from burning candles into the liquid. It is used for medicinal purposes or during veneration of Buddha-images at home.

Small votive tablets bearing images of the Buddha are also produced by monk-artisans at the shrine; bits of detritus from the *stupa* are among the ingredients of these objects. They are available at the shrine sales desk for pilgrims to purchase and wear as protective amulets hung around the neck. Photographs, medallions, tie-clasps, and pins bearing the image of the *stupa* are merely souvenirs which possess no magical powers.

To summarize, pilgrims express the objectives of their journey and its culminating ritual in terms of "making merit," through which they acquire "advantage," "bliss," "prosperity," ("*prayōt*," "*khwamsuk*," "*khwamcaroen*") or "protection from all dangers and disease" (as quoted from the "opinions" section of the shrine registration book). At the sacred place once visited by the Buddha, the pilgrim comes into proximity with the Buddha's meritorious power; performing the meritorious acts of veneration and giving brings about for the pilgrim a convergence

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8) Shrines associated with magically-powerful Buddha-images, territorial protective spirits (*lakmyang*), or Hindu deities may be visited for purposes of making such vows.

of the "really real" (the world as conditioned by *kamma*) and the world of everyday reality.

### V. The Merit-seekers

The movements of pilgrims to the That Phanom shrine reveal a range of variation between two dominant patterns: (a) the devotional journey between home residence and one specific shrine; (b) the general excursion to a number of places which includes both devotions and sight-seeing. In general, the former is practiced by a large group of pilgrims from a single village, located close to the shrine, which organizes itself annually for the purpose of making a joint donation to the shrine. The latter, for the most part, is performed by groups of urbanites or villagers whose visits to the shrine, infrequently or seldom undertaken, rarely involve specific group donations. For the former, ritual veneration of the sacred object at the shrine is usually performed by the entire group as a single ceremonial act; for the latter, the devotions are pursued singly (with no representative leading the entire group in worship), even though the members of the group may enter the shrine precincts together.

Geographic and temporal factors influence these patterns of pilgrim movement. For the most part, there are more journeys undertaken to the That Phanom shrine from villages in the district than from adjacent districts, provinces, and regions. The following figures (from the record of signatures in the shrine registration book between February 1971 and February 1972) on the regional distribution of pilgrims indicate that the majority of devotees at the shrine are inhabitants of the region in which it is located:

Table I. Regional distribution of pilgrims at Wat Phra That Phanom

|            |      |
|------------|------|
| Northeast: | 5155 |
| Central:   | 958  |
| North:     | 19   |
| South:     | 16   |
| TOTAL:     | 6148 |

The following cautionary remarks should be borne in mind with regard to these figures. First, because of the isolated location of the

registration book relative to the "flow of pilgrim traffic," these figures represent a small sample of the total number of visitors at the shrine for this period. (Over 80% of the groups contacted during the research period at That Phnom hailed from the provinces of the northeastern region or from Laos.) Second, the figures refer to place of residence rather than place of birth, so it is impossible to determine what proportion of pilgrims from other regions are native Northeasterners combining a pilgrimage with a return visit home. (No examples of this were encountered during interviews at the shrine during the research period.) The large number of citations from the central region (with 537 of these from the Bangkok-Thonburi municipality) perhaps reflects recent improvements in the road network and the promotion of tourism, which have contributed to the increase in combined merit-making and sight-seeing excursions, especially by middle- and upper-class townspeople in Thailand's largest urban center.

Most pilgrimages occur during the "pilgrimage season" (December through March), the dry season in the northeastern region, when little or no agricultural activity takes place. The least number of pilgrimages are undertaken during the period of the annual Buddhist "rains-retreat" (*phansa*) (July-September), which coincides with the height of the rainy season, the time of year when monks are generally restricted to their monasteries, agricultural activity is in full swing, and both weather and road conditions hamper convenient travel in rural areas away from the main highways.

Most pilgrimages of a localized nature (from villages, districts, or provinces adjacent to the shrine) occur during the period of the annual shrine festival (*ngān pracam pī*), which is scheduled between the tenth day of the waxing moon and the first day of the waning moon in the third lunar month. The penultimate day of the festival (the full-moon day of the third lunar month) corresponds, in the Lao Theravada Buddhist calendar, to the major Buddhist holiday of *Wan Mākha-būchā*, which commemorates the Buddha's miraculous meeting with 1,250 of his disciples. The festival can be described as a merit-making, merry-making, and money-making extravaganza, combining opportunities for

religious devotion with a substantial market complex and those amusements typical of fairs almost anywhere. The largest number of pilgrims assemble at the sacred place during this brief period. Unfortunately, there is no firm statistical evidence to support this statement: shrine authorities are interested in counting proceeds, not people. However, the estimated number of pilgrims attending the 1972 festival (23-31 January) was nearly 178,000, based on the number of sets of flowers, joss-sticks, candles, and gold leaf sold (one set per person) at stalls located at the entrances to the shrine compound during the seven-day period. This figure should be viewed as a general approximation rather than as an exact tally of the number of pilgrims.

For the most part, the majority of the pilgrimages from adjacent villages and districts at this time are undertaken on an annual basis. The closer a particular village is located to the shrine, the more likely will it be that its inhabitants undertake a pilgrimage each year during the period of the annual shrine festival. This journey will be in the form of a merit-making project in which cash donations and offerings of monks' requisites will be ritually presented to the shrine as a community gift.

Pilgrimages are also undertaken at the time of other major Buddhist holidays, and at the end of the Buddhist "rains-retreat," when merit-makers present robes to monks at Wat Phra That Phanom or other monasteries in the area.

The second dominant pattern referred to above is the pilgrimage-excursion, a journey to a particular region, with stops (scheduled and otherwise) at both sacred places and secular points of interest (water-falls, parks, etc.). These journeys usually take place during the dry season. In comparison with other parts of the country, there are few natural attractions or sacred places in northeastern Thailand in general (and the That Phanom vicinity in particular, unless one takes into account an unimpressive view of Laos across the wide flat expanse of the Mekhong). Nevertheless, groups of travelers from Bangkok and central Thailand do tour the northeastern region and include the That Phanom shrine on their itineraries. It should be noted here that Thai Buddhists do not make a distinction between "journey of piety" and "journey for pleasure." A

noted Thai scholar referred to pilgrimage as a "vacation—of a semi-religious nature" (Anuman Rajadhon 1961: 96). There are no deliberate austerities or penances associated with such journeys; over-crowded buses or trucks seemingly without springs are common modes of transport in northeastern Thailand. One informant stated that if people took a journey solely to make merit somewhere, then the trip would be no fun. However, if people went traveling purely for their own pleasure, with no planned stops at holy shrines, then merit would not be obtained (*bun bau hāū*; Central Thai: *bun mai thyng*). This viewpoint applies not only to the middle-class urban "tourist" but also to the villager who enters the shrine compound bearing a "money-tree" instead of a camera.

Pilgrimage is usually a group enterprise, with group size ranging from three or four up to four hundred and over. In general, with regard to pilgrimages undertaken annually by residents of the locality or region, the size of the group is proportional to the distance between residence and shrine. The closer the residence is located to the shrine, the larger the group of pilgrims, for the most part. The prevailing economic situation in villages located some distance from the shrine determines the degree of participation in the pilgrimage, as well as its occurrence on an annual basis. The expense involves a small cash donation and a contribution to the cost of hiring a truck or bus, in addition to money spent at the shrine itself. During the annual festival, this additional expense will be directed toward the purchase of amulets or consecrated water, donations in collection boxes, alms to beggars, or shopping and amusements. Villagers generally bring a supply of food with them (or at least packets of rice wrapped in banana leaf), although some meals may be taken at food-stalls set up in or near the shrine precincts. If an overnight stay at the shrine is required (such stays usually do not exceed two nights), villagers either occupy large pavilions provided by the shrine, or else sleep anywhere space is available in the compound. Even if it is not feasible for all villagers to undertake the journey (participation in pilgrimage being voluntary), the opportunity is available for them to contribute to the joint community donation which is presented to the monks or custodians at the shrine. In such cases, names and donations of all contributors may be recorded on sheets of paper which accompany the presentation of the



cash contribution. Villagers who do undertake the pilgrimage may purchase amulets or other souvenirs at the shrine to be distributed among those who remained at home, thus enabling the latter to possess tokens of their shared participation in the community merit-making enterprise. This practice is found mainly among villagers of the region, who go on pilgrimage annually or semi-regularly during or near the period of the annual shrine festival.

The composition of pilgrimage groups is determined by a number of criteria. Both urban and rural groups may be formed on the basis of kinship, friendship, common residence, or any combination of these. Most groups of rural devotees are made up of the inhabitants of a single village community, members of a village temple congregation. There are also larger groups comprising residents of a number of villages located in the same administrative commune (*tambon*). The majority of the groups for whom That Phanom is the sole objective of the journey are of this composition. Many groups of urban pilgrims are formed on the basis of mutual employment, shared occupation, or common membership in some sort of formal organization, such as a vegetable growers' cooperative or orchid fanciers' association. There are other groups for which these principles delineate only the core of the total makeup of the group. For example, a group comprising members of an urban temple congregation may be unable to fill all the available seats of their chartered vehicle, and thus will invite friends, relatives, or the general public to join the pilgrimage.

Larger groups of pilgrims, both rural and urban, have organizers and leaders, or "guides" (*phū nam*). The organizer publicizes the journey, contacts potential pilgrims, and handles the transportation arrangements. The leader is often an individual who has visited the sacred place at least once, and is sometimes a monk. The roles of leader and organizer may be filled by one or more persons.

Except for certain monks (see below) and residents of villages within several kilometers of the shrine, pilgrims travel to the sacred place by motor vehicle or (in the case of some Laotian pilgrims) by boat. Motor vehicles may be privately owned or (more commonly) chartered for the occasion, in which case buses and drivers from commercial transport firms will be used. Groups of excursionists bent on merit-seeking sometimes deck their hired buses with banners proclaiming the name and home town of the group, purpose and destination of journey, and, less frequently, the itinerary.

Concerning the Roman Catholic pilgrimâge center of Bom Jesus de Lapa (Brazil), Gross states that "the overwhelming majority of pilgrims are lower-class, low income agricultural workers and subsistence farmers," who outnumber the lower-class town-dwellers, and the few middle and upper-class "visitors" (1971: 138). This conclusion could also be made regarding That Phanom during or near the period of the annual festival. At other times, the numbers of villagers and middle-to-upper-class urbanites in the shrine compound appear to be more nearly equal. For the most part, as in Brazil, pilgrim groups are homogeneous in terms of social level. Exceptions are those rare large groups which are organized by abbots of urban and rural temple-monasteries in a particular area, with the members of the respective congregations composing the group. Groups comprising individuals from different regions of the country are rare and (as in Brazil) contact with members of groups from other regions is slight.

With regard to lay pilgrims at the That Phanom shrine, women usually outnumber men, both in the composition of specific groups and in terms of the total number of pilgrims to visit the shrine in a single day. The figures in the following table represent the numbers of men, women, children (under 15), monks and novices, and "nuns" who engaged in ritual devotions on one specific Sunday (usually the one day of the week when shrines are most frequented by visitors) unconnected with the annual festival or any religious holiday. Also included are figures recorded under similar circumstances at three other Thai pilgrimage centers located in other regions of the kingdom:

*Table II. Number of pilgrims on a specific Sunday at four shrines*

| shrine   | men | women | children | monks & |        | Total |
|--|-----|-------|----------|---------|--------|-------|
|  |     |       |          | novices | "nuns" |       |
| Wat Phra That Phanom<br>(Nakhon Phanom province,<br>northeastern region) | 146 | 214   | 37       | 4       | 2      | 403   |
| Wat Phra Phuttha Bat<br>(Saraburi province,<br>central region)           | 139 | 241   | 160      | 67      | 0      | 607   |
| Wat Phra That Chom Thong<br>(Chiang Mai province,<br>northern region)    | 47  | 99    | 27       | 7       | 0      | 180   |
| Wat Phra Maha That<br>(Nakhon Sri Thammarat city,<br>southern region)    | 55  | 111   | 33       | 0       | 0      | 199   |

This prevalence of female merit-makers at a sacred place is perhaps linked to their exclusion from the monastic order. This exclusion may channel female merit-making into frequent and overt expressions of lay piety, such as daily donations of food to monks, attendance at temple-monasteries during Buddhist holidays, participation in pilgrimage to sacred places, and becoming a "nun," a "white-robed lay follower" of the Buddha and his teachings. The predominance of women over men among pilgrims reflects similar proportions in groups of merit-makers at local temple-monasteries.

The preponderance of the middle-aged or elderly among the participants in local merit-making may indicate an increasing concern for the accumulation of merit at the approach of old age and death, in order to improve chances for favorable rebirth. However, this bias, unlike that of sex, is not as frequently manifested in the constitution of pilgrim groups. Men and women over fifty dominate relatively few of the groups of village pilgrims at the That Phanom shrine. Among village pilgrims during the shrine festival, and for urban excursionists, all age groups are evenly represented, reflecting the attractions of sight-seeing and festival-going (as well as merit-seeking) for individuals of all ages.

Finally, visiting clergy also engage in devotions at the sacred place. There are three general types of pilgrim monks. Fewest in number are the "wandering ascetics" (*phra thudong*, from Pali *dhuranga*: "ascetic practice") who stop at the shrine to venerate the sacred object while en route to and from forest meditation centers in various parts of the northeastern region during the dry season. Monks also serve as organizers and/or leaders of pilgrim groups; they may, in some cases, be invited by lay pilgrims to accompany the group and to lead the devotions at the shrine. Most monastic pilgrims travel with groups of their fellows, and eschew the austerities of the "wanderers" without, however, departing from the rules governing monastic behavior as set forth in the *Pattimokkha*.

To summarize, pilgrimages to the That Phanom shrine are undertaken by Buddhists from all stations and walks of life, both men and women, townspeople and villagers, clergy and laity, (The present King and Queen of Thailand have visited the shrine twice, in 1955 and 1963.) Frequency of pilgrimage, length and duration of journey, and size of group are affected by geographic proximity of the shrine to home residence, and the economic capability of the devotee. The journey from home to shrine and back again is generally dominant among village groups, while the excursion type of pilgrimage is mostly performed by urban-dwellers.

Pilgrimage as a particular kind of patterned movement in Thailand is relatively independent to other kinds of patterned movement. There is no evidence that the circulation of pilgrims has promoted significant movements leading to cultural exchange, political integration, or the spread of epidemic diseases. The connection between pilgrimage and the flow of commerce merits further study. Small-scale entrepreneurs who provide goods and services for pilgrims at the That Phanom shrine festival engage in similar activities at other secular and religious fairs in the region during the dry season, as well as operate on a regular basis at various town markets. Most of the movements of these individuals are confined to this regional system of markets where they make their living. This conclusion may also apply to professional fortune-tellers,

blind musicians, and certain beggars who also "follow the pilgrims." A flow of pilgrims who seek out sacred places for purposes of merit promotes a flow of entrepreneurs who seek out pilgrims for purposes of profit. However, the linkages between pilgrimage to Mecca and the commercial life of Islamic Africa, Central, and Southeast Asia have no parallel with regard to Theravada Buddhist pilgrimage and large-scale *inter-regional* commerce in Thailand. Similarly, no apparent connection exists between pilgrimage and patterns of labor migration. As in Brazil (Gross 1971 : 145), there is no evidence that pilgrimage in Thailand provides an occasion for the exchange of information on jobs and business opportunities.

## VI. Discussion and Conclusions

While its chief objective is the individual contact with the sacred, pilgrimage is an activity undertaken by groups of diverse back-grounds from different localities. In this final discussion, attention will be directed to the social aspects of pilgrimage as a type of group action. These aspects may be viewed in terms of the social structure of pilgrim groups in their home communities, or the concepts and norms which govern their conventional behavior.

Scholars have noted the quality of change involved in the movement of pilgrims from local community to sacred center. Obeyesekere (1966) views Buddhist pilgrimage in Sri Lanka as an activity which transfers pilgrims from the localized model of the village and region to the national model of the pilgrimage center. The "localized model" refers to the local deities, their attributes, myths, and the rituals associated with them, which vary from one village or region to another. This complex, for each village or region, defines the limits of the community of devotees (over which the respective deities have jurisdiction and authority) and validates its social structure (1966 : 16). The "national model" refers to the sacred Buddhist shrines which attract devotees from villages all over the country who share understandings, meanings, prayers, and rituals associated with the Buddha and his teachings, who assemble together at sacred places "in a commonality of worship" where status distinctions are irrelevant (*ibid.* : 23). The transfer of pilgrims

from the localized village model to the national model of the pilgrimage shrine reinforces a sense of national identity, which is made possible by the sharing of a common Buddhist "salvation idiom" that over-rides the adherence to local parochial traditions (*ibid.*: 22-23).

In Thailand, as in Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism forms one basis for mutual identification by devotees from a diversity of social settings associated with particularized local village spirits and territorial deities. These devotees share common understandings concerning the religious goals of Buddhist belief and practice, and possess a common fund of ritual behavior. Certain pilgrimage shrines (among them Wat Phra That Phanom) have been patronized by political elites, in terms of financial support, status designation as "royal temples," and royal pilgrimage. These shrines, through such mechanisms, have become symbolically associated with a Buddhist Thai national order. However, the shrines have not become "national cult centers" (cf. Kirsch 1967: 136) where devotees somehow celebrate their membership in this national order. There is no sign that pilgrims at the That Phanom shrine are consciously concerned with increasing their national awareness at a sacred place patronized by Thai kings, or that this concern has influenced the choice of the shrine for religious devotions. Furthermore, not all shrines associated with Buddhist sacred objects have been favored by royal patronage or donations by national leaders. The actions of pilgrims at sacred places are guided primarily by Buddhist religious concerns and, for many, the recreational aspects of the undertaking as a whole are also important.

Pilgrimage to Wat Phra That Phanom does indeed temporarily remove individuals from their parochial village settings and bring them into physical proximity at the sacred place with scores of pilgrims from other villages, mutually recognizable as Buddhist merit-seekers exhibiting mutually comprehensible ritual behavior. However, this physical proximity does not imply any marked alterations of a social nature among pilgrims, as suggested by Obeyesekere and noted with regard to the partial minimizing of caste distinctions at Indian sacred places (Bhardwaj 1973: 151-152). This particular social aspect can be examined in the light of Victor Turner's ideas concerning pilgrimage and the temporary dissolution of social structure.

Drawing upon observations of van Gennep, Turner (1973) argues that pilgrimage, as a pan-human social phenomenon, exhibits the characteristics and qualities of the "liminal" or "threshold" period which occurs during rites of passage. These characteristics of liminality (sanctity, homogeneity, equality) are manifestations of society as "communitas," an unstructured and undifferentiated communion of equal persons, which is juxtaposed with and emerges from society as "structure," a system of hierarchical statuses and orderly relations governed by rules. Devotional journeys remove pilgrims from the "structure" of sedentary village and urban life and place them in the realm of "communitas," a condition which permeates not only the journey itself but the ritual setting of the sacred place. This condition, however, is not the absolute or spontaneous "communitas" which verges on anarchy (although this spontaneity of human feeling underscores the entire phenomenon of pilgrimage), but is rather the "normative communitas" which is characterized by a necessary re-organization of relations among pilgrims, and between pilgrims and those who assist them on their journey or at the shrine (Turner 1973:191-195). Pilgrimage is therefore viewed by the author as a social phenomenon "founded in a system of religious beliefs, polarized between fixity and travel, secular and sacred, social structure and normative communitas" (*ibid.* : 195).

Pilgrimage to the That Phanom shrine, while viewed by the participants as an opportunity to gain merit, enjoy oneself, and shed temporarily the routine of every-day life, can be viewed by the observer as an undertaking which releases participants from the obligatory constraints of this routine, and as an occasion for contact with the sacred in the company of devotees from other localized social settings. At Wat Phra That Phanom, the ideal of a united commonality of devotees at a sacred place found expression in references to pilgrims as "elder and younger siblings" (*phīnāūngkan*) during the abbot's evening sermons at the annual festival, and in the usage of this kinship idiom as a friendly form of address or reference in other contexts, such as the announcements of donations over the public-address system. However, in spite of the spirit of "brotherhood" recognized and encouraged by shrine monks, the residues of social structure still remain. These aspects of structure are

those status differences in the secular realm which are symbolically validated in the religious context of veneration and merit-making. For example, the designations of status with regard to merit are apparent during the mass circumambulations of the *stupa* which occur during the festival: although the lay participants are persons of both sexes, all ages, most occupations, many localities, in such processions the laity are always preceded by monks, novices, and "nuns," in that order. Likewise, photographs of a circumambulation procession during a royal visit to the shrine indicate that the King is leading the group, with the Queen following at a distance of twenty paces or so, while government officials are well behind the royal personages (no monks or novices are visible). Individuals whose merit-status is socially recognized or whose behavior (through the observance of precepts) as world-renouncers approximates the Buddhist ideal are the acknowledged first in line for all organized group devotional processions of this nature.

In addition, many pilgrim groups are formed on the basis of previously existing social aggregates such as village or urban temple communities. Once these groups arrive at the shrine, their devotions are the result of a joint effort, performed as an extension of community merit-making in the local setting, with the shrine replacing the local temple as the field for the action. While these groups may be temporarily united spatially during the mass veneration of the sacred object, in general there is no social mixing between them or between pilgrims of different regional and economic backgrounds.

Furthermore, Theravada Buddhist pilgrimage produces no formal change in social status with regard to returned pilgrims back in their home communities. This is in contrast to the experiences of Thai Muslims who journey to Mecca. After returning from this long and expensive trip, the Thai Muslim pilgrim receives the title of "*haji*" (one who has successfully completed the *hadj*) and enjoys prestige and social esteem. The Muslim pilgrimage, in this regard, more closely approximates the processual nature of a rite of passage. Theravada Buddhist pilgrimage, on the other hand, is a recurrent undertaking which brings about an internal alteration in the merit store of the pilgrim rather than effecting any permanent change in external social relations.



To be sure, differences in social status and regional or economic background are muted or irrelevant for the minimal social interaction (or cooperation) between individuals and groups or for their behavior during the ritual performances at the shrine. However, one structural attribute in the pilgrims' home communities seems to persist within the precincts of the sacred place: the validation of one's status as merit-maker through the performance of culturally-valued religious actions.

It was stated earlier that merit is a major concept in the Thai Theravada Buddhist religious system, and that the acquisition of merit through the performance of appropriate actions brings the performer into contact with Buddhist ultimate reality (i.e., the universe conditioned by *kamma*). The acquisition or "making" of merit is not only a meaningful religious concept for Thai Buddhists, but is also a valued social norm. The results of merit are directly understood in terms of both spiritual and emotional benefits, and the kinds of actions by which merit is acquired are socially approved: in particular, the practice of charity as expressed in the presentation of valued goods or services to others. While the individual is the agent which acquires and possesses merit, the actions for doing so generally take place with regard to other individuals in the context of social relationships characterized by reciprocity and cooperation. Thus, the lay villager presents food and requisites to the monks at the village temple-monastery, receiving in return merit and the religious services of the monks. For their part, the monks maintain their store of merit by providing opportunities for merit-accumulation through temple rituals and by receiving the lay villager's merit-making offerings. An ordination ceremony (during which the ordinand makes merit for his parents in repayment for childhood care and upbringing) generally involves the participation of a number of people in addition to the young man and his immediate family: the costs of the ceremony may be borne by the household, relatives, and guests at the ceremony celebration, or shared by all households in a village. This social aspect of merit-making as an approved "good" action is heightened by the public nature of the merit-making ceremonies. The participants in such ceremonies are able to

observe the frequency and amounts of each other's contributions. In making merit together, the participants establish their social reputations as "good Buddhists."

These concerns are also manifest at the sacred place. The shrine is the setting for religious actions performed by groups from a number of village and urban locales, whose presentation of offerings, in return for an increase in merit, contribute to the maintenance of the shrine as a valued institution and the support of the shrine clergy as religious specialists for pilgrims. These actions (and, in some cases, the actual journey to the shrine) are openly displayed and "advertised," although, in contrast to the village setting, the interest of one group of merit-seekers in the efforts and achievements of another group is perhaps not very profound. The processions of merit-seekers and their gifts through the shrine compound, the publicizing of donations and home villages in the registration book and (during festivals) over the public-address system, the banners on pilgrim buses proclaiming to passers-by the identity and destination of the merit-seeking group, and the purpose of its journey, all are examples of a socially-esteemed practice on display. These actions call forth a sense of identification as a group of meritorious devotees *vis-a-vis* other groups of merit-seekers.<sup>9</sup>

This demonstration of social action directed toward meaningful religious goals generally occurs during certain times of year when there are many pilgrims frequenting a sacred place: the annual shrine festival, major Buddhist holidays (associated with important events in the Buddha's life), or the beginning of a new year. The location for the public display of merit-making is that sacred place (such as Wat Phra That Phanom) which is distinguished by pilgrims from their normal centers of religious action, the temple-monasteries in their home communities. As noted previously, the sacred place is the site at which an object symbolizing the Buddha has been enshrined and at which the Buddha himself is believed to have made an actual visit during his lifetime. Because of this association with the "actual" Buddha and the accessibility of the sacred object, pilgrims consider ritual actions

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9) C.K. Yang, in a description of a shrine festival in Canton, makes a similar observation (1961 : 89).

performed at the sacred place to be more meritorious than similar actions exhibited at the local temple-monastery, even though the degree of religious value along the continuum of merit-making from devotions at home to shrine-going is not as sharp as that between (for example) recurrent Friday prayers at the local mosque and a pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims. The Buddhist sacred place is also believed to be a reservoir of magical power which can be used by the pilgrim for beneficial ends. In addition (at least from the point of view of an observer), journeys to a sacred shrine bring the pilgrims into contact with a potentially wider "audience" for the conspicuous display of meritorious behavior than would be available in the village setting.

The present author would agree with both Turner (1973: 229) and Gross (1971: 145) that pilgrimage is essentially a conservative phenomenon in the religious sense, presenting nothing heterodox or potentially revolutionary in terms of beliefs and styles of symbolic action. The That Phnom shrine (and other sacred places), through royal patronage and government support, is a center of religious devotion which defines a legitimate social and moral world at a level beyond that of the localized village or urban community. This definition has been accomplished through conformity to traditional religious beliefs and the exercise of legitimate authority. Thus, no radical message is being communicated to devotees. Instead, the value of the traditional concept of merit-making is re-conveyed, in the context of ritual oriented toward culturally-recognized religious goals.

Turner has noted that pilgrimage flourishes in "patrimonial-feudal" societies based on agriculture, with a pronounced rural-urban division and a limited development of modern industry (1973: 195-199). Furthermore, the practice is re-emerging as a present-day social phenomenon during a period of rapid social change, when cultural forms bearing the characteristics of "communitas" renew themselves (*ibid.*: 196). With regard to Thailand, a traditional Theravada Buddhist society which has been undergoing modernization and change, it appears that pilgrimage is an example of a still-enduring traditional pattern which has incorporated some aspects of modernity, i.e., modes of transportation.

At another level, the influence of secularization and the responses of concerned Buddhist elites in contemporary Thailand have not yet eroded popular interest in the benefits resulting from ritual action performed at sacred places. On the one hand, a member of a lay Buddhist association can state that the "pilgrims" of today are those who journey to meditation centers around the country in search of a "guru" (the word actually used by this English-speaking informant). On the other hand, in December 1971, construction work was begun on "the largest Buddha-image in the world" (45 meters high when completed) at a site just 25 kilometers north of Wat Phra That Phanom. In spite of contemporary re-interpretations of "pristine" Theravada Buddhism (cf. Swearer 1973), the continuing importance of merit-making and its socially-relevant display indicate that the establishment of new sacred places and journeys to older ones will probably remain a part of religious life in Thailand.

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