

## **Boonkumkhaoyai : The Thai-Isan Epitomic Model of Buddhist Economy and Dhammic Socialism**

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### **Abstract**

In Northeast Thailand, or Isan, there are twelve distinct ceremonies known as PrapheniHeetSibsong that mark the entire lunar calendar. Each of these ceremonies is an occasion for merit-making, observance of the precepts, and cultivation of morality (sīla), meditation (samādhi) and wisdom (paññā). Based mostly on Buddhist principles, each ceremony in the entire corpus of PrapheniHeetSibsong points towards a gradual progress along the spiritual path, and has since time immemorial formed the warp and woof of the traditional Isan way of life. Although Isan is generally regarded as the poorest and the most ‘backward’ region in the country, a close look at how the northeasterners have entwined their lives with the twelve-month tradition reveals the richness of the Buddhist ethico-religious and cultural heritage that has remained intact to the present day. In this paper we focus on one unique ceremony, Boonkumkhaoyai (previously known as “Boonkhunlarn”), literally translated into English as “merit-making by offering the giant paddy heap”, that 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. 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, propagation of Buddhism and Isan culture. Viewed from the socio-ethical perspective, this particular agro-based ritualistic ceremony seems to epitomize the culture of merit-making ingrained in the traditional Isan way of life. Although merit-making in some urban and cosmopolitan settings has 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 PrapheniHeetSibsong. Therefore, merit-making still exists as a spontaneously thriving tradition and has not yet turned out to be a fe-

tish and a means to ‘bartering’ of merit. In this paper we analyze various socio-ethico principles that form the foundational base of Boonkumkhaoyai. Through our analysis we aim at showing that Isan peasantry’s inherent zeal to practice generosity at a communal level for the welfare of the entire community and society at large brings into fusion two distinct trends of the Buddhist weltanschauung, namely, Buddhist economy and Dhammic Socialism.

**Keywords:** Boonkumkhaoyai, Thai-Isan, Epitomic, Model, Buddhist, Economy, Dhammic, Socialism



## Introduction

In Northeast Thailand, or Isan, there are twelve distinct ceremonies known as *PrapheniHeetSibsong*<sup>1</sup> that mark the entire lunar calendar. Each of these ceremonies is an occasion for merit-making, observance of the precepts, and cultivation of morality (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Based mostly on Buddhist principles, each ceremony in the entire corpus of *PrapheniHeetSibsong* points towards a gradual progress along the spiritual path, and has since time immemorial formed the warp and woof of the traditional Isan way of life. Although Isan is

<sup>1</sup> A list of these ceremonies is provided at the end of the article.

generally regarded as the poorest and the most ‘underdeveloped’ region in the country, a close look at how the northeasterners have entwined their lives with the twelve-month tradition reveals the richness of the Buddhist ethico-religious and cultural heritage that has remained intact to the present day. Boonkumkhaoyai (previously known as “Boonkhunlarn”), literally translated into English as “merit-making by offering the giant paddy heap”, is a ceremony that 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 unite and recognize the significance of harmonious co-existence and mutual interdependence among all people in *amooban* (village). According to some Isan scholars, 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 prior to the Buddha’s final passing away or *mahaparinibbana*.<sup>2</sup> In pre-modern Isan society, after the harvest season the accumulated grains of rice used to be gathered in front of a Buddhist monastery or at any village community hall and villagers after having participated in the *Bai-si-su-khwan*<sup>3</sup> and making symbolic offering of the harvested grains to the Buddhist monks took them back home in order to have much good fortune all throughout the year. In course of time, the practice of donating a part of the harvest for various social welfare projects came into origin. And today, Boonkumkhaoyai is organized on a large scale at different places and people from distant villages and provinces can come and join together in forming the giant paddy heap by donating unhusked rice for the purpose of supporting and promoting various projects related to the propagation of Buddhism and Isan culture. A reflection on the underlying ethical principles of Boonkumkhaoyai will help us understand the original Buddhist way of life, which when viewed from the psycho-spiritual environmental perspective is one of moderation, contentment, generosity and right livelihood. Boonkumkhaoyai is a typical example of how agro-based rural Isan community practices the Buddhist way of life in a genuine way and an analysis of it will show us the Buddhist approach to a balanced living, the

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup> It is the ceremonial tying of consecrated white thread around the wrist.

supporting principles of which can pave the way for solving any economic or environmental crisis no matter where, when and how it originates.

### **Right Livelihood as endorsed in the concept of Boonkumkhaoyai**

As is well-known, Right Livelihood (*sammāājīva*) is an essential component of the Ethical Conduct (*Sīla*) that forms the foundational base of the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya-Atthangika-Magga*). Right Livelihood implies abstinence from making one's living through a profession that is harmful to oneself and others, such as manufacturing of and trading in arms, ammunition, all lethal weapons, intoxicating drinks and poisons, human trafficking, butchery, cheating, etc. It is expected that a true Buddhist live by a profession which is honourable, blameless and innocuous. Right Livelihood along with Right Speech (*sammāvācā*) and Right Action (*sammākammanta*) form the foundation of ethical conduct that aims at promoting both individual and communal happiness, peace and harmony. No higher spiritual attainments can be possible without the practice of this basic ethical conduct<sup>4</sup>.

The originators of Boonkumkhaoyai were humble folks who tilled the soil. Their descendents 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 who till the soil and generally reap harvest twice annually. 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. Those urban folks who flaunt their wealth while offering large sums of cash donations to monasteries without taking into consideration the significance of Right Livelihood might have to shy away in front of the Isan farmers' humble but righteous donation of paddy on the occasion of Boonkumkhaoyai that can easily help raise an amount of not

<sup>4</sup> Walpole Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Bangkok: Haw Trai Foundation, 1990), p. 47.

less than a million baht on each occasion for any public as well as monastic welfare project.

### **Generosity or the practice of Dāna**

Closely related to Right Livelihood is the Isan farmers' inherent zeal to practice generosity at a communal level for the welfare of the entire community and society at large. In the good old days when the advances in science and technology did not touch upon the life of Isan farmers, every step in the process of paddy cultivation sowing, reaping and threshing – used to be done manually with mutual assistance and co-operation. Families offered help to each other and the harvested grains were accumulated in a cleared ground for threshing jointly and at the end a section of the grain was generously donated for welfare of the entire village community as an acknowledgement of the fact of mutual co-existence and interdependence. The cash earned after selling the donated paddy could be used for construction of roads, public places, monks' dwelling places (*kuti*), community health services, etc. Today, most farmers use tractors, threshing machines etc and each family has become quite independent. Yet, the original concept of Boonkumkhaoyai has not lost its pristine values and therefore, there is annual arrangement of this ceremony at different places in each of the nineteen provinces all over the Northeast. Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khonkaen Campus has already arranged the ceremony for six consecutive years since 2008 (BE 2551). Every year it is arranged in conjunction with the Boonphravesa Ceremony and usually more than three thousand peasant households from different provinces (Khonkaen, Roi-et, Kalasin, Chayaphum, Mahasarakham, Nakhonrachasima, Udonthani, Loei and Buriram) donate unmilled glutinous and plain variety of rice for the establishment of three different funds – i) “Kongthun-Sasanathayaat” meaning “fund for kith-and-kin-in-religion/religious heirs”. The purpose of this fund is to help and support the ecclesiastical and secular education of those monks and novices who lack self-financing. ii) Fund for the propagation of Buddhism aimed at “Taking Dhamma to People”. The objective of this fund is to provide financial support to MahachulaKhonkaen Campus's radio station FM 101.75 MHz. iii) Fund for development of monks in Ecclesiastical Region 9. It is hoped that like every grain of rice that grows under the nurturing care of nature and the hands that sow the seeds, the mindful use of the cash earned from the giant paddy heap will bring true

prosperity to society by setting the wheel of goodness and virtue in motion.

### **Moderation**

In rural Isan society, generosity and moderation work in tandem, otherwise Boonkumkhaoyai would have become a defunct tradition by now. Today's consumerist culture is characterized by the trend of material indulgence more than moderation and so genuine acts of charity and generosity are hard to find. Most urban affluent families make donations preferably on a public platform for gaining applause and tax relaxation, quite unlike their counterparts in rural Isan society where people engage in charitable acts for the sake of goodness in the act itself, without any ulterior motive behind the act. Participants in Boonkumkhaoyai, although rural and rustic in appearance, can afford to be always generous because of their moderate lifestyle and the psychology of sharing. They zealously take part in the traditional ceremony not for any personal benefit, but out of deep rooted faith in a holistic approach to living and sharing, socio-cultural and religious environment as well as the inherent goodness in the tradition. Amidst affluent urban population this kind of exemplary model may not be always obvious since easy affordability of all conveniences tend to make life centered upon spending and indulgence more than involvement in genuine acts of generosity. Even though an Isan farmer's per capita income may be comparatively less than an urban white collar official or businessman, his family can practice generosity on a daily basis (offering alms food to monks), monthly basis (taking part in each monthly ceremony of *Prapheni Heet Sibsong*), and annually (making large donations of paddy as in Boonkumkhaoyai) due to the practice of moderation and generosity. Having limited needs and being moderate in spending, a typical Isan peasant couple has not yet become a slave of the consumerist culture that has gripped the urban community.

### **Contentment**

Moderation cannot be practiced if there is no contentment. Contentment to an appreciable degree is noticeable in the lifestyle and life's philosophy of a traditional Isan farmer's family. It is a fact that people who are content have fewer wants than those who are discontent. According to Buddhism, contentment implies the absence of artificial wants, i.e. the

desire for sense pleasure. Compared to materialistic urban folks who blindly adhere unnecessary importance to a western styled consumerist way of behaving and thinking, Isan peasantry still has a good foundation: most people are content, not prone to extravagance, are relatively less obsessed with consumption, know the means to sufficiency economy and normally use things in a sparing manner. From the Buddhist perspective, involvement with sense-pleasure is regarded as indulgence; honing a form of desire that is not natural but artificial. Any artificial desire (*tanhā*) triggers endless greed, selfishness, ostentation and superficial flaunting of wealth and personal possessions leading to deterioration in people's moral standard and ethical conduct; therefore, whenever the temptation of fulfilling such desires grow strong, individuals become greedy, selfish, possessive, pretentious, jealous and ultimately ignorant of the true value of the Noble Eight-fold Path. When the tendency to fulfill artificial desires becomes the rule of the day, corruption, crimes, political upheaval, dog eat dog kind of competitiveness become rampant in society. Under such circumstances, true quality of life (*chanda*) that involves a balanced approach to life and encompasses right effort, diligence, industriousness, impartiality, honesty, truthfulness, moral courage and uprightness gets neglected. Therefore, the cultivation of contentment is indispensable for the maintenance of optimum moral growth and ethical standards in any society. Cultivation of true contentment leads to a clean separation of the two contradictory tendencies namely, desires for true quality of life and temptations to fulfill artificial desires, and prepares the ground for the establishment of the former. As the scholar-monk, PA Payutto puts it, "Contentment understood correctly means cutting off the artificial desire for sense-pleasure but actively encouraging and supporting the desire for quality of life. In Buddhism, contentment is always paired with effort. The purpose of contentment is seen to be to save the time and energy lost in ministering to selfish desires, and using it to create and nurture true well-being"<sup>5</sup>. Boonkumkhaoyai is a glorious example of how the spirit of contentment can guide collective action leading to both individual and social prosperity and true well-being.

### **Control of greed**

The binding effect of generosity, moderation and content-

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<sup>5</sup> P.A. Payutto, *Buddhist Economics* (Bangkok: The National Identity Board, 1994), p. 33.



ment leads to the control of greed. Greed, which is inherent in human nature when given a free sway, escalates at a rapid scale bringing harm to individual and entire society through the obfuscation of all human spiritual faculties. The domino effect of avaricious actions of politicians and media tycoons in the present political scenario of Thailand clearly points to the pernicious influence of uncontrolled greed on society. In order to help flourish a healthy society free of crime and corruption, there is an exigent need to cultivate the practice of subduing, controlling and finally annihilating unfettered greed through the threefold practice of generosity, moderation and contentment. Today's consumerist culture, however, tends to capitalize on this inherently negative element in human nature. Contrary to this, is the tradition-bound rural Isaan society that is restraint in approach and cherishes the culture-of-giving which is so clearly reflected in the traditional ceremony of Boonkumkhaoyai. What Buddhadasa defined as "Dhammic Socialism" is very much at work here. 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>6</sup>. Dhammic Socialism, which is said to characterize the original moral (*sila-dhamma*) condition of individuals and society, is a hallmark of Boonkumkhaoyai.

### Loving-kindness

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 toil and labour. 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<sup>7</sup> that Buddhism upholds. It is believed that the Buddha himself practiced loving-kindness 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

<sup>6</sup> Buddhadasa, *Dhammic Socialism*, (Bangkok: Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development, 1993), pp. 33-34.

<sup>7</sup> The four divine or heavenly qualities or sublime states of mind known as *Brahmavihāra* that Buddhism emphasizes are *mettā*(loving-kindness), *karunā* (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.



loving-kindness and compassion. These are great virtues, the cultivation of which helps to keep vices like greed and selfishness at bay. Such unwholesome mental states as egocentricity, egotism and megalomania that are so rampant in today's consumerist culture can find suitable cure through the practice of both loving-kindness and compassion. When mindfully practiced to the highest level, these virtues, which are rightly called heavenly abidings, 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. These virtues can give rise to other supremely admirable qualities such as: generosity, charity, selflessness, self-sacrifice, honesty, endurance, patience, forbearance, moral courage and determination. 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**

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>8</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 labour for various activities in a monastery. It is very interesting to observe how Thai people have traditionally entwined their lives with the culture of merit-making. To the two attributive nomenclatures that already exist, "Thailand is the land of smile and the land of yellow-robe", one can easily accord yet a third name that reveals the underlying principle behind the smile and the robe

<sup>8</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.

“Thailand is the land of merit-making.” Although merit-making in some urban settings<sup>9</sup> has 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 *PrapheniHeetSibsong*. Therefore, merit-making still exists as a spontaneously thriving tradition 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 money-tree (*tonphapa*)<sup>10</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 fore fathers 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.

### **Egalitarian participation**

Like most Isan ceremonies, Boonkumkhaoyai is a gender neutral ceremony in which men and women take part equally. The hosts of the ceremony, who donate sacks of unhusked paddy to form the giant paddy heap, are humble village folks. Interestingly, sometimes the female hosts outnumber the male hosts. Dressed in attractive hand-woven silk attires, men and women take part equally in the joyous merit-making occasion. Each village community or group has its own colourful parade with the men beating traditional Isan drums and cymbals and women folks dancing to the rhythm holding money-trees, yellow-robos, pillows, and lotuses in their hands as offerings to the monks. The parades circumam-

<sup>9</sup> One instance that immediately comes to mind is WatDhammakāya that has fetishized the cult of accumulation of merit to an unprecedented degree while willfully misconstruing the teachings of the Buddha, 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 *Buddhadhamma* in the true sense.

<sup>10</sup> a makeshift toy tree made of straw with many branches into which devotees needle in bamboo pins stuck with currency notes.

bulate the giant paddy heap three consecutive times in a symbolic supplication to the Triple Gem – The Buddha, The Dhamma and The Sangha – before gracefully placing the offerings in front of individual monks and receiving benisons.

### **Belief in Kamma**

Isan people, like all Buddhists throughout the world, have strong faith in the Law of Kamma. The words of the Buddha “...people sow their seeds determine their fruits: those who do good, receive good; those who do evil, receive evil”<sup>11</sup> are deeply implanted in the hearts of rural Isan people who try to accumulate merit for spiritual progress and a good birth in the next life. Although they might not understand the Dependent Origination and the Law of Kamma in intricate details, the general belief that one is destined to receive the results of one’s action whether good or evil, aspires them to strive for positive action (*kusalakamma*) by such methods as merit-making. They are aware of the dominant pattern of moral validation in Buddhism that takes into account the intention (*cetana*) of the doer, the nature of the act, and the consequences that flow from it. Their intention to take part in a traditional ceremony like Boonkumkhaoyai suggests a positive mentality, the actual act of donating paddy reflects a meritorious action, and the consequence that will result can be expected to be positive. All participants in Boonkumkhaoyai believe that taking part in the occasion is a good action that increases the potentiality of accumulation of merits and will bring them good fortunes in the present life and ultimately prepare them for a good birth in the future. For the reason of assuring good fortunes in the present life, the host participants in Boonkumkhaoyai desire to collect a handful of grains (*khaomongkhol*) from the donated sack of rice to carry back home. They believe that after the offering is made and monks have chanted and blessed the giant paddy heap, each grain of rice becomes consecrated and auspicious. So they carry home a handful of it to be preserved and mixed with other rice that will be sowed in the next season with the expectation of reaping a good harvest that would enable them to continue the meritorious act of donating paddy anew the following year. The action of carrying back home a handful of consecrated grains has both concrete and symbolic meanings. At one level it shows the northeasterners’ strong faith in an auspicious object, and

<sup>11</sup> Samyuttanikāya.227, PTS Edition.

at another level it symbolically represents the flow of *kamma*. Just as a handful of consecrated paddy mingled with other grains is expected to produce a good harvest, good deeds when repeated will reduce and replace all evil deeds. The accrument of good deeds will not only bring good fortunes, happiness and assure a good birth in the next life, but will also lead to higher spiritual attainments.

### **Moral benefits the participants in Bunkumkhaoyai reap**

**Mental well-being** As in any act of generosity, participation in Boonkumkhaoyai brings great happiness, satisfaction and solace to the humble donors.

**Observance of the precepts** Arrangement of the ceremony and participation in it is regarded as a spiritual undertaking that is conducive to ethical practice and observance of the precepts.

**Getting rid of defilements** The observance of the precepts and realization of the significance of dhamma in life pave the way for deletion of defilements and temptations.

**Acquiring wisdom** 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 basis of wisdom.

**Endurance** Participation on the occasion and generous sharing of a part of the harvest give rise to an attitude of endurance and make people more tolerant of hardships in life.

**Forbearance** The attitude of endurance and tolerance beget patience and forbearance.

**Sincerity** Participation in Boonkumkhaoyai is a merit-making act that involves direct contribution towards social welfare giving rise to sincerity – sincerity to the act of merit-making, to the age-old tradition and to one's own faith.

**Social bonding** Boonkumkhaoyai is a 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 it.

**Sympathetic joy** The concept of “my/mine” gets reduced when people take part in Boonkumkhaoyai. The desire to donate unmilled rice to form the giant paddy heap comes from loving-kindness and compassion and when the effort is seen to directly contribute to social and religious welfare it gives rise to sympathetic joy.

**Accumulation of merit** Participation in the ceremony enhances the potentiality of accumulation of merits. Suppose one cannot see the result of such good action directly, the preceding nine benefits in themselves can be regarded as the direct result of the meritorious act.

## Conclusion

As mentioned aforesaid a reflection on Boonkumkhaoyai will enable us to understand the true Buddhist way of life vis-à-vis a consumerist way of living and behaving. Economists and finance experts today are generally supportive of a materialistic way of life and their theories and suppositions are grounded on a non-Buddhist approach simply because Buddhism is not supportive of any form of excess and non-ethical means. Although economists interpret any past, on-going or impending economic crisis in theoretically loaded terms and terminology, looked at from the Buddhist perspective, it is clear that any crisis takes place whenever there is an imbalance in the practice of ethical conduct. The world is never rid of crises – economic crisis, ecological crisis, communal war and conflict – because the world is never empty of defilements. The paradox of the present day world situation is that the values we have enumerated above, as reflected in the traditional ceremony of Boonkumkhaoyai from rural Isan, are deficiently lacking in society at large and particularly among affluent power holders and policy makers. In today’s highly consumerist culture, people tend to pay only lip service to moral and ethical principles; consequently, generosity gave way to ostentation, moderation to hoarding, contentment to insatiability, control of greed to indulgence, loving-kindness to self-centeredness, compassion to indifference, merit-making to accumulation of wealth and bank balance and belief in one’s action or *kammato* masquerading. When all these negative developments gather momentum, regional or worldwide

economic meltdown becomes inevitable.

The Asian Crisis of 1997 originated under the tremendous pressure that built up due to steady escalation of various negative forces, such as: overconsumption, crony capitalism, debt, default, excessive real estate speculation, all of which as a whole point at the deterioration of moral and ethical standard. Economists, however, talked only about such surface phenomena as the floating of the currency, deflation, devaluation of the baht, recession and finally, the bursting of “The Bubble”. Underneath the statistical data and economic analyses lay layers of truth unrevealing which will have to begin with such simple questions as – Why did “The Bubble” originate at all, and why did it ultimately burst? Will not such economic depression occur again? The answer is, economic crisis will repeat itself and with ever more devastating force if ethical problems are not taken into serious consideration and moral standards both at the national and international level are not maintained. The Buddhist perspective on any economic crisis will focus on the Right Way of Practice that incorporates right livelihood, practice of generosity, moderation, contentment, control of greed, loving-kindness and compassion, merit-making, egalitarianism, and belief in the Law of Kamma or volitional actions. The Buddhist approach is the Middle Way approach that denies two extremes living in abject poverty and indulgence in wealth and materialism.

Apart from the traits of Buddhist economy that are inherent in Boonkumkhaiyai, Dhammic Socialism, which is said to characterize the original moral (*sila-dhamma*) condition of individuals and society, is yet another outstanding hallmark of Boonkumkhaoyai. Dhammic Socialism espouses and supports harmonious co-existence with ecological systems and one’s fellow beings and is quite contrary to the type of Socialism that emerged as a ‘political’ ideology reinforcing its stance on people through brutal means. While political socialism is still naïve an endeavor functioning within a ‘worldly-matrix’ and is least able to shun itself from the basic unwholesome roots of avarice, aversion and delusion, Dhammic Socialism, on the other hand, is securely tied up with the wholesome aspects of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, since it is not based upon any self-centric assumption or world view but rather on a holistic and collective approach to life and human actions. It functions on the mindful awareness of the three salient features of existence – impermanence, suffering and non-self. According to Buddhadasa, wanting only

what is *necessary* is the first level of morality (*sīladhamma*), one that is easy to practice and is part and parcel of Dhammic Socialism. Curbing in the desire to possess in excess, any adherent of Dhammic Socialism spontaneously cultivates the principles of loving-kindness and compassion that are foundational bases for a non-hatred attitudinal disposition.

Boonkumkhaoyai, as an epitomic model of Dhammic Socialism stands for a form of Natural Socialism that is practical, objective and non-delusionary in nature with its emphasis on the interdependence of existence, non-attachment to the concept of an individual self and sharing of one's material wealth as against excessive hoarding of it solely for personal consumption. Since everything in nature and in human society exists interdependently, the question of an independent self (*atta*) is misleading and unmindful aggrandizement of its material needs are detrimental for oneself and the society as a whole, as is evident in recent times in the cases of capitalistic mode of growth and a consumerist life style drastically affecting the inner mindscape (excess greed for material possession) and natural environment (unpredictable climatic and ecological changes<sup>12</sup>). Therefore, contrary to the consumerist trend, Boonkumkhaoyai as an exemplary model of Dhammic Socialism upholds the principles of minimal consumption, sustained moderation and sharing of surplus to help reduce clinging to material wealth and possession and views material welfare from a collective standpoint rather than a narrow individual perspective. Consequently, the principle of non-greed for possession gives rise to non-encroaching and non-harming of one's immediate surrounding (both human and ecological) for selfish ends and points towards the practicability of harmonious co-existence with one's fellow beings and nature.

Boonkumkhaoyai, which is based on genuine altruism and an understanding of the principle of interdependence, ensures the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the Isanpeople. It can be concluded that Boonkumkhaoyai is 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

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<sup>12</sup> The very recent Polar Vortex that affected the weather in the US and Canada to an alarming degree setting the severity of chilling coldness in twenty years to a record of -50 degrees Celsius has resulted from Global Warming.



the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the many' (*bahujanah itāyabahujanasukhāyalokānukampāya*) – 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. Although the dominant mainstream lifestyle and way of thinking today tends to override the Buddhist Middle Way approach, exemplary model such as Boonkumkhaoyai that exists on the periphery ought to be highlighted in order to counteract and minimize superficial and vacuous elements in today's consumerist culture that is based on extremes such as: overconsumption, indulgence, unfair competition and hoarding of wealth.

### Thai-Isan Traditions – PrapheniHeetSibsong

No	Name of the Tradition	Time/Season	Related Activity/Purpose
1	Boonkhaokam	after harvest during mid/late November	intensive practice of dhamma – listening to sermons, practice of meditation, reading Dhamma books; it is the period of purification both for monks and laymen
2	Boonkhunlarn or Boonkumkhaoyai	end of harvest winter season early January-early February	invitation of Buddhist monks to one's home for chanting and blessing of the harvest/granary; making merit by offering the giant paddy heap
3	Boonkhaojee	The Buddhist All Saints' Day last week of February or early March	merit-makings are performed in observance of the great events of the Buddha's time; celebration of Magha Puja on the full moon day
4	Boonphraves	March	monks' chanting of VessantaraJātaka (WetsandornChādok) – the story of Mahāchāt or The Great Birth

5	Boonsongkran	13-15 April	Traditional Thai New Year celebration; merit-making, construction of sand pagoda, bathing of the Buddha Statue, bathing Buddhist monks, honouring ( <i>Bangsukul</i> ) ancestors' bones, fish and bird release
6	Boonbang-fai	May Rocket festival	merit-making, asking for rain from God, worship the guardian spirit ( <i>deva</i> )
7	Boonchamha or Boonberkbaan	June Ablution ceremony	bringing of sand, small stones and water in a big jar and white consecrated tread 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; Buddhist monks are invited for chanting on two consecutive nights and on the third day meal is offered to the monks
8	Boonkhaophansā	late July/early August Asalha Puja commencement of the Buddhist Lent	celebration of Asalha Puja to commemorate the Buddha's deliverance of the First Sermon to the faithful disciples; celebration of the advent of the three-months' long Buddhist Lent
9	BoonkhaoPadabdin	August ceremony for dead relatives	merit-making, decoration of the earth with rice, sweets, areca palm and betel leaves as offerings to deceased relatives
10	Boonkhaosak	September sharing of food with spirits	merit-making in the honour of spirits and one's own ancestors
11	Boon Orkphansa	October End of Buddhist Lent	ritual offering of alms food to monks ( <i>Takbatra-Devo</i> ) to mark the end of the Buddhist Lent
12	Boon Kathin	N o v e m b e r Robe-offering ceremony	presentation of yellow robes and other necessary items to monks

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