



WITH WIND IN THE SAILS

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WRIST ACTION STATIONS

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Phra Maha Pranom Dhammalangkaro, the acting abbot of Wat Chak Daeng, stands by bales of crushed plastic water bottles that will be turned into robes that will be worn by monks. Photos: Tibor Krausz

Spirit of transformation

A Thai monastery is pioneering the recycling of plastic bottles, turning them into robes. But in a country with a terrible problem with pollution, is this just a drop in the ocean?

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At Wat Chak Daeng, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand's Samut Prakan province, bulky cardboard boxes are being stacked on top of each other in an outdoor storage area. The boxes have just arrived in the mail. One was sent from Pattani, a Muslim-majority province in Thailand's southernmost region. Another was posted from Chiang Mai in the mountainous north. A third was dispatched from Nong Khai province by the Mekong River in the northeast.

"We're getting packages from all around Thailand," says Iraj Rithsuregul, who helps out as a volunteer at the temple. "Many people send them by courier."

Their contents? Empty plastic water bottles.

Customarily, Buddhists donate food, toiletries and other necessities to monks – and used water bottles hardly qualify as desirable items, especially in a country where some 4.4 billion bottles are produced every year and millions are thrown away daily.

At Wat Chak Daeng, though, donations of single-use plastic bottles made of PET (polyethylene terephthalate) are welcome.

Everyone benefits. Monks get new robes. People can make merit

ACTING ABBOT PHRA MAHA PRANOM DHAMMALANGKARO

In fact, resident monks encourage people to bring or send discarded bottles to the temple, whose grounds sprawl in scenic settings by the Chao Phraya River.

In partnership with a chemical company, acting abbot Phra Maha Pranom Dhammalangkaro has been spearheading a project to upcycle PET bottles into saffron robes for his fellow monks.

Discarded shopping bags, food wrappings and drinks bottles have blighted the country, littering streets, clogging canals, befouling rivers, invading seas and gathering on beaches.

"Robes are expensive so, instead of buying those, people can give us plastic bottles," Phra Maha Pranom explains. "By doing this, they can make merit just as if they had donated robes directly."

Buddhists believe that by giving alms or gifts to monks, especially prized items such as saffron robes, they earn karmic credit, which benefits their current lives and improves their chances of an auspicious rebirth in the next one.

"Thais are eager to donate robes to monks, so now they will be more inclined to keep and collect disposable bottles instead," he says. "Everyone benefits. Monks get new robes. People can make merit. We'll all have less plastic in our environment."

Sakkan and Wanna Somboonsa, a middle-aged couple, have taken the monk's idea to heart. On a recent afternoon they arrived at Wat Chak Daeng with their SUV packed full of empty plastic bottles. "At first I didn't believe it was possible to make merit by donating plastic trash," Sakkan, a business owner, observes. "But I came here and saw it."

"We've collected around 1,000 bottles so far," Wanna says. "We'll be back with more."

The Buddha would approve of this scheme, Phra Maha Pranom reckons. "In his conduct, the Buddha showed us the value of reusing and recycling," he says. "We're following in his footsteps."

The Buddha and his followers, according to tradition, wore robes stitched from cast-offs and clothing scavenged from rubbish heaps and funeral grounds. Phra Maha Pranom's method of turning bottles into robes is rather more tortuous, requiring teams of volunteers and machinery.

Sitting amid piles of plastic bottles is Wan Thipjantee, a spirited octogenarian whose left hand is permanently clenched from rheumatoid arthritis. The elderly man removes wraparound labels from water bottles with a box cutter, pushes his balled left hand into bottles to dent them for easier storage, and throws them into a basket. He does this for hours on end every day. "If I stop moving, my hand gets worse," the retiree says. "It's like exercise for me."

Nearby, operating an industrial machine that flattens bottles, is Sampan Suktantee, a wiry man who is a recovering compulsive gambler. "I gambled everything away. I've got nothing left," he laments. "The monks have taken me in so I want to repay them by making myself useful."

Once the bottles are sorted, crunched, pressed into blocks and packed into portable bales by the temple's volunteers, they are transported to a factory to be shredded into small flakes. At another factory, the flakes are made into polyester fibres mixed with cotton and a zinc-based antibacterial nanomaterial. At a third factory, yarn is dyed and spun into a high-quality lightweight fabric. The cloth is then brought to the temple, where volunteers cut and stitch it into new robes for monks.

"I'm happy to do this," says Supattra Siripanya, one of the volunteers, who sells food on the street for a living. "I feel we're doing a good deed."

A single robe is made from 15 1.5-litre water bottles. A whole set of traditional "triple robes" (sarong, inner raiment and outer covering) requires 60 bottles. Since it began making robes last year, the temple has produced about 1,000 of them. "They're light, dry quickly and don't wrin-



Above: Volunteers sew fabric made from plastic bottles into robes. Below: Sampan Suktantee flattens bottles at the monastery.



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SAMPAN SUKTEE



4.4b

Number of plastic bottles made and thrown away in Thailand each year. The consequences can be seen at places like this canal in Klong Toey

kle easily," says Phra Maha Pranom, who tested the prototype by wearing it for months. "They don't smell bad, even when you wear them unwashed for a while."

Much of the monastery looks less like a place of worship than a recycling plant. Greeting visitors near the gate are mounds of plastic bottles and other recyclable waste. In one area, organic waste is composted into fertiliser. In another, food waste is converted into biofuel, and plastic waste turned into diesel fuel. Only ongoing Dharma classes nearby for school-age novices testify to the temple's spiritual mission.

The monastery's abbot is a trailblazer in seeking creative solutions to plastic waste, but he isn't alone. Similar volunteer-run initiatives aimed at repurposing plastic trash into durable products have been sprouting up around the kingdom.

The scale of Thailand's plastic problem remains daunting, though. A short boat ride away from Wat Chak Daeng on the Chao Phraya River lies another riverside community, in Bangkok's Klong Toey district. A narrow, winding alleyway through a warren of plywood and breeze block shacks leads to a fetid canal. It's covered in a thick carpet of trash, mostly plastic.

"When I was a child we swam and bathed in this canal," says a shirtless man in his 50s, lounging outside a hut. "Now I don't go near it." Recently, locals removed several truckloads of garbage from the water in do-it-yourself clean-ups. Yet plastic waste has since flooded back.

The situation is no different around Wat Chak Daeng.

"In three months, our volunteers have collected several tonnes of plastic trash just in this one small area," Phra Maha Pranom says.

It doesn't help that Thai food vendors and corner stores keep handing out disposable plastic bags with every purchase, often several at once. Greenpeace estimates that 75 billion plastic bags are thrown away each year by Thais.

The real solution lies in changing habits, Phra Maha Pranom argues. "Plastic bags and bottles are convenient, so people like them," he says. "But we have to think about the consequences. If we all stop wasting plastic, we'll make a big difference."

