



## THEY'VE GOT THE LOOKS

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A young woman releases a frog into a canal to earn "merit" at a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. Photos: AFP, Tibor Krausz, AFP

# Shrine of the times

**Thai monk has become a social media hit for speaking out against the commercialisation of Buddhism and the rise of questionable practices that claim to bring people wealth**

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Like most Buddhist temples around Thailand, Wat Soi Thong in northern Bangkok draws a steady stream of devotees. On a recent afternoon, several locals arrive one after another to petition the Buddha inside the temple's assembly hall.

A motorcycle taxi driver in his profession's trademark orange vest lights incense sticks and kneels before two large Buddha statues with the stem of a lotus bud clasped between palms pressed together in prayer. He then daubs gold leaves on one of the statues to adorn it and so earn karmic merit.

Four high-school students perform the same rituals, followed by a middle-aged street vendor who sells grilled meat on skewers from a cart, and an office worker who has come with her six-year-old daughter.

They have all come to seek favours from the Buddha: more customers for their business, more money in the bank or better grades in school.

"I would like something good to happen to my family, so I have come to ask for help," Kawee Sriwadee, a teenager, says.

"I want to make merit and re-

ceive the Buddha's blessing," street vendor Suchada Wongjan says. "I hope for my business to get better."

As far as Phra Maha (Venerable) Paiwan Warawanno is concerned, these worshippers are wasting their time. The monk, who lives in the temple's monastic quarters, insists that the Buddha does not grant wishes like a genie from a lamp.

**Part of the reason most Thai people believe in superstitions is that many monks encourage these beliefs by pretending to have supernatural powers**

PHRA MAHA PAIWAN WARAWANNO

**Phra Maha Paiwan Warawanno stands among golden Buddha statues at Wat Soi Thong in Bangkok.**

"Many people think the Buddha is like a tutelary deity they can ask for this or that," the monk says, sitting beside golden Buddha sculptures in an elevated shrine hall reached by stairs with balustrades shaped like mythical serpents. "This is a mistaken belief that goes against his teachings."

Siddhartha Gautama, a guru in

ancient India who became known as the Buddha (Awakened One), never claimed to be divine and taught that desire for material things leads to more suffering in life. Two-and-a-half millennia later, however, millions of devout Thai Buddhists would like him to help them get rich quickly.

"The object of the Buddha's teachings is to free us from unhelpful desires, yet so many people approach him with their material desires," says Professor Danai Preechapempravit, who heads the Buddhist studies programme at Bangkok's Thammasat University.

"Many monks are responsible for this because they have commercialised Buddhism," Danai says. "They have turned their monasteries into marketplaces of spiritualism to attract more people and get more donations."

Paiwan is not one of them. An owl-like man in thick spectacles who walks around with his latest reading material in hand, the 29-year-old hails from a family of labourers in eastern Thailand.

Paiwan entered the monkhood at the age of 13 to study in a provincial temple school because his parents could not afford a proper education for him.

"I became a monk not to reach enlightenment but to learn," says Paiwan, who now teaches novices

at Wat Soi Thong's own school. Pensive and impassive, Paiwan may not come across as a rebellious spirit, yet he has been an outspoken voice of reason against pervasive superstitions and his fellow monks' shenanigans. On his Facebook page, where he has more than 125,000 followers, he frequently pans irrational beliefs and dubious religious practices.

"I respect old animistic traditions, but I don't think people should put too much faith in them," he says. "The Buddha spoke out against false notions that are not grounded in reality and I feel part of my job as a monk is to do the same. I want people to think more rationally."

In a recent, widely shared Facebook post, he chided a fellow monk for claiming to be a spirit medium. During a seance held in a rural forest and broadcast on television, the monk, covered in magical tattoos, appeared to be in a trance. His eyes closed, he was emitting high-pitched nasal squeals while dangling a burning cord over a pair of small dolls.

He claimed to be communing with the spirit of a three-year-old girl who went missing from home in a village on May 10 and was later found dead in nearby woods. She was either abducted and murdered or died of exposure after getting lost, police said, citing inconclusive forensic evidence.

The toddler was at peace in heaven. But Paiwan says monks who claim to possess supernatural powers prey on the gullible in a country where the clergy are often credited as miracle workers.

"Part of the reason most Thai people believe in superstitions is that many monks encourage these beliefs by pretending to have supernatural powers," he says. "But these monks undermine the essence of Buddhism."

He is equally vexed about a Buddhist temple in southern Thailand said to be home to the spirit of a 10-year-old boy called Ai Khai, who allegedly intercedes from the afterlife on his supplicants' behalf.

The boy, whose statue is on prominent display, is believed to have been a disciple of Luang Pu Thuat, a venerated Siamese monk who, legend has it, performed miracles and made potent magical amulets for his devotees before his death at age 100 in 1682.

Thais from around the country



Cool drinks and kuman thong figurines at a spirit shrine; a reclining Buddha statue is covered in coins from worshippers who hope to get lucky.



have been flocking to the site, hoping to win big on the lottery with Ai Khai's help. Several temples elsewhere are cashing in on the craze by commissioning statues of the boy and selling amulets imprinted with his image.

"Many Buddhist temples are not what they are supposed to be," Paiwan laments. He says they are meant to be havens of ascetic-

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cism and cultivated mindfulness, but instead function as mercantile enterprises that cater to people's materialistic urges by peddling good-luck charms and effigies of famous dead monks.

Yet spiritual commercialism prevails at his own monastery, too. At the gate lottery sellers ply their trade and there are spirit shrines on the premises with kuman thong figurines from Thai folk religion.

Prayed to by believers with treats and strawberry-flavoured fizzy drinks, the dolls are stand-ins for rambunctious household ghosts that purportedly look like young boys and were once conjured up by witch doctors from unborn and stillborn fetuses.

At the temple's pier on the Chao Phraya River, several women sell corn puffs and food pellets so worshippers can make merit by feeding the fish. "If you help their life, they will help your life," says one of the vendors, Pussadee Chaipitap, a youthful 74-year-old woman in a lavender shirt decorated with Playboy bunnies.

Paiwan disputes that. "Feeding the fish helps only the fish," he says. "People feed the fish not because they care about fish but because they want to do a good deed to make merit and get lucky."

Nor can people earn karmic credit by freeing the young eels, juvenile tortoises and small fish that are on sale in plastic wash basins for release into the river.

"When you pay to release animals, you don't perform a good deed. You do the opposite," the monk says. "Many of these animals are taken from their environment so people can let them go. That's not right."

His no-nonsense approach has earned him fans (and some enemies) on social media, especially among young Thais who ask him probing questions.

"Is it true the Buddha took seven steps when he was born?" one questioner asks, referring to a miracle Gautama performed as a newborn, according to Buddhist mythology.

"It's just a story," the monk responds. "He was like any other human being."

When pressed, Paiwan is willing to question even such pivotal Buddhist beliefs as the concept of rebirth. "Even the Buddha himself was fallible," he says.

"We shouldn't view him as an [unimpeachable] authority on anything. We have to weigh the evidence for all beliefs."

In Kalamā Sutta, an ancient Buddhist text, the Awakened One urges people to do just that – evaluate the merits of religious truth claims empirically rather than take them on faith.

Paiwan has taken that advice to heart. "Buddhism is a pragmatic religion. It's not about blind faith," he says. "Many Buddhists have lost sight of this."

