

The Golden Chapel of Sin-Town

โบสถ์สีทองของเมืองบาป

The Abbot of Wat ‘Ban Pa’* was worried when the Buddhist Lent was ending so soon and no one had yet booked a Kathin** offering ceremony at his monastery. He looked at what would be the Golden Chapel of the village Wat and saw that its roof was still open to the sky all down the west side because there was not yet enough money to buy the last tiles. He could but sigh in despair. The village had been under the spell of a drought all year, the villagers were poorer than usual, and the new chapel had not been finished.

In a flash of worldly insight, the Abbot thought of the newspaper... and a day later, he was in the capital city.

The middle-aged Editor of the leading paper was upset. Yesterday he had lost twenty thousand baht on gambling. His fifth wife was also pestering him for a car. Furthermore, he had been frustrated all morning just trying to figure out which phone call to make first.

He therefore felt not a little annoyed when a monk made an entrance, walked up to his desk, and stood there confronting him.

“Who are you visiting, Reverend?” he inquired, making a real effort to speak in a civil tone.

*The Wat (Temple) of, literally, “Forest Village”, i.e. any small rural village.

**The Kathin ceremony: the annual robe-presentation ceremony in the month following the end of the Rains Retreat. This festival is usually accompanied by fund-raising for the temple, and is associated with ‘Merit Making.’ Thai Buddhists believe they can gain ‘merit’ for subsequent lives by giving generously in the present life, usually to the Wat. This conspicuous giving is often abused by the rich who use it to demonstrate their power and influence in the community.

“I came from my temple in the country – for our annual Kathin Benefaction,” the Abbot replied while still standing.

The Editor looked around for a reception officer but did not see one. He knew it was a disgraceful sight to have a monk just standing there, so he had no choice but to say, “Please do have a seat.”

The Abbot explained the purpose of his visit, in some detail.

In a flash of worldly insight, the newspaperman thought of his colleagues, estimated the amount of money needed to build the new chapel, and then grinned, his cunning eyes not entirely concealing his delight.

“My dear, Reverend,” he said to the monk in a considerably more respectful tone, “I’ll take care of it. Don’t you worry, everything will be all right. I like doing this sort of thing, you know, and I can guarantee that after the Kathin ceremony, your new chapel will certainly be completed.”

The Abbot’s face was radiant with satisfaction. It looked as if all that search for Merit and virtue had indeed left their mark on his face, making him look almost saintly. The worries that had weighed him down at Ban Pa Temple seemed to have vanished at this moment. He uttered exclamations of genuine approval and appreciation - which amused the newspaperman as much as they pleased him.

The Editor of the local paper opened up the letter and saw on it the name of the big Editor from the capital city. He suddenly wanted to burst out and curse the other’s mother. ‘No doubt, the bastard must want me to do something for him, that’s why he’s summoning me so urgently.’ the local Editor fumed. ‘I’ve no choice but to go to him because he’s the boss.’

Being a local newspaperman, he had spent his life comfortably and had become so big that he couldn’t go back to being small. He certainly

wouldn't be foolish enough to ignore this man, what is more to act in defiance of him. Without his present support, he would certainly be just a mere dog, kicked and bullied and shut out. What would be even worse, though, was that a lot of people would inflict even more pain on him despite his troubles. On top of all this, he and his family would become 'unrich,' since money from some businessmen in the illegal logging trade would stop flowing into his pocket. There would be no one who would need him enough to invite him to the big parties, or to give him perks like eating anywhere he wanted free of charge. If he wanted to see a movie, for example, he would have to pay for a ticket - and that would be humiliating.

He had become so big that he couldn't possibly get small.

A day later, the local newspaperman carried his bag to the bus terminal and used his V.I.P. ticket which exempted him from having to pay the bus fare to the capital city.

The Governor of the Province glared at him through his spectacles, and when he saw who it was that was visiting him, he too gave a silent curse, 'Damn the bastard! It's him again!' But, the very opposite for what he felt, he smiled graciously and rose to welcome his visitor.

"So it's you, brother. Welcome—haven't seen you for ages. I always miss you, you know." the Governor said.

The local Editor greeted him most respectfully with a very high *wai*.^{*} "Lately, I haven't been able to be of much service to you, sir. How's the Agricultural Development Project going?"

^{*}*wai*: Thai tradition gesture of greeting or respect

“Do you want to make it news? Good! Then please be sure to include the fact that I’ve already visited farmers in almost all of our districts. They’re all very pleased with this project, of course. I’ll start working it out right away as soon as I get the budget.” The Governor embarked on quite a lengthy speech about all this.

“Let’s save that for later, sir,” the newspaperman interrupted. “In a few days I’ll come and interview you with a photographer to put together a real scoop. I’ve already got started on it. But today I’ve just come to offer you some Merit.”

The local newspaperman produced a white envelop with the seal of *the Wheel of the Dharma** and took from it a leaflet which he proceeded to unfold and to hand to the Governor for his inspection. The governor saw immediately the picture of a chapel on the leaflet, paying no attention whatever temple it was or what its needs were.

“Oh, what a kind heart,” said the governor, forcing a smile.

“My boss from the head office in Bangkok is organizing a Kathin offering ceremony. The purpose this time is to complete the new chapel at the Wat Ban Pa. I’m truly honoured that I have been asked to be one of the organizers. Could I leave one of these subscription circulars with you?” asked the journalist in his most charitable voice.

“Why, yes, of course! Why not? Everybody knows I like this kind of thing, don’t they? Indeed, I thank you for telling me. Please do tell me whenever there are any Merit Making activities or charitable works in your neighbourhood.” The governor said, all the while burning with anger. He almost laughed out loud for making such a fool of himself; he was just able to gulp down his laughter.

*The Wheel of the Dharma or the Wheel of the Law: one of most important symbols of Buddhism

“Please, do come and collect the subscription envelop later. It’s once in a blue moon we have a chance to make Merit together, so I’d really like to give a lot – thousands, you know. A small amount – a hundred or two, just wouldn’t do,” the Governor continued.

“Thank you very much, sir” the newspaperman replied, and then said good-bye.

The Rice-Mill Owner collected Kathin subscription envelopes from the Governor, from the District Chief Officer, and from some senior government officers to whom he was obliged to give some respect and with whom he had long been acquainted. The envelopes lay one on top of the other in a big pile. He felt not a little irritation that he had to spend so many thousands of baht on this occasion. But what was there to do? After all, this was investment, it was as simple as that.

The rice harvest was imminent. He had to inform the Governor in advance about the price he would pay this year to farmers to buy their paddy. Whatever the Governor, or even his subordinates or his friends asked for, he had never failed to respond. Thus, the Rice-Mill Owner was quite certain that the Governor would not refuse to return him favours as well. Should he realize too high a profit in his trade, it was all on account of the money he had given to the Governor and his friends the year before. It always came back to him, handsomely.

The person confronting him at the moment had some real power—even more than the Governor, in fact. The Rice-Mill Owner deliberately acted in a most respectful and submissive manner, in fact beyond what he had ever acted out to anybody before. At the same time he counted out the envelopes, handed them over, and then explained.

“You see, the Governor and all these people left these charity envelopes with me,” he said. His small slit eyes were obviously hiding some complicated feelings as he spoke.

The local newspaperman could sense the scorn in the businessman’s eyes. But still he asked confidently, “and what about you, won’t you join in our Merit Making?”

“I will indeed, sir.” He replied. “My envelope is the bottommost.”

The local Editor then left, and in a flash of worldly insight, the Rice-Mill Owner felt sorry for those farmers in the field. In many villages that he visited he saw that the poor labourers were exploited at every turning. They could never guess what was going on behind the fund raising for that chapel. Unlike their investment in their works, he would get back what he had put into the chapel.

The city Editor and his colleagues counted the money from the Kathin envelopes sent by various newspapermen from the provinces, sly eyes rolling in delight.

“Here we are, then. This portion is for the Wat. The surplus here is for us to share among ourselves.” The Editor spoke to his colleagues in a straight forward, matter-of-fact voice.

One of his colleagues expressed profuse admiration for the whole job, but he refused the compliment saying that they should all really thank the Abbot of Wat Ban Pa. It was he, after all, who had brought such a windfall to them.

The unfinished roof of the Golden Chapel of the village was completed not long after the Kathin ceremony. The Abbot held a celebration for the new Chapel in which a whole crowd of people from the neighbourhood came to participate. And even though the recent harvest had not done anything to make their lives better, they felt

overjoyed at seeing that the new chapel which would serve as the center for their own Merit Making was finished at last. As if a new life awaited them, the people made wish that they would have good rice seedlings and a good yield and a good price for their paddy in the year to come. They also prayed that their beloved Abbot would carry on doing such good, spiritual work forever.

The Abbot's face was radiant with satisfaction. All that search for Merit and Virtue had indeed left their mark on his face, making him look almost saintly. He gave blessings through the loud speaker, naming all those who had taken part in the completion of the Chapel. During the reading of the list of names of contributors, he announced over and over again his heartfelt thanks to those newspapermen from the capital city and the districts who had given so selflessly.

The villages pressed their hands respectfully together over their heads echoing their Abbot's words of appreciation. At the same time, the local musicians struck up a well known tune of blessing. The saintly sound reverberated all through Wat Ban Pa, golden like the dancing light that radiated from their precious chapel.