

# thai talismans

*Amulets exemplify everyday ties to Buddhism, offering those who wear them renewed spiritual strength*

BY RACHADA RITHDEE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HELEN KUDRICH

ayap Khampan nurtures a secret power underneath his cloth. The grey-bearded man in his 50s has adorned himself with all kinds of amulets since he was a teenager, and not once, he insists, has he left home without them. “For me it has become like wearing a shirt,” he says. “Can you leave home without a shirt on?”

Today Payap is a respected mentor in amulet circles. When chance arises you can ask him politely, and he’ll be happy to unveil the ultimate treasure suspended from a gold chain on his neck: a tiny tablet of baked powder with the relief of a meditating Buddha, faceless yet impeccably graceful in its diminutive scale. This piece of *phra kruang*, or miniature Buddha image, was consecrated by the venerable Somdej Phra Buddhacharn Toh of Wat Rakang 150



years ago during the early Rattanakosin period. Because it was blessed by a monk of supreme spiritual calibre, the image is believed to attain an unrivalled sanctity that brings upon its owner an aura of greatness. Look closely and you'll marvel at the fine-grained texture concocted from an alchemy of fragrant flower seeds, 108 kinds of holy plants, rice left from the bowl of the monk, and special *din sor pong* powder on which the cleric had inscribed a hallowed mantra.

Commonly known as Phra Somdej, the image is the most revered among the Grand Five, the rarest, holiest *pra kruang* in the entire history of this land. The other four are Phra Kampaeng Sumkor, Phra Rawd Lampun, Phra Pong Supan and Phra Nang Phya. Payap is a proud owner of all five, and altogether they are worth, at minimum, something like 10 million baht. Not that he has any intention to sell them. "Great amulets are the fortune of a lifetime, their spiritual value inestimable," he says. And the man wouldn't budge even if you tempted him with a hundred million baht more.

Amulets exemplify the power of faith. They're objects

*Amulets exemplify the power of faith. They're objects that give believers spiritual morale and urge them to invest strength and dedication to succeed in their pursuits*

that give believers spiritual morale and urge them to invest strength and dedication to succeed in their pursuits. The story of amulets and charms is as old as the origins of this nation, dated back 700 years to the Sukhothai period, or even a few centuries before that. Ancient warriors sought physical invulnerability from supernatural sources, whereas normal people looked for divine guardianship in critical moments, and for strings of good luck in times of peace.

Nowadays the tradition of amulets, or *kruang lang khong khlang*, is perceived as an aside to mainstream Buddhism. It's a normal practice for devout Buddhists to reflect upon the teachings of Lord Buddha by worshipping his image, thus some practitioners claim that it's an auspicious gesture to carry a small, portable Buddha sculpture with them as a reminder, an alarm bell of conscience. But there is also a more arcane side of the discipline that hints at the normal capabilities of amulets, from warding off evil spirits to blocking the



The spiritual value  
of some pieces is  
inestimable.

**OPPOSITE:** Working  
on the fine details is  
a skill for only the  
steadiest of hands.

assault of black magic, boosting charisma, facilitating the road to power, or, bluntly, protecting injury from bullets and other lethal firearms. Rumours abound about how a gun aimed at close range repeatedly misfires at a man who wears a certain, highly sought-after talisman, or how a serious car accident fails to inflict a single scratch on such a person. They even make the front page of Thai newspapers from time to time, exciting modern-minded readers who hover between disbelief and awe.

Reason or superstition? It depends upon whom you ask, and the situation is so loaded with wicked irony in the fact that one of the biggest amulet markets in Bangkok is located in the same building that serves as the largest computer complex in the country, called Pantip Plaza. Die-hard belief and new-century technology, they seem to co-exist happily. But for genuine followers, like Payap, they insist that their belief is far from a superstitious mumbo-jumbo: faith is the means, not the end. "The amulets cannot help you, if you don't help yourself," Payap intones. "The Buddha represents universal goodness, the question is, are you behaving like a good person?"

In the reportedly six-billion-baht market, there are generally two types of Thai amulets. Widely popular are the miniature Buddha images, which collectors cherish for their sacredness as well as craftsmanship, and they're available in a few thousand forms from a few hundred baht and up. The second type encompasses other talismanic objects, such as *takrud*, or amulet scrolls; *bia kae*, or protective conches; *kiew sua*, or tiger's fangs; *rahu*, or figures of the Rahu giant; and there are rosaries, rings, medallions and artefacts made from exotic materials ranging from ivory tusks and *warn*, or holy plants.

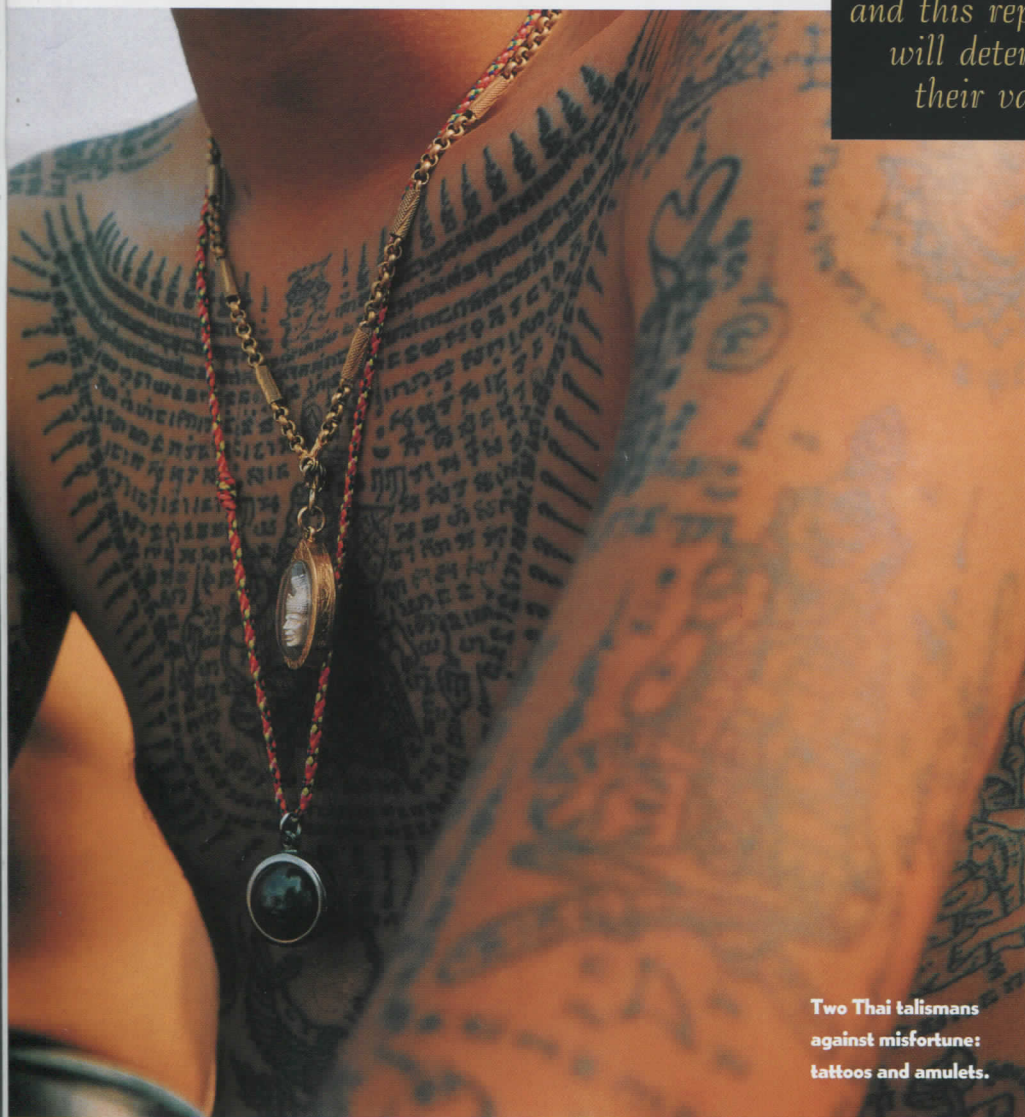
*Only monks  
who have attained  
religious purity  
through rigorous  
practices can  
channel their  
power to amulets,  
and this reputation  
will determine  
their value*

All of these amulets have one of two origins. Either they're antique pieces found in the crypts of ancient temples or historical sites by accident, or by the work of nasty tomb raiders; or they are relatively new creations anointed by guru monks. Some antique Buddha images are as much as 1,000 years old, like Phra Rawd Lampun, one of the

Grand Five. Meanwhile Phra Somdej, though 150 years old, belongs to the second group. The belief is that only monks who have attained religious purity through rigorous practices can channel their invisible power to mundane objects, and this spiritual reputation will determine the value of the amulets.

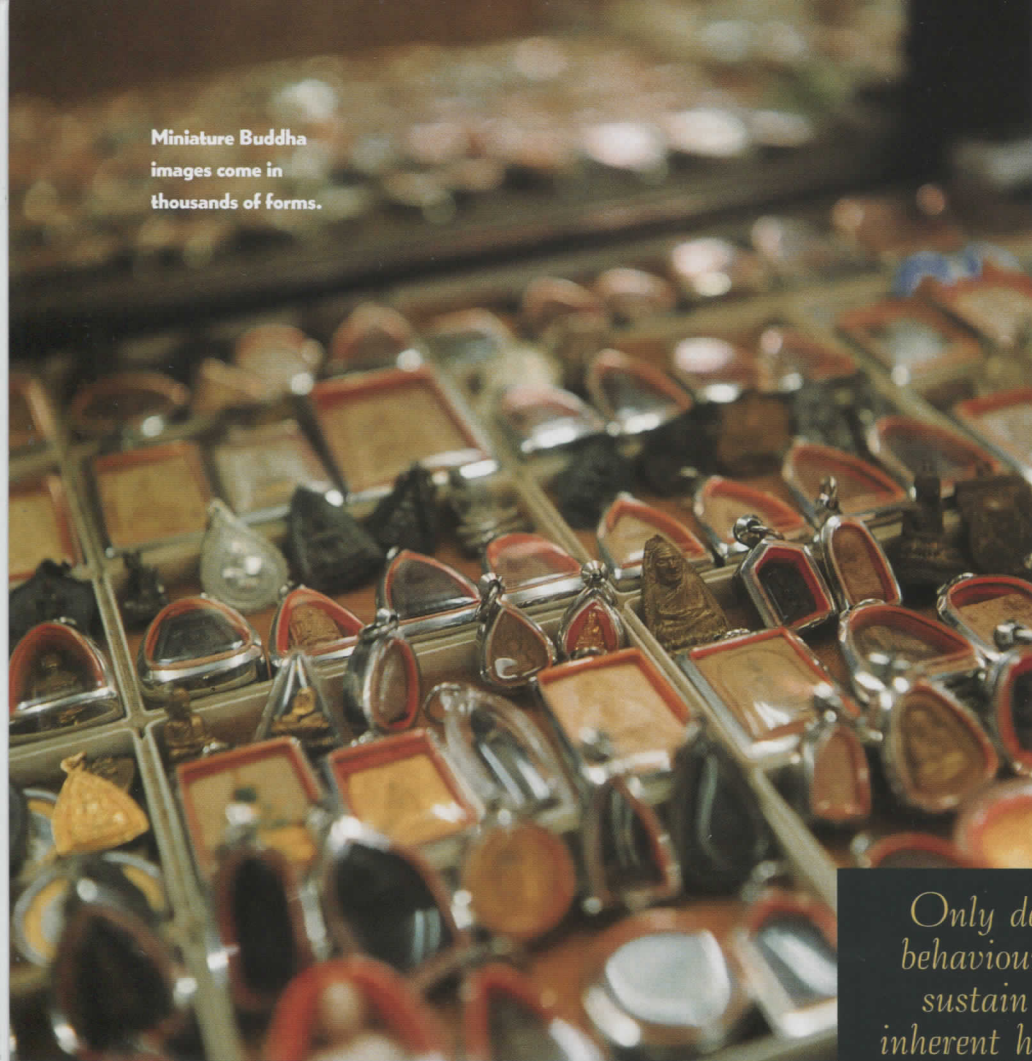
In various corners of Thailand, there are monks who specialise in blessing the best amulet scrolls, the perfect conches or the mightiest tiger's fangs. To roar like a fierce creature, people hunt for the limited edition of carved tiger's fangs made by the late Luang Por Pan of Wat Klong Darn, in Samutprakarn province. Cut into a thumb-sized figure of the beast with its jaw wide open, the piece was etched with sacred letterings. Tigers symbolise power, or *maha amnad*, and those who seek infinite strength would like to have this rare object around their neck at all times.

For *takrud*, or amulet scrolls, the classic batch was consecrated by Luang Pu Eiam of Wat Sapansung, in



Two Thai talismans  
against misfortune:  
tattoos and amulets.

Miniature Buddha  
images come in  
thousands of forms.



Nontaburi province. Celebrated for their quality of *maha ud*, or absolute protection, the tiny scrolls are generally made from lead, silver, bamboo, or even a patch of skin from a tiger's forehead. These materials are solid elements — in the case of bamboo, it has a thick, dead-end stem — so believers associate this with the ability to block the offence of weapons. In a more metaphysical application, *bia kae*, or anti-evil conches are used to counteract the working of black magic and the conches whose fame resounds far and wide were the ones blessed by Luang Pu Rawd of Wat Nairong on the Thonburi side of Bangkok.

To summon luck and charisma, believers resort to Hanuman, a wooden figure of the Indian monkey-god carved from an enigmatic organism: the root of a pudson tree that points eastward. When digging for these roots, ancient rules stipulated that a digger must not let his shadow fall upon the tree itself, otherwise the whole process is jinxed. Finally the last object in the mystical menagerie is a model of the furious giant Rahu, made from “one-eyed” coconut shell — normally a coconut shell has two eyes, or markings, on its surface — that would shield its bearer from straying negative forces.

Of course we cannot prove these claims despite our immense curiosity. To most onlookers the talismanic practice is such a grey sub-culture that looks somewhat

nonsensical. And indeed many Thai people perceive amulet-bearers with bewilderment and suspicion, more or less the same reaction we regard persons with tattoos. To the general public, only *phra kruang*, miniature Buddha images, represents a benign power based on the positive belief in the eternal goodness. So it's socially acceptable to hang a piece — or even a jingling collection of two or three — around one's neck without provoking a questionable stare, which is often the case against those who exhibit cultish objects like tiger's fangs or amulet scrolls.

The artistic value of *phra kruang* also opens up a new segment of disciples who treasure the fastidious details of the pieces, the quality of the mould, or the texture of the print. Every month there's a competition in which the rarest and finest models are awarded the prizes, and such event help ensure an active market during the current economic gloom.

*Only decent  
behaviour can  
sustain the  
inherent holiness  
of the Buddha  
images. When  
wearing one, a  
person should  
maintain his piety  
to honour Buddha*

But in this journey along spiritual topography, faith is what determines the real value of a tablet of baked powder: only decent behaviour can sustain the inherent holiness of the Buddha images. When wearing one, a person should maintain his piety to honour Lord Buddha. He's instructed to take the amulets off before entering lowly establishments, and especially before engaging in sexual activities. There's no point in possessing a great *phra kruang* in the false hope of getting away with the crime of indiscretion or carelessness. Even its creator knows this. Luang Por Koon is the most famous guru monk alive in Thailand, and the Buddha images he blessed are believed to be an ultimate protector from bad vibes or accidents.

“You should put my Buddha image in your car,” the monk once remarked. “But when you drive faster than 80 kilometres per hour, the Buddha will flee your vehicle at once.” That's a classic summary of all things spiritual: faith is the means, each individual must define his own end.