

Source: www.travel.cnn.com

Buddhist amulets: Little keys to the Thai spirit

Seeking wild sex? Protection from enemies? Bangkok's Buddhist amulet market has you covered

By Richard S. Ehrlich



A two-headed baby 'zombie' is the most terrifying thing you can buy in Bangkok's riverside Buddhist amulet market, but if you promise to feed it every day, the undead spirit could become your loyal slave and protect you against misfortune.



Several magazines published in Thailand are devoted to news about amulets. "In Thailand, the lowest level of believers buy these zombies and other amulets like this," says Phramaha Watcharapung Kaviwungso, a saffron-robed Buddhist monk warily examining the grotesque doll-like totem.

"The next highest level of believers buy amulets which have the faces of Buddhist monks. The highest level of believers are people like me, who believe only in Buddha."

Most Thais are Buddhists, but they also mix a bewildering slew of other beliefs -- including Hindu, animist and superstitions -- into their spiritual outlook.

Buddha was not into amulets, and advised followers to ignore such illusions. But today's Thais surround themselves with as much protection as possible by wearing, carrying or keeping at home one or more small amulets.

An amulet for every occasion

According to believers, amulets can bring good luck, true love, wild sex, cold cash or exquisite relief from obscure personal problems.



This round amulet portrays Hinduism's elephant-headed Lord Ganesha. The pieces come in all styles and shapes, made of metal, wood, bone or plaster, and can include sacred ash from incense, colored dust from a temple's bricks, human hair or other material.

Some portray Buddha, or a famous senior monk, in bas-relief. Others depict a mythical creature or cryptic script, often in Khmer language, which may be indecipherable.

Thailand is one of the world's biggest producers, sellers and exporters of amulets, which are available in every Thai city and village. Some men, including tough guys in danger of being killed, wear a necklace of several big, heavy amulets in a pretentious form of Buddhist bling.

Antique or rare amulets can fetch more than 3.3 million baht. Most Thais, however, usually get their amulets at a Buddhist temple after making a small donation, or by rummaging among humble stalls where prices begin at five or 10 baht.

The stories explaining most amulets are often half-remembered, and can change depending upon who is describing the charm and its powers.

Invisibility and protection

The two-headed baby zombie sells for about 200 baht at Bert Bu's shop, in Bangkok's main amulet market near Phra Chan Road, next to Thammasat University, along the Chao Phraya River. It is made of 'pressed powder,' hardened to form the shape of Thailand's legendary Khu Mon Tong.

According to some legends, Khu Mon Tong is a baby who died, perhaps stillborn. His loving father fed Khu Mon Tong's corpse, and successfully reanimated its spirit, which gratefully protected the parent. Anyone who buys a Khu Mon Tong amulet and diligently feeds it a morsel of food every day, offers it toys and calls it "my son," can hope to be protected from enemies.

Some Buddhist amulets can be sinister things. Fanatics have created Khu Mon Tong amulets by using the crushed skull of a baby, or with the dripping oil from a roasted infant.



A buyer uses a small magnifying glass to scrutinize an amulet. A much more popular and peaceful amulet shows a faceless Buddha sitting cross-legged, atop a layered plinth.

The rectangular amulet, often called a 'Phra Somdet,' is easy to produce from a plaster-like substance, and is frequently given to devotees at Buddhist temples. On the reverse side, it may include the name of the temple, or the monk who manufactured it, or other information.

One version has a small fish bone embedded in the back, which some people believe bestows special powers, and costs a mere 10 baht. Another amulet is illustrated with a large ship, and is sometimes called a 'Krom Ma Luang Chumporn.' It is said to protect people during ocean voyages.

A chubby cross-legged man, covering his face with both hands, depicts a devout monk who resembled the Lord Buddha. People mistakenly worshipped him, thinking he was actually Buddha, until he hid his face so no one could see him, according to believers.

The amulet is called a 'Phra Phid Ta,' which translates as 'monk closed eyes.' Possess this amulet, and you will remain virtually invisible to your opponents, they say.

Just superstition? Wearers swear by their amulets

Professional collectors will whip out a tiny magnifying glass and scrutinize an amulet's details to determine if it is genuine or one of the many forgeries offered to unsuspecting buyers. To create a bestseller, monks pray intensely over a batch of fresh amulets, and perform other acts to infuse the item with spiritual functions.



These dinner plate-sized icons show "Phra Pid Ta," though most collectors buy smaller amulets that can be worn on a necklace.

Huge fortunes are made from selling amulets, prompting allegations of corrupt monks and temples raking in massive profits, which are unaccounted for and tax-free. Complaints are also frequently voiced about the blatant commercialization of Thai-style Buddhism -- and its degeneration into mindless superstition -- that tarnishes Buddha's lofty ideals.

But believers swear that their favorite amulet saved their life during a car crash or violent attack. To boost morale, Thailand's military has even handed out amulets to its Buddhist soldiers fighting in the south against Muslim separatists.

Thailand's amulet bazaars include shops selling tiny plastic or glass containers -- ringed by metal, silver or gold -- to enshrine an amulet while wearing it on a necklace or storing it at home. Rules to obey while wearing an amulet include removing it during sexual intercourse and keeping it off the floor and away from people's feet.

Thieves target temples, shops and homes if they think they can steal expensive amulets, creating an irony in which 'protective amulets' need protection. People who complain that their amulet failed, however, are usually told that it works only if the person who possesses it is a pious Buddhist, creating a marvelous loophole to avoid refunds.