

Promoting Buddhist Education While Keeping the Tradition



[Interview] By Jeffrey Po

- A conversation with Ven. Phrakhu Udom Dhammavithes (Phian), the abbot of Uttamayanmuni Buddhist Temple

Built in 1962, Uttamayanmuni Buddhist Temple (UBT) in Hong San Terrace, belongs to the Thai Theravada Buddhist Tradition and is closely linked with the Kelantan temple, Wat Uttamaram which falls under the Kelantanese Thai Monastic Chapter in Malaysia. Like his predecessors, the current abbot is a Malaysian born of Thai descent who hails from Kelantan. Unlike his predecessors, he has a higher and wider vision. Jeffrey chats to Phrakhu Udom Dhammavithes, or better known as Bhante Phian, to find out more.

On UBT's Historical Origins

Can you perhaps clarify how does a temple in Malaysia fall under the jurisdiction of the Thai Religious Department?

Historically, some parts of Malaysia such as Perlis, Kedah and Kelantan were part of the Thai Kingdom. In fact, in Kelantan there are 20 Theravada tradition Buddhist temples that fall under the jurisdiction of the Thai Religious Department. Hence our appointments come from there.

How is UBT connected with Wat Uttamaram temple in Kelantan?

UBT was built in 1962. In 1959 the chief monk of Wat Uttamaram came to Singapore to conduct some religious ceremonies for some Singaporeans. He was then offered this piece of land. His name was Jao Khun Khron, or Phra Vicarayanamuni, a Royal Monastic title conferred by His Majesty King of Thailand but was popularly known as Tok Raja. He accepted and the building construction commenced thereafter. Unfortunately he passed away before he could witness the final completion of the temple. The second abbot, the nephew of Tok Raja, Jao Khun Mit, then came to officially consecrate this temple. Hence the jurisdiction of UBT is within the patronage of the Kelantan temple, Wat Uttamaram.

Would it be correct to say that you are the third abbot in this lineage of UBT?

Yes that is correct. When I first arrived in 2006, UBT did not have any sort of activities. Most devotees came here merely to receive blessings, participate in some religious ceremonies and obtain

blessings for the amulets or pendants they have purchased. This is the traditional Thai style.

What is the composition of your devotees in terms of nationality?

Well, 90% of the devotees here are local Singaporeans. As you know, UBT is not a pure Thai temple. It is considered a local temple because the lineage is from Kelantan. Most Thai devotees prefer to patronise temples such as Palelai Buddhist Temple or Ananda Metyarama Buddhist Temple. In terms of Kelantanese Buddhists, there are only about 10 of them.

On UBT's Missions

Bhante Phian was instrumental in starting the Dhamma propagation programme in UBT since his appointment in November 2007. He continues to provide the established cultural and traditional style of service (i.e. religious ceremonies, blessings, etc.) to the devotees while paving the way for Dhamma propagation. He knew that he could not stop those practices and introduce Dhamma propagation immediately. He was also acutely aware that he needed the assistance of Ven. Kheminda, a Theravada monk of Indonesian origin and trained in Myanmar.

How does Ven. Kheminda help you in promoting the Dhamma?

With him, I could start Dhamma as well as Abhidhamma courses. His presence has also attracted a number of Indonesian Buddhists. We are getting a good mix now.

What is your aspiration now?

My aspiration is to spread the Dhamma through Buddhist knowledge and education. Buddhism has expanded simply because of the spread of Buddhist education. If it had remained purely as a religious institution performing religious ceremonies, conducting blessings and selling amulets/pendants only, Buddhism would not have expanded at such a fast rate. One of the strong Dhamma propagation programme that is currently running is our Abhidhamma course conducted by Bhante Kheminda. He is very well versed in that subject. The programme is conducted in the English language and we use *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* by Bhikkhu Bodhi. There are two types of devotees that come to UBT – one simply to buy pendants, amulets, receive blessings, etc., and the other to improve their knowledge in the Dhamma. The latter group grew after I came here. I sincerely hope that this group will continue to grow as these devotees will be the ambassadors of Buddhism.

Thank you, Bhante.

About the Abbot

Bhante Phian was ordained in 1996, after which he spent the rainy seasons in his home town. Sensing the need for further education, he re-settled himself in another temple in Kelantan where he spent three years studying Buddhism under the Royal Dhamma Examination programme offered by the Religious Department of Thailand. Having completed it, he left for Sri Lanka where he graduated with a Masters in Buddhist Studies from the Kelaniya University.

