Khun Sawet Piamphongsant and I were sitting at our usual meeting place, on the balcony of his house overlooking the Chao Phraya River, one morning in early December of 1994 when he explained to me about making merit (tham bun). At our first meeting in 1992, we had sat in the formal dining room downstairs. Since then, when I visited him at his home I would walk through the kitchen, remove my shoes at the bottom of the highly polished stairs, climb to the second floor, pass the locked glass cases filled with his extensive collection of Thai and Chinese porcelain, and go through his office out onto the balcony. The balcony is a small but pleasant space, cooled by river breezes and lined with plants. It serves as a kind of outdoor kitchen and office—shelves with dishes and implements sit against the house, as does a small refrigerator. Khun Sawet works there in the early morning at the round marble table, answering correspondence, translating, and writing poetry. When we chatted, I would sit next to him, for the river traffic was loud: long-tailed boats filled with tourists ply the river, tugs towing strings of barges chug by, river taxis cross from Thonburi to Bangkok, stopping just below at the pier, Tha Phra Athit. Despite the noisy river, Khun Sawet never raised his voice. Tape-recording was impossible, so I kept my notebook close at hand. We nearly always spoke in English (his was excellent), with careful attention to the precise wording and meaning of what he intended to say. After a few hours of talk, we would eat a simple but wonderful meal—a fresh crab omelet, soup made with mushrooms brought from Chiang Rai—prepared by his cook and served to us on the balcony.

That December morning, I asked him if he had ever been ordained as a monk. Yes, he said, once for three months at Wat Mahathat, when he had been a young man of twenty-five or twenty-six years. As a monk practicing the precepts, he had tried but failed to understand “the

“Sheep art is helping our country
Because then our art will enhance our reputation
So we take our place without shame
Among the great nations of the world.”
—King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), c.1913
essence of Buddhism.” Years later, in 1945, he had entered Wat Mahathat for a month-long re-
treat to learn meditation under the tutelage of its abbot, Phra Phimolathan. There he experi-
enced the breakthrough he had sought, attaining the deep inner peace that comes with finally
understanding the greatness of the Buddha. He described learning to be “exactly in the pres-
ent” and to acknowledge that which arises—the noise of a bird, tiredness, loud music, an itch—
then passes away. He got up from the chair to show me the steps of walking meditation, one
of the techniques of vipassana practice. “I am walking,” he said as he deliberately, in slightly
slow motion, raised his foot, placed it forward and down again, then shifted his weight forward
and raised his other foot. He walked back and forth across the balcony several times. He then
spoke of the people at the retreat crying, of he himself crying from the gratitude that came with
understanding and the release of fear. “And,” he said, “out of gratefulness, to the Lord Buddha,
comes the desire to tham bun.”

While slightly stooped and careful in his movements, Khun Sawet is usually in superb
health. He is deeply religious. He meditates regularly and has long been committed to the prop-
agation of vipassana meditation techniques. He is chair of the Vipassana Foundation, estab-
lished at Wat Mahathat, and as a result of his experiences there, the abbot asked him to write
a book explaining vipassana meditation techniques, first published in 1960. Meditation and the
insights he had reached through that practice would account, I assumed, for his aura of calm,
happiness, and intense focus. He continued to maintain this aura through the long months of
unremitting pain and restricted activity following a fall that resulted in a cracked tailbone.

At age eighty-five (in 1995, when I saw him most frequently), Khun Sawet was still a busy
man. In his words, “I have no leisure. I have to work every day . . . for the people, for the art.”
He has many extensive and complicated projects to which he is deeply committed, including
writing poetry, assisting in temple administration, promoting the works of Sunthorn Puu (one
of Thailand’s greatest poets), collecting ceramics, and gardening. In addition to his sponsorship
and management of Wat Buddhapadippa through the London Buddhist Temple Foundation,
Khun Sawet has long been the treasurer of Wat Mahathat, the largest temple in Bangkok. In this
capacity he oversees the management of nearby commercial properties owned by the temple,
reconciles temple accounts, and prepares Wat Mahathat’s annual financial report to the Reli-
gious Affairs Department.

Khun Sawet’s understanding of art arises in no small part out of his deep passion for Thai lit-
erature, stories that he enjoyed retelling on any occasion. When we visited Wat Phra Singh in
Chiang Mai, he pointed to scenes in the newly cleaned murals while recounting the story of
Phra Sangthong, Prince of the Golden Conch. When he received me one morning, I found him
on the balcony writing poetry based upon the story of Phra Lau, a seventeenth-century ro-
mance, and he immediately told the tale to me at great length. But he spoke most frequently
of his admiration for the poetry of Sunthorn Puu. Several times he explained the intricate
structure and beautiful internal rhyming of the poet’s stanzas. He often extolled the poet’s
greatness, once playfully describing Shakespeare as the “Sunthorn Puu of England.” Khun
Sawet was chair of the Sunthorn Puu Society, with the mission of spreading awareness of his
work among Thai schoolchildren by distributing his works to local libraries and sponsoring
contests. Khun Sawet is himself a poet; he often referred to his “next project,” a one-thousand-verse poem to honor his wife.4

The son of a Sino-Thai merchant in Rayong Province, Khun Sawet had been educated in both law and economics at Thammasat University in Bangkok. As an eight-time member of Parliament and as deputy prime minister and minister of finance, he has served in various Thai governments for thirty years—spanning regimes from the ultranationalist authoritarianism of Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram to the modern democratic idealism of Kukrit Pramoj. As have many members of the Thai elite, he has traveled extensively, both as an official representative of the Thai government and as a private citizen. On tour with his wife and other Thais, he has visited countries throughout Europe, North and South America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. Through travel, Khun Sawet sought knowledge of the world and to “promote world peace.”5 He has hosted Peace Corps volunteers eight times. Several of his children were educated abroad; one currently resides in the United States.

Khun Sawet’s travels fed another passion. He took keen delight in describing and exhibiting his various gardening projects, especially the grounds of his second home in Chiang Rai. There he has planted, literally, the fruits of his travels: trees and shrubs from all over the world—Nepal, China, the United States, and England. These plants include a magnolia and an apple seedling from Wat Buddhapadipa itself. At one of our last meetings he served me coffee made from beans he had grown in his Chiang Rai garden. He has also established a park near his hometown of Rayong as a memorial to his wife.

We traveled together, visiting numerous temples and museums. On these occasions, he compared both older and contemporary temple mural paintings to those he had sponsored at Wat Buddhapadipa. When introducing himself to temple abbots, museum personnel, or academics we encountered on our visits, he always mentioned the Wimbledon temple and his central role in its construction, as well as his long service as government minister. Although in this manner he sought and received public validation for his meritorious actions and his standing in Thai society—indeed, sponsoring a temple ranks at the top of merit-making activities—Khun Sawet presents a modest demeanor, devoid of ostentation in appearance or temperament.

Many people whom I interviewed agreed that Khun Sawet’s unstinting efforts had propelled the financing of the ubosot construction and the mural painting. On his balcony early one morning, he described his role in the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, saying, “I write the letters, I am the typist, I fix the meetings. . . . I try to do everything for the foundation.” “Then, you did all the work?” I asked. He chuckled, replying, “If I do not do it, I do not know who will.” His fund-raising for Wat Buddhapadipa has continued since the completion of the murals, with long-range plans for permanent classrooms and a building to house those who attend meditation retreats.6

An Expanding Economy of Merit

Through his personal commitment to propagating vipassana meditation techniques and his activism as a layman at Wat Mahathat, Khun Sawet exemplifies the gradual laicization of Thai
Theravada Buddhism and other contemporary realignments within Thai society between the laity, the *sangha* (Buddhist community), and the state. Despite serving in the Thai government at the time of his initial involvement with the temple in the early 1960s, the thrust of Khun Sawet’s interests in Wat Buddhapadipa has been personal and primarily religious. He comprised only one of a large group of wealthy contributors to Wat Buddhapadipa, albeit the most pivotal one by his and others’ reckoning.

In contrast, the involvement of another sponsor, Dr. Konthi Suphamongkhon, represents interests of the Thai state in continuing its historical position as protector of the Thai *sangha* and in promoting the national interests of Thailand abroad. Dr. Konthi became involved with Wat Buddhapadipa while serving as Thai ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1970–1976; his engagement was necessarily from his position as a government official. However, he also expressed intense personal motivation and religious commitment. The respective positions of the two men do not imply any theoretical opposition—far from it. The distinction points to multiple positions, an overlapping array of interests among these sponsors within an expanding Thai economy of merit. Differing interests can give rise to competition and sometimes conflict between individuals and the institutions to which they are attached—emerging lay Buddhist groups, individual temples, the *sangha*, and the Thai state.

Notably, Khun Sawet, Dr. Konthi, and their friends and associates belong to an older generation of Thai elites—in their late seventies and eighties at the time of my research—who gave or arranged large sums of money to build the *ubosot* and paint the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa. Wat Buddhapadipa projects their elite vision of Thai national culture, one linked to their positions within the Thai social hierarchy, the social dynamics of the gift/donation, the history of Anglo-Thai relations, and notions of “Thainess” that have shaped its construction architecturally and as social space. National and monarchical pride suffused the fund-raising activities of this older generation of Thais. Following the example of King Chulalongkorn, who traveled throughout Europe and sent his son to England to be educated at Sandhurst and Oxford, many of Wat Buddhapadipa’s sponsors had been educated in the United Kingdom, France, or Germany. Adopting a temple in London seemed not at all extraordinary, as they had become quite comfortable in Europe. As a former senior government official explained, “For many of my generation, London is our second home. We are so used to it, we know it so well.”

However, the temple occupies a global economic and cultural space that has emerged since the 1970s, an arena where Thais circulate as investors, corporate functionaries, students, artists, and tourists, and one that shifts the grounds for the formation of “Thai” identity and the terms of cultural citizenship. The mural painters Chalermchai, Panya, and their assistants represent a younger generation straining to attain elite status. The young professionals, bankers, and stockbrokers who contributed to their mural project by buying their art in fund-raising exhibitions also seek such status, historically reserved in Thailand for royalty, civil servants, and the military. This younger generation’s involvement with Wat Buddhapadipa is structured by issues of investment, taste, and Thai identity as much as the merit attained through building temples. While the ethics of merit accumulation through public giving and the pursuit of individual sal-
vation remain important to many in this younger generation, the explicit ties of merit-making to nation building, a relationship articulated by the older sponsors, have attenuated.

Lavish merit-making by individuals that intersects with the expansion of business interests or entrenchment of political regimes characterizes other Southeast Asian modernities as well as Thailand (Schober 1995). The experiences of Thai urban elites abroad through education and travel, their globalized business, political, and social connections, and the ethic of long-distance merit-making at faraway temples like Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon or Wat Thai in Los Angeles add a more ecumenical, pan-Buddhist cast to such activity. I do not (nor cannot) interpret the intentions of individual sponsors in their giving except as they have personally relayed such intentions to me; rather, I note the convergence of diverse interests in the discourse and practices of merit-making.

To a large degree, the construction and administration of Wat Buddhapadipa represents a transnational division of labor. While the mechanics of establishing the temple—finding a suitable location, negotiating with English authorities, obtaining necessary permits, and overseeing construction of the ubosot— took place in the Thai embassy and through Thais residing in London, the bulk of the fund-raising was accomplished in Bangkok. The London Buddhist Temple Foundation, governed by Khun Sawet, Dr. Konthi, and other members of its executive committee, directed the fund-raising activities, supplemented by a subcommittee of London residents. In a real sense, the executive committee was mobile, as individual members traveled back and forth between Bangkok and London quite frequently. During the years of constructing the ubosot and painting the murals, Khun Sawet estimated he traveled to London two or three times a year, totaling at least twenty visits. Other committee members traveled as diplomats and officials of the Thai government, others still on business, pleasure trips, or in combination with the annual kathin ceremony to donate robes to monks at the end of their annual retreat during the rainy season.

At the behest of his former professor, Dr. Konthi, Thai Prime Minister General Kriangsak Chomanan served as chair of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation. General Kriangsak arranged for the Thai government to donate 10 million baht (about US$400,000) to the building of the ubosot by inserting an appropriation in the supporting budget of the Religious Affairs Department. General Kriangsak also raised money from personal friends and associates. The government of his successor, Prem Tinsulanonda, budgeted 6 million baht (US$240,000) for Wat Buddhapadipa. In addition, through connections between Khun Sawet and the then minister of finance, the Bureau of the National Lottery allotted 3 million baht (US$120,000).

Like Khun Sawet, some of these sponsors sought to promote Buddhism worldwide. Professor Sanya Dharmasakti, active in the World Buddhist Organization, had assisted in establishing the first Thai Buddhist temple in London in 1965. While prime minister in the early 1970s, he attempted to involve the Thai government in the Wat Buddhapadipa project. In addition to having personal attachments to England, many key supporters had connections to the tourist industry as well, as developers and hotel builders. Major donors (those giving 1 million baht, or about US$40,000) included Khunying Somsri Charoen-Rajapark, a developer of upscale hotels...
and shopping plazas—named in one magazine profile as “Thailand’s Leading Businesswoman.” Another sponsor with similar interests was Senglert Baiyok of the Baiyok family, which in 1995 in Bangkok was constructing the tallest hotel in the world, Baiyok Tower. Uthen Techaphaibul, owner of Bangkok’s World Trade Center, also contributed one million baht.

A key—and some have argued the key—sector of the Thai economic elite is the Sino-Thai community of merchants and bankers. This sector has moved aggressively to sponsor important merit-making rituals such as the kathin ceremony throughout Thailand to enhance public legitimacy for their increasingly central role in the Thai political economy.14 Seats on the London Buddhist Temple Foundation and its executive committee were reserved for those who held important positions within this community, such as the chair of the Thai-Chinese Chamber of Commerce or the chair of the Thai Bankers’ Association. Members of prominent banking families, representing “the largest, wealthiest and most profitable enterprises in Thailand” (Hewison 1981, 397) show up frequently on the lists of the foundation’s committee members who raised money for Wat Buddhapadipa. These individuals appear on the donor lists with individual gifts, along with contributions from the banks they control: Bangkok Bank (Sophonpanich family), Thai Farmers Bank (Lamsam family), and Bangkok Metro Bank, First Bangkok City Bank, and Bank of Asia (Techaphaibul family). Other contributing banks included the Bank of Ayutthaya, Siam Commercial Bank, Thai Military Bank, and the British-based Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. Numerous corporations, financial firms, and private foundations contributed as well, along with hundreds of Thais and farang.

**Vipassana in England**

Khun Sawet explained to me the origins of the Wat Buddhapadipa temple with this clear statement: “We would like to promote Buddhism in England.”15

Khun Sawet and his wife had been traveling in Europe. In his capacity as chair of the Vipassana Foundation committee at Wat Mahathat, he visited the Buddhist Association of Hamburg, West Germany, where twin monks of German origin had established a Buddhist center. In London Khun Sawet and his wife visited the Thai embassy. One of the embassy employees, a former Wat Mahathat monk who knew Khun Sawet, told him about the Buddhavihara in Hampstead, a lay meditation center for English Buddhists founded in 1956 by a Thai-ordained English monk. In the early 1960s local Thais attended a Singhalese temple, the only other Theravada Buddhist temple in London. Phra Ananthaphothii, the monk at the Buddhavihara, requested Khun Sawet’s help in arranging for the abbot of Wat Mahathat, Phra Rajsidhimuni, to come and (in Khun Sawet’s words) “teach English people . . . about practice.” Phra Rajsidhimuni had studied vipassana meditation techniques in Burma and held the “highest meditation rank” in Thailand. Khun Sawet related to me his answer: “I told him okay. I will try. Phra Rajsidhimuni is my khrú, my ajarn.”16

In private and published interviews, Khun Sawet gave prominence to the promotion of vipassana meditation specifically, rather than Buddhism more generally, in his accounts of the establishment of Wat Buddhapadipa. In the context of that period and tensions within the Thai
sangha, his involvement and efforts to get Phra Rajsidhimuni to England had political as well as religious significance. These events occurred during a time when competition had intensified between two sects of Thai Buddhism—the Mahanikai and Thammapayut (so-called “reform”) orders—and when the Thai state sought to maintain tight political control of the population.\(^{17}\) Thailand in the late 1960s and early 1970s experienced increasing political absolutism under the direction of army-backed and installed chiefs of state. Official policy under Prime Minister Field Marshall Sarit emphasized national development and political integration at the expense of the democratic ideals of the 1932 coup that had abolished the absolute monarchy in Siam.

Phra Rajsidhimuni’s predecessor as abbot of Wat Mahathat in Bangkok (the largest temple in Thailand and of the Mahanikai order) was the charismatic and ambitious Phra Phimolathan.\(^{18}\) He promoted vipassana meditation throughout Thailand by bringing abbots and monks from the provinces to Bangkok for training, involving nuns (mae chii) and numerous laypeople alike, and by encouraging the establishment of meditation centers.\(^{19}\) This program posed a “political threat” to Sarit, since, as Tambiah has noted,

> political power was grounded theoretically in a monk’s spiritual excellence and religious achievement. This source and basis of power were inaccessible to lay politicians and soldiers whose power rested on the control of physical force. . . . Insofar as there exist mechanisms within the sangha [such as vipassana centers] for generating collective support in society that can be claimed to be independent of and immune to naked political power, the political authority will seek to curb them. (1976, 260, emphasis in original)\(^{20}\)

Sarit accused Phra Phimolathan of being a Communist (a major concern of the Thai military at that time) and of instigating attacks against his rival in the Thammapayut order. On an inflated charge of violating the vinaya, or the precepts obeyed by monks, Phra Phimolathan was forcibly disrobed and thrown in jail. While the Supreme Court later cleared him of the charge, he lived out his days as an ordinary monk at Wat Mahathat.

As an active lay worshiper at Wat Mahathat, Khun Sawet himself felt threatened by Sarit’s actions. “At that time,” he told me one evening, “I waited for a knock at the door, because I was the man nearest the abbot, his disciple.” He indicated that because of what had happened to his teacher, Phra Rajsidhimuni “dared not take action” in terms of the invitation to go to London. Khun Sawet himself wrote a letter to the Supreme Patriarch, the head of the Thai sangha, urging him to support the proposal and noting the strong requests by monks in Europe for a qualified teacher of vipassana meditation techniques. In his letter, which he recounted to the abbot of Wat Buddhapadipa, he argued further that the invitation extended to Phra Rajsidhimuni “was an important opportunity” and that the “core or heart of Buddhism” was to “teach people of other advanced nations [that Buddhism] is a good thing.” His letter asserted that this “will be to promote Buddhism, spread it more extensively. What is important will be the enhancement of the Thai Sangha” (Phrakhru Palaat 1988, 8–9).

Khun Sawet’s letter was passed through the Religious Affairs Department to the Supreme Patriarch, who granted Phra Rajsidhimuni and his secretary/interpreter permission to go to Lon-
Upon their arrival at the Buddhavihara on Vishaka Bucha Day, an important day of offering that celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, they immediately held a meditation class.

**A Proper Thai Wat**

A small group of Thai nationals and students living in London met in 1964 to discuss the desirability of establishing an “office of its own,” in the words of one man, for the Thai Buddhist mission now residing at the Hampstead Buddhavihara. They intended the new temple—the first official Thai monastery abroad—to serve “all nationalities,” not exclusively Thai (Konthi 1982, 26). To that end, the group formed the Committee for the Establishment of a Buddhist Temple in London, known also as the London Buddhist Temple Foundation. Khun Sawetchaired its executive committee. Phra Rajsidhimuni requested money from the Thai Religious Affairs Department for a new location for the temple, now called Wat Thai Buddhavihara. Through the active lobbying of the director-general of the department, the government of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn granted the committee 1.8 million baht (US$72,000) to purchase a house in Richmond, another London suburb. As diasporic Buddhist communities frequently do when establishing temples in residential neighborhoods, the committee converted the house for religious use without substantial alterations: a large reception room on the ground floor became the shrine room, the upper floor monks’ quarters. The committee, chaired by the then Thai deputy prime minister, himself of royal blood, applied for and was granted royal patronage for the temple. It was dedicated in August 1966 by the king and queen of Thailand as Wat Buddhapadipa, a name meaning “light of Buddhism” and one chosen by His Majesty.

In 1970, Dr. Konthi Suphamongkhon, then ambassador to the United Kingdom, proposed converting the modest one-acre property in Richmond to a “real temple in the Thai conception” (personal communication). To be a proper Thai *wat*, buildings must serve the ceremonial needs of the Thai Theravada ritual calendar, including the ordination of monks, which takes place in the *ubosot* or chapel marked as sacred space. The foundation began to raise money for the construction of such an *ubosot*. To facilitate meditation, the monks in the Richmond temple had previously erected small kiosks (*kuti*) around the property in which individual meditators could sit. The local council of Richmond had declared these kiosks “substandard” and required their removal. After this incident, community members protested vociferously at a public hearing the proposed construction of the new chapel. One Thai member believed neighbors feared that a new chapel would encourage street activity and noise, apparently confusing Thai monks with members of the Hare Krishna sect, prominent on the streets of London in the early 1970s. The member of parliament representing the Richmond jurisdiction indicated that, given community opposition, he could not support the Thai plans to expand the temple.

The foundation began considering alternate sites for Wat Buddhapadipa. They became aware of the pending sale of the Barrogill estate in Wimbledon—in the words of one member, a “superb property.” On four acres, Barrogill included an ornamental lake, landscaped gardens, and an expansive, elevated lawn behind the main house. The estate had been open to the public for
visits—a tourist attraction then and now. However, when the owner died, his widow put the property up for sale because of high taxes. The Thai embassy purchased Barrogill in 1975. The foundation committee commissioned plans to construct the Thai-style ubosot on the grassy hill behind the main building. The embassy submitted the original building plans to the local council, which then passed them along to the Ministry of the Environment. The ministry held ultimate jurisdiction, since the permit request originated from a foreign government.

To introduce the idea of building a Thai ubosot in the middle of Wimbledon, the monks posted a sign at the temple and, as they walked through the village, invited their neighbors for Sunday tea and biscuits. For six months, people came every weekend—sometimes only one person, sometimes four or five, sometimes a family. According to one participant, the local residents and members of the foundation committee “would chat about this and that,” but the committee members always brought the subject back to their plans for building an ubosot. As an example of a “Thai temple” they passed around a photograph of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace in Bangkok. In addition, the head of the local council visited Thailand, where the Thai contractor hired by the foundation escorted him to the Grand Palace to view the real temples. The permit process required political intervention on the international level, as well as acquiescence to concerns at the local level. In the end, the British minister of the environment contacted the Thai ambassador, indicated that any public objections were “not serious,” and offered his approval of the ubosot plans to the embassy as a Christmas gift. The local council did, however, stipulate that the landscaping of the grounds could not be altered without council permission—according to Khun Sawet, to even “cut a branch.”

The attempts by this group of Thais to construct a “real” Thai temple in London reveal local tensions around what were perceived as “foreign” incursions into “English” neighborhoods. Some expressed this literally as worries that “millions of Thai would be flocking in there every two or three days.” These fears have eased considerably in recent years—one neighbor relayed to a Thai friend how he now believed the temple had brought tranquility to the area—although it receives a few complaints about parking and litter during festivals.

**Expanding the Nation**

The London Buddhist Temple Foundation organized the fund-raising to build the ubosot and to paint the murals in multiple arenas. The foundation had requested that the British architect plan construction of the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa in stages, beginning with the underground portion, an assembly hall. The British firm warned of possibly escalating building costs and the conventions of building contracts; this pressured the foundation to pursue less conventional fund-raising strategies than individual and corporate donations. They approached the Thai government for sizable budgetary allocations. Among the top echelons of the Thai economic elite, individuals, foundations, and corporations made donations in Bangkok. The general public also contributed through individual donations in Thailand and England, and Thais through merit-making excursions to London. The foundation raised money for the murals through art exhibitions, art sales, and festivals at the temple itself. The temple’s total cost.
was 46 million baht (approximately US$1.84 million), including the cost of purchasing the Barrogill estate. Of the building costs—not including the mural paintings—approximately 16 million baht (US$640,000) were given by the Thai government, 21 million baht (US$840,000) by private and individual donations. The murals cost an additional 9 million baht (US$360,000).

Fund-raising strategies to build the ubosot and paint the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa reveal the multilayered, overlapping interpretations of Thai conceptions of making merit. Merit-making enhances one’s own current and future prospects, does good for the community, promotes Buddhism, honors the king, and furthers the interests of the Thai nation in an international arena, thereby expanding the Thai economy of merit. The Thai embassy in London linked Wat Buddhapadipa to the Thai nation by making it known to prospective donors that the temple “belonged to” the embassy as a cultural attachment. In discussions on this issue, some donors indicated that making merit by giving money to build a temple was comparable to Western forms of giving to charity. Both actions contribute to a social good and enhance the status of the donor; Thai merit-making differs from Western charitable giving to the degree to which Thai politics, social interactions, and religion are entwined, rather than separated legally or by custom or practice. In the specific approaches foundation members made to potential donors, the elements of this ideological triad—monarchy, nation, and religion—were bundled and interchangeable.

Khun Sawet raised money for the murals mostly among his network of political associates. When asked how these potential donors understood the nature and importance of the project, he answered that his own eminent position and status gave the project its particular character. “I was in politics for thirty years. I was a member of parliament eight times, and I used to be minister of finance,” he said. “They [the donors] understood the murals’ importance for Thailand and for Buddhism.” When I asked him why people gave so generously—ten individuals donated 1 million baht (US$40,000) each—he explained to me,

Thai people love to make contributions for the Buddha. The businessmen usually make a contribution when some politician asks them for [in the name of] the people, for the king. When some famous people ask for the king and the queen, they are pleased to make a contribution, because they love their king. The king is the protector of the religion.

His framing of donations to Wat Buddhapadipa as “a sacrifice for the king” rather than as money to build a temple structure adds important dimensions to the request. It implies that the merit accrued from this particular donation attaches to the king, further increasing the donor’s status as a merit maker. From a different angle, it becomes a subtle form of social control. As one informant noted, “You cannot refuse a request connecting to the king,” especially when the request directly promotes Buddhism. As another component of the merit bundle, the Thai government—in the person of Khun Sawet, a former minister—represents a promoter and protector of Buddhism.

Merit-making represents more than a gift or donation by an individual to support Buddhism. As a profoundly social act, merit exchanges bear meanings that adhere in relations between individuals and the structures of the Thai social hierarchy. As exemplified above, the nature of
the social relationship between the person making the request and the donor very much shapes the exchange. As one informant explained in the case of contributors to Wat Buddhapadipa, “They want to help the government.” When I asked if a primary motivation here would be to make merit, he replied, “Not really. In Thai culture, if a person comes to you to ask for some help... if you are asked by the prime minister or somebody high-ranking, you say yes.” He glossed this request with the Thai notion of **kraeng jai**, or reluctance to cause embarrassment or public distress to another person (also “consideration”) by directly declining a request for help. Such a denial would cause the person asking to lose face. 33 In upper-class Thai society, prominent people have a social obligation to act as host (**chao phap**) for fund-raising activities for temples. In this context, the fund-raising exchange is balanced. How much the host gave in previous fund-raising efforts factors into how much the solicited will give; if peers, the amounts will be at least the same or a bit more.

One afternoon at his home office, a retired high-ranking official of Thai Airways International discussed with me the mechanics of Buddhist long-distance merit-making. He also distinguished between the two main occasions when Thais give money to support temples: **kathin** and **phaapaa** (literally, forest cloth). 34 **Kathin** refers to the ritualistic giving of monks’ robes and other daily necessities at the end of the annual rainy-season retreat (**phansaa**) (Plate 7). Thais organize **phaapaa**, also ritual offerings to monks—frequently in the form of a “money tree” (**ton ngern**)—throughout the year rather than on a single occasion. Other than the timing, the two forms do not differ substantially. Both types of offerings are framed in terms of giving to temples for specific purposes. For example, the airline official explained, perhaps the abbot of a temple wished to build a new **ubosot**. Conceived as a long-term project, perhaps lasting over the lifetime of the abbot, the temple would set up a yearly campaign, with the donations from each year intended to fund a particular phase of the construction: setting the foundation or constructing the roof. Temples frame their fund-raising efforts also in terms of maintenance or annual budgets. The temple (or its major supporters) often publishes brochures, describing the temple or the specific construction project underway. Individual supporters distribute these brochures and small white envelopes among their friends and colleagues. In our conversation, the airline official described his own fund-raising efforts for the Wimbledon temple, emphasizing that those efforts did not require any kind of “formal approach.” Rather, he would say, we are going to have a **thaawd phaapaa** in order to raise funds for the first project, say the roof or the foundation. The aim is ten years for the whole project. But this year we’re going to have the merit-making—a **thaawd phaapaa** or a **thaawd kathin**—to go to London. And we try to spell out that the architect or some artists are going [to work in London] for nothing and that Thai Airways provides them with the tickets. People get quite interested. They want to join the **kathin** or the **phaapaa**. And we print pamphlets, thousands of them, in order to give to people on the streets. I might bring a hundred and give to all my friends and say “merit-making, fifty baht or one hundred baht, it doesn’t matter.” . . . People give according to their strength, and through the effort of many people, the cumulative sum gets very substantial.
Royal Status, Royal Markings

As a cultural production of the Thai state, other aspects of “official” Thai culture—those promulgated and controlled by agencies of the state—are equally relevant to the prestige of Wat Buddhapadipa. That the temple was granted royal patronage gave it special status as a project of the Thai nation and in the mind of the Thai public. At Wat Buddhapadipa the symbolic connections between the temple and Thai and British royalty underscore long-standing political, social, and commercial relationships between Thailand and England, adding royalist luster to the national image of Thailand in England. Temples under royal patronage (wat luang) are those founded by kings or, as in the case of Wat Buddhapadipa, founded by lay supporters and gifted to the king. They are administered directly by the Religious Affairs Department and in a broad sense represent the “bonding of the sangha to the polity via the ecclesiastical hierarchy” (Tambiah 1976, 353). Attaining the status of a wat luang endowed Wat Buddhapadipa and, I would argue, its sponsors with additional merit, for in a Thai worldview of the monarchy as dhammaraja (righteous king), persons, practices, or objects that are designated as royal (luang) possess qualities of perfection, virtue, and great merit (Gray 1991, 47).

Thai and English royalty—the king and queen of Thailand, the king’s sister Princess Galayani Vadhana, and the English Princess Alexandra—have participated in various dedication ceremonies. Members of the Thai royal family routinely participate in Thai temple dedication ceremonies throughout the world; the attendance of English royalty certainly enhanced the status of this temple, both to local Thais in London and its Wimbledon neighbors. Members of the Thai royal family have sat as committee members of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation; Prince Narathip Pongpraphan served as the first chair of the foundation when it was established in 1965 until 1972. Offering a chance for the Thai public to make merit in the name of the king in the fund-raising for Wat Buddhapadipa, the boundary stones (luuk nimit) were gilded daily for one week in front of the Grand Palace during the Rattanakosin Bicentennial Celebration in 1982. Photographs of members of the Thai royal family figure prominently in the books that document the history and murals of the temple. Dr. Konthi’s history, The Buddhapadipa Chapel, for instance, even includes an excerpt from the king’s address to the Grand Assembly of the Buddhist Association of Thailand on the responsibility and methods of propagating the Buddhist religion. The inclusion of this address further casts the establishment—and thus sponsorship—of Wat Buddhapadipa as a supreme act of Buddhist devotion (1982, 2).

Temples and Tourism

Of special interest to me was why donors gave so generously to a faraway temple that they might never see without long-distance travel. Dr. Konthi’s family foundation, funded by his mother, offered one million baht to the foundation, thereby inaugurating the fund-raising efforts to build the ubosot. On this issue Dr. Konthi identified important additional factors in
Thai forms of group merit-making—those of “having fun” (tham hai sanuk) and “going traveling” (pai thiw)—was the case in his own family, as he reminisced to me one afternoon:

My mother used to be very religious. She went to make merit at temples all over. Going by bus, very crowded with people. I used to tell her, “You can make merit here. Why go make merit so far?” She likes to do that; she has friends going with her, to see new places, have adventures. That is why, when she passed away, I feel she would not blame me if I gave her money to this temple in London.

_Tham bun_ tours to visit charismatic monks in forest _wat_ upcountry, organized through the workplace or temples or by enterprising individuals, have become enormously popular among Thais (cf. Taylor 1993). In response to my surmising that one factor in assessing merit accumulation might be the distance involved, a Thai friend studying in the United States confirmed: “The further away you go to make merit, the more merit you get.” This friend lived near Phoenix; she observed that Thais from Los Angeles, or even from Bangkok, came to her temple in Phoenix to make merit, while she and her friends would travel to New Mexico.

The issue of long-distance merit-making and the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa must be set in the context of a growing number of Thais involved in international affairs, the increasing participation by Thailand in a globalizing economy, and a burgeoning Thai elite sending their children abroad for education. Merit-making occasions that connect a mobile Bangkok elite to a temple abroad can occur frequently. Since Wat Buddhapadipa is an “official” temple, the itinerary of any official delegation from Thailand automatically includes a visit to Wat Buddhapadipa; such visits always include donations. The foundation and Thai Airways International organized _kathin_ tours to the temple annually or biannually. These tours coupled merit-making through temple sponsorship with expanded arenas of travel in which, in the Thai point of view, “you can have a good time, enjoy your time there, and also do something good for charity.” Finally, with Thai businesses establishing operations and making investments in England, the number of Thai personnel living there also increased the local source of support for the temple.

While the donations to the Wat Buddhapadipa projects were asked for and received in general terms of supporting Buddhism, the nation, and the Thai king, it is clear that a nexus of personal connections and national business interests undergirded the transactions. Thai Airways International’s support provides one example of this nexus. Panya and Chalermchai asked Khun Sawet to sponsor additional artists to help in order to meet his deadline of the king’s sixtieth anniversary two-and-a-half years hence. Khun Sawet went to a friend high up in the administration of Thai Airways International for assistance with their tickets. He noted that the foundation had chartered two Boeing 747s from Thai Airways International to carry 150 monks and 200 supporters to the opening dedication of the _ubosot_ at a total cost of around 4.5 million baht (US$180,000). The chief of marketing and head of operations at Thai Airways International had already become involved in the temple through his friendship with Dr. Konthi, who had brought him into the project when it was clear that Thai officials, Khun Sawet, and the ar-
architect Praves Limparangsri would need to travel to London several times to plan the design and construction of the ubosot. Khun Sawet and the airline official devised a long-term arrangement between the foundation and Thai Airways International whereby the airline would donate round-trip tickets for the artists and Khun Sawet. As an additional source of revenue for the temple tied to the airline’s expansion into the European market, the foundation would also organize annual kathin and periodic phaapaa merit-making tours for wealthy Bangkok supporters, lasting a week or ten days. It would charter flights from Thai Airways International; the supporters would pay their own “very low fares,” which would generate enthusiasm for traveling abroad. While in Wimbledon participants would attend kathin ceremonies at the temple, where they presented their offerings. They often took special food from Thailand—nam phrik, Thai chili paste, or mangoes and sticky rice—for the meal following the ceremony. The remainder of their time abroad was spent on tour (pai thiaw), continuing on to other cities in Europe or visiting with their children studying abroad. This arrangement was quite successful, as several of these merit-making tours were organized each year. The tours benefited the temple enormously, as many individuals became regulars on these tours, making substantial, tax-deductible donations to Wat Buddhapadipa on each tour.

The involvement of Thai Airways International and the Royal Thai government meshed the private motivations of Khun Sawet and Bangkok merit makers with national diplomatic and commercial interests. The Thai government owns and operates Thai Airways International; the Wat Buddhapadipa project was begun just at the time when the airline was starting operations to London and promoting Europe as a major market for Thai tourists. As Thai Airways International has grown as a national airline, it has frequently offered special deals to Thai nationals, a benefactor business that could be seen as “doing good” for Thailand. According to the airline official, the people who participated in these tours were from well-to-do families who could afford overseas travel. The tours promoted merit-making—by offering potential donors an opportunity to “see what is actually being done there”—and tourism at the same time. As a national company, Thai Airways International was another agent that promoted the transformation of Thai nationals into worldwide travelers. By expanding Thai travel to London, the airline further justified the need to support a Thai temple there, for Thais often visit temples on their travels.

Templegoers in Transnational Space

Khun Sawet and the foundation, the Thai embassy, and various abbots and monks constitute multiple sources of authority, giving rise to occasions of confusion, if not tension, at the temple. To a degree, these multiple authorities represent those within Thai society generally—for example, the Mahanikai and Thammayut orders within the Buddhist sangha. Tensions may adhere also in relations between the center (Bangkok) and the periphery (Wimbledon). That the periphery in this instance is located outside of Thailand has added important dimensions to daily life at the temple and how it has evolved. Wat Buddhapadipa’s location in England has
posed not only logistical challenges for its Thai sponsors, as with English building codes and winters, but social ones as well. It has changed the terms by which interpersonal disagreements could be resolved—an appeal to English law and custom rather than Thai, for example. More generally, Wat Buddhapadipa and other temples abroad expand the social arena in which Thais operate, giving additional latitude to interpersonal relations and modes of resolving conflict. This has been the case with conflicts between the artists, monks, and local Thais over mural content, style, and details, discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. The competition between authorities is further exacerbated by a different orientation toward its community of supporters. On the one hand, the temple serves a farang community, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, with the mission of attracting attention to Buddhism, teaching the Dhamma, encouraging meditation practice, and sending monks to other Buddhist centers in Europe. On the other hand, as Thais have congregated in London, Thai socioreligious forms—the donation of food, merit-making on behalf of the dead, blessing ceremonies, and the like—have reasserted themselves in this new context.

That there was a Thai community of any size presented a relatively new situation for Thai diplomats serving overseas when the Wat Buddhapadipa project began. During an interview in Bangkok, one former diplomat noted that similar developments had taken place in other parts of the world during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the numbers of Thais living abroad increased dramatically. “In the old days,” he reminisced, “we didn’t have to contend with our own people, since there were not many of them. In the 1970s, students went to America, to restaurants in Europe, workers to Saudi Arabia. The overseas community became part of our job, part of our care.” The United Kingdom offered no exception; merit-making at Wat Buddhapadipa itself has become a mechanism through which the boundaries of the Thai social and national community expanded. In the early 1970s at Wat Buddhapadipa’s first location in Richmond, members of the Young Buddhist Association, an international Buddhist support organization of Thais, numbered around seventy and comprised local Thai students and personnel from the embassy. As international tourism expanded, the growing London hotel industry recruited Thai workers in Bangkok. Thai businesses opened branches in London. Thai Airways International, the national airline, located its European headquarters there. In the 1980s, after a boom in tourism to Thailand and a new awareness by the English of things Thai, Thais emigrated to open restaurants on London high streets, becoming as familiar and ubiquitous as the “local Indian.” By the 1990s, the Thai community had expanded to around twenty thousand, the second largest outside of Thailand after Los Angeles.

The sponsors recognized early on that the temple would serve multiple communities. A clear statement of this position appears in Dr. Konthi’s The Buddhapadipa Chapel, written to celebrate the dedication of the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa:

In recent time [sic], there was an increasing number of Thai nationals residing in the United Kingdom. Beside the students in search of knowledge, there appeared Thai firms, banks and other business concerns which set their branches in London. Also were Thai na-
tionals who came here in the pursuit of their vocation. On the other hand, more and more Britons adhere to Buddhism, its Dhamma and its practical applications, as may be seen from the weekend service attendance. (1982, 10)

One morning, over coffee at the Regent Hotel, an official who served at the embassy under two Thai ambassadors during the late 1970s described to me the dimensions and problems of this double mission:

We began to organize festivities and festivals. Here the problems started . . . with our own trustees. A temple is not just a place of worship but a community center . . . . The Buddhist temple in Sheen [Wat Buddhapadipa's location on Sheen Road in Richmond] had become a popular meditation center . . . more a place of study and meditation, rather than a Thai temple as such. People began to say the monks had been “moved over.” The temple is becoming a busy place; people come and go so much. I had to put my foot down. It must be a community center and spiritual home of the Thai community. From my point of view, it cannot turn down members of the community who go to visit the monks to make merit . . . ask them to read their palms . . . more “serious” members of the temple backed away.”

Another former diplomat to the United Kingdom during this period articulated the same view that the temple’s mission was to serve the Thai community. As we discussed the nature of expatriate communities in general, he elaborated, “[T]he further you are away from home, the special need is even more. A Thai working in London . . . sometimes you feel lonely, you have some suffering, where do you go? At least you go to the temple; at least you talk to the abbot. At least you say ‘I have bad luck, I lost in gambling.’ The abbot pours some holy water, sprinkles it, and you feel better.”

As well as affecting the design of the temple itself, these competing orientations set in motion social dynamics that affected the work of the artists on the murals and that animate temple life today. Thais arrive daily at Wat Buddhapadipa to make merit by bringing food. Monks perform the life-cycle ceremonies and blessings through which Thais seek relief from the anxieties and sorrows of daily life. On Sundays, Anglo-Thai children attend Sunday school to learn the Thai language and culture. Semiannual festivals celebrating Loy Krathong and Songkran, two popular Thai holidays, appeal to both Thai and British communities. In addition to sitting and walking meditation sessions four days a week, the temple hosts week-long meditation retreats attended largely by British Buddhists. At such times meditators must contend with the holiday-like atmosphere of Sunday’s regular activities. The ubosot’s distinctive appearance and murals have made it a local tourist attraction; visitors steadily arrive just to see them, sometimes disrupting daily temple activities.

Authenticity and Articulations of “Thai Culture”

Of the handful of Thai Buddhist temples built outside of Thailand, the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa was the first built to project a vision of “traditional” Thai architecture. Concerns for the
“Thainess” of this temple derive from its location in England as much as from the interests of its sponsors, especially those representing the Thai government. Its setting in an upper-class English suburb sets up a cultural model of Thai civilization with a historical depth that can measure favorably against that of the English. The roots of Anglo-Thai relations sink deep into the nineteenth century, when France and England were consolidating their colonial interests in countries neighboring Siam. In 1855, King Mongkut signed the Anglo-Siamese (Bowring) Treaty granting the British extensive trade concessions. Beginning in the 1880s, the Thai elite’s increasing exposure to Europeans through trade, travel, diplomacy, and participation in international expositions engendered a new discourse of siwilai, the Thai transliteration of the condition of “being civilized” or “civilization.” Increasingly conscious of Siam’s position in an international arena, Kings Mongkut (Rama IV, r.1851–1868) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r.1868–1910) began to institute religious, administrative, and social reforms, many along European models they believed represented siwilai. King Mongkut’s deep passion for the “modern” sciences of geography and astronomy contributed to a new “spatial discourse” that implicitly compared Siam with other powers, and the Bangkok elite with other people within the kingdom. Echoes of this discourse resonate in the design of the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa, a style that recalls both the nineteenth century in basic design and ornamentation and is most recognized as “Thai traditional” architecture.

Buddhist temples in the West established to serve overseas communities of refugees, expatriates, or students are usually housed initially in existing buildings, as both commercial structures and residences are easily converted to suit the needs of a Buddhist community. Lay populations constructing “purpose-built” temples to accommodate an expanding population of worshipers and monks usually utilize local materials and conform to local architectural styles. European examples include the Buddhavihara in Wolverhampton, England, which serves a local Indian community of Buddhists; the Thai temple near Bern, Switzerland; and the expansions at Amaravati, Ajarn Sumedho’s main temple in England, which one man described to me as looking like a Waitrose, an English supermarket chain.

Sponsors of the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa were concerned that it appear clearly to be a temple, especially given its location on the old Barrogill estate. One former ambassador noted that he had been quite pleased to see the new ubosot when he returned to London, for the prior facilities in East Sheen had been completely Western. “We don’t have any signs of Thai architecture or of Thai cultural elements there. Even the hall we use for ceremonies is still Western style. So one hardly knows that this is the Buddhist temple, because from the outside it is clearly an English building,” he said.

For others more intimately involved with the sponsorship, however, the planning of the design reflected intentions extending beyond making local Thais feel more at home. According to Khun Sawet in one interview, the members of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation wanted to construct a temple, “to show our Thai art.” Dr. Konthi saw the temple as “a good way to disseminate Thai culture and Thai religious activities, to make it known that this is available.” A Thai architect working in London at the firm eventually hired by the foundation to oversee the planning of the ubosot, as required by English building codes, had submitted a project “in
the English style,” which Khun Sawet rejected. Sawet and the foundation then turned to the Fine Arts Department, seeking another architect. That department recommended Praves Limparangsri, their chief architect and a National Artist of Thailand who had extensive experience building royal cremation pavilions.

The complex factors that play in the notions of “Thainess” at Wat Buddhapadipai reveal the contingent and negotiated nature of concepts of authenticity. The foundation convinced English authorities to allow the construction of an ubosot that looked Thai; however, problems developed when the foundation insisted that it be Thai in terms of materials and construction techniques. According to English law, the project had to include an English contractor, so the architect and foundation negotiated that, given the Thai particularities of its design, the construction project would be split. The English contractor would build the structure of the ubosot. Thai contractors would manufacture the elaborately carved ornamentation; Thai workers would apply these decorative details to the building. Yet in designing the actual plan of the ubosot, its architect adjusted in significant ways to its English setting, while retaining basic Thai conceptions of religious architecture.

At his studio outside Bangkok, Ajarn Praves Limparangsri, the architect, explained to me that since the proposal involved religious architecture—“not the architecture of a palace, not the architecture of business”—he needed to seek the advice of the Supreme Patriarch, who told him that the spread of Buddhism abroad is “not a little difficult.” He recommended that the architect seek permission to build the ubosot in Thai religious style, in order to identify the building as a religious structure. However, Ajarn Praves believed that the temple, especially because it was Thai, should fit into its English setting. For this reason, he walked the streets of London to understand that city’s historical architectural styles and visited prominent landmarks. St. Paul’s Cathedral and Windsor Castle were two he mentioned as being particularly impressive. He attempted to comprehend the English atmosphere, the English climate, English light, and, of course, English construction standards. One of Ajarn Praves’ major concerns for the ubosot was the amount of light. In Thailand the interiors of bot are kept quite dark, with shuttered window openings along the sides that are appropriate for the blistering sun of that country’s climate. England, he observed, often had gray and overcast weather. Thus he incorporated many more windows into the design, but retained a classically Thai shape to the windows: the wimaan (paradise) that symbolically recalls the peak of Mt. Meru, the sacred center of Buddhist cosmology (Plate 1).

Ajarn Praves sought to establish some sort of harmony between a building “expressive of Thai philosophy” (chai prachanaa thai) but one transported to a foreign setting amid English architecture. For this reason, he remained at the Thai embassy in London, located behind Buckingham Palace, to prepare the plans while working in an office on the fourth floor overlooking imposing English institutions. One might speculate that this aerial view of the buildings below gave him the idea for his major adaptation of Thai religious architectural convention—that of adding two wings that transformed the roof of Wat Buddhapadipai into the shape of a cross, symbol of Jesus (Plate 8). “If we look from the air,” he told me, referring to the plan of Wat Buddhapadipai, “we will see a wooden cross against the yellow or orange earth.” Another
consideration shaping this decision, he continued, was an uncertain future. Considering the London blitz of World War II, he feared that if hostilities or a war should ever break out between countries, religious structures had a better chance of remaining safe from bombs. “I thought about the safety of the architecture also,” he said.

The roof tiles of the ubosot exemplify how the foundation defined the authentic, as well as the lengths to which they were prepared to go to attain authenticity. Khun Sawet and the committee of the foundation insisted that the roof tiles of the new ubosot in England be the same tiles used in Thailand for temple roofs. The British contractor hired by the foundation insisted that they use unglazed British tiles, but according to Khun Sawet, “I refused because it is not our custom to use these tiles. Our tiles must be painted [khluab, or glazed].” The local council granted the foundation a three-year reprieve from the building code to allow it time to find tiles that would meet British standards of stress resistance. In the meantime, the contractor installed Thai tiles on the roof. After the artists had begun to paint the murals in 1984, the Thai roof tiles began to break under the stress of the temperature extremes of the English climate. Water leaked inside the bot, ran down the walls, and ruined the preliminary work of the artists. Khun Sawet revealed that Chalermchai nearly quit the project at that point, claiming he had no time to “paint and paint again.” Clearly, the foundation needed to replace all of the roof tiles with those made to British specifications. Khun Sawet made an extensive search for alternative tiles, even traveling to Berlin to examine a Chinese pagoda there with green tiles imported from China. He thought these might be suitable in terms of material and color, but they were twice the size of Thai temple tiles. According to him, “The roof of the temple must be beautiful. It must be the same as the roof in Thailand.” He considered tiles produced by a French manufacturer, but they were the wrong size also, which would require changing the spacing of the tiles and the ornamentation. Khun Sawet then said, “I came back to Thailand. I told our contractor we have to change.” A Bangkok tile manufacturer recast the roof tiles, requiring eight attempts and one year of experimentation before the tiles could meet the English building code standards.

In the end, the foundation spent 7.6 million baht (US$304,000) on architectural details. In addition to the roof tiles, the carved wooden temple gables inscribed with the royal insignia (naa baan), elaborately carved brackets (kan tuay), the distinctive horn-shaped finial, or “sky tassel” (chao faa), and, most important, the bai sema, or boundary markers, were manufactured in Thailand over a two-year period. These pieces were then shipped to England—the shipping costs a donation by the contractor—and installed by the Thai workmen who had flown to London. To prevent further problems, the Thai contractor used special materials on the ornamentation that would withstand the English climate—for example, a German preservative mixed with the cement used to cast some of the architectural details.
Figure 1: Ground plan, *ubosot* at Wat Buddha-padipa. Drawing by Joe Shoulak.
Commissioning the Murals

The ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa was dedicated in October 1982. At the time of the dedication ceremony, the interior walls of the bot had been plastered and painted white. Ajarn Praves’ original vision for the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa did not include murals. When he began to consider painting the inside of the bot, he thought of Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok. Walls there are painted with an elegant wallpaper-like patterning incorporating the kranok (flame-like motif) and small deva (deities). However, when the ubosot was completed, the foundation had no money left to sponsor any elaborate interior painting.

Khun Sawet, who assumed the position of chair of the foundation’s executive committee following General Kriangsak, remained the central sponsor concerned with the bot. “At first, I had no idea about having mural paintings, because the task of building the temple was very great,” he told me one day in Bangkok. “My intention was to build this building.” Yet, as he also noted, “I know very well about murals; I have gone many places to see mural paintings.” He particularly admires the murals at Wat Suwannaram, the temple in Thonburi also favored by Panya and Chalermchai. When I asked him who had the idea to paint murals in the bot at Wat Buddhapadipa, he put his hand on his chest and said, simply, “Me.” “In the first place,” he said, “I never had an idea about murals, even though I had seen murals in temples. But then I think something is absent. Mine is a very big temple, why don’t we have murals like in the Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin periods? Every great temple has them. But in some temples there are none, or they have only the Past Ten Lives.”

He continued, “After opening day, I tried for two years to find out who could do this mural painting. I talked to artists—some would like to do but they could not find cosupporters.” The issue, he concluded, was the lack of money for the immense time and effort required. Several people told me that at least one artist went to London to assess the situation but refused the commission largely on financial grounds. Khun Sawet was quite surprised when Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijinthanasarn, artists willing to tackle the project, came to him.

Chalermchai told me that he convinced Panya to visit Khun Sawet at his home on the river without an appointment. Armed with résumés, portfolios, a copy of Hoskins’ Ten Contemporary Thai Artists that featured their work, and preliminary sketches of their ideas, they rang at the gate. Khun Sawet himself answered, asking the pair whom they wanted to see. Chalermchai replied, “You.” When he asked them why, they explained that they were artists and wanted to paint at the temple he had sponsored in London. “Come in,” he responded.

“I did not know of them before. I asked them to draft the content of the work, especially the life of the Buddha,” Khun Sawet told me. They agreed, returning in seven days with complete black-and-white sketches of the overall compositions of the four walls of the ubosot’s main room (Plate 9). In a later conversation, Khun Sawet told me his reaction to the sketches Panya and Chalermchai had prepared: “When I saw this draft, I was stunned. I believed in them. The murals would be finished.”

Khun Sawet asked them what they would like to have in return for his permission. They replied that they needed no salaries; they would paint as volunteers, for free. They required only
the costs of living at the temple and money for materials. They mentioned that four people would go—themselves and two assistants. The artists did, however, place their own terms on the commission. According to Chalermchai, he and Panya asked Khun Sawet for his assurances that if they painted what the foundation wanted in terms of the mural program, the foundation would not “pressure them in any way.” Noting his own work in poetry, Khun Sawet remembered his reply: “Okay, you are free to paint as you like, because I myself understand the mind of the artist. Artists must have freedom,” he continued, “otherwise they will not be artistic.”

When the two initially presented their sketches to Khun Sawet and the members of the foundation’s executive committee, they prepared a budget for the project—estimating one year’s work at a total cost of 1 million baht (US$40,000). After they reached the agreement with Khun Sawet regarding terms for painting the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, Sawet continued fund-raising, as he had to build the ubosot. He organized kathin tours to Wimbledon and solicited donations from his friends and acquaintances in the government. A number of individuals who had given to the bot gave also to the murals, but as the project expanded to require a number of young assistants, that source of support was not sufficient. The artists themselves began to raise money through their own grass-roots efforts in London—selling food at the semiannual temple festivals, sketching portraits at Wimbledon fairs, accepting outside commissions to paint family portraits and at restaurants within the local Thai community. They also used their positions within the Thai art world to raise money from art sales. Periodically, both Chalermchai and Panya returned to Bangkok to organize fund-raising events, promote their work in the media—as many can attest, Chalermchai was a brilliant spokesperson for the mural project—and to recruit new artists to join them in Wimbledon. They put the original sketches for the murals on exhibit at the British Council in 1984, along with some of Chalermchai’s earlier tempera paintings and prints Panya had produced while studying at the Slade School in London on a British Council scholarship. At a 1986 exhibition at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, the artists sold easel paintings of the “Thai Art 80” group, which included Panya, Chalermchai, and several of their assistants in London. Since the mural project was a site-specific “installation,” one of the fund-raising events relied on the display and sale of simulacra—large color photographs of mural scenes. An English photographer shot the murals; Kodak (Thailand) Ltd. donated the enlargements. To finance the completion of the two side rooms, the foundation sponsored a 1987 exhibition of these images at the River City Shopping Complex, a popular exhibition venue near major riverside hotels. In 1989, another exhibit at the Thailand Cultural Centre, in conjunction with the Religious Affairs Department and the Office of the National Culture Commission, reinforced the special, official status of the Wat Buddhapadipa project.

The participation of important political or religious persons mark the status and significance of a Thai public ritual, be it wedding, dedication ceremony, or exhibition opening. Just as the participation of Thai and English royalty in key dedication ceremonies enhanced the nationalist preeminence of Wat Buddhapadipa in both London and Bangkok, so did the participation of political and religious persons of prominence at art events accomplish the same for the murals. The Supreme Patriarch presided at two exhibition openings while Prime Minister Prem
Tinsulanonda presided at others, a symbology of power publicly aligning the art at Wat Buddhapadipa with state and sangha. The artists made certain these events received extensive coverage in Bangkok's Thai and English language press.

Promotional efforts for these events stressed Wat Buddhapadipa's significance as a religious institution—one pamphlet characterized the temple as “one of Europe's most important Buddhist training centres.” Media coverage always mentioned Chalermchai and Panya's intentions to work for free, thereby highlighting the meritorious aspects of their work. Equally as important, promotions and the media mentioned the role of “art” in modernizing Thai culture and the significance to Thailand's international image through Chalermchai and Panya's attempts to revive mural painting. The following excerpt from the brochure accompanying the British Council exhibit of the preliminary sketches indicates the tenor of such representations:

There emerged a small group of artists who valued their own nationality and were determined to rekindle a fire that would give a bright light to the future of Thai paintings. They wished to show that Thai paintings can be used not only for religious purposes but can also be developed into contemporary art that will bring recognition and honour to the country. (British Council 1984)

Adding the dimension of “art” to the cultural patina of Wat Buddhapadipa attracted the attention of the Bangkok art world to Chalermchai and Panya, giving them a central place in what became known as “neotraditionalism” in Thai art. The terms by which the ubosot at Wat Buddhapadipa had been promoted by its sponsors, as a temple and field for donations and merit-making, thus expanded to encompass broad social discourses on art and art's role in Thai culture.

Chalermchai and Panya's involvement represented a radical departure from Ajarn Praves' intentions. Ironically, given their stated intentions, Ajarn Praves now sees the Wat Buddhapadipa murals as “old” in their conceptualization, not “modern,” because of their reliance on narrative as the basis of their design. Further, in his opinion the murals do not “join together” (prasaan) harmoniously with the design of the building, which he considers “modern” (samai mai).

Another conflict at the temple around the issue of old versus new developed over the sculpture known as the Black Buddha (luang phaw dam), a 650–700-year-old bronze image from the Sukhothai era, donated in 1966 to the king for Wat Buddhapadipa by a wealthy Bangkok woman. Many temple staff and visitors told me of its magical powers, especially regarding fertility. Ajarn Praves, on the other hand, insisted that an ubosot ought to house an image cast in the era and style of the building itself, in this case the Bangkok or Rattanakosin style of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Toward that end, and to celebrate the bicentennial of the Rattanakosin era in 1982, a new image named Buddhapadipa-Mongkol was cast in gold at Wat Thepsirin, Dr. Konthi's favorite Bangkok temple. Thai templegoers in London protested to the abbot over any attempts to remove the Black Buddha. At a meeting of the foundation's executive committee, a compromise was forged: both Buddha images would remain. The new golden image (luang phaw thong) was installed at Wat Buddhapadipa, placed to the front and lower than the Black Buddha. More recently, Wat Buddhapadipa was given a replica of the Emerald
Buddha. Installed also at the altar in the ubosot, this preeminent symbol of the Thai polity further magnifies the nationalist splendor of the bot.

The long-distance merit-making accomplished by the sponsors of Wat Buddhapadipa reveals important facets of the contemporary Thai economy of merit. Connecting this temple to the king (Khun Sawet described Wat Buddhapadipa once to me as a “supertemple”)—in contrast to those in Thailand that are now primarily constructed privately—endows Wat Buddhapadipa with some of the aura of the king. The Thai monarch almost by definition possesses the most righteous power, or barami (merit/virtue), in the country. In another discursive construction, Khun Sawet also has compared the building of this temple with those built in the days of Rama I and Rama V, both eras of extensive temple construction and restoration. In our conversation, the Thai Airways International executive interpreted the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa as a “customary activity” of the Thai elite. That is, “We all believe that if we are successful in various areas of our life, then we should go on doing benefit for the community, whether it be a hospital or whatever . . . and a temple is one of them.” In discussing the international outlooks of Wat Buddhapadipa’s major sponsors, he emphatically concurred that to consider building a temple in England was not a farfetched idea for Khun Sawet and Dr. Konthi, since both had been there many times. During our conversation, this official further elaborated on a “Thai” view of the project:

I don’t think the temple in London, in its intention, is trying to encroach on the liberty of people, or trying to convert people, or expand Buddhist teachings into foreign lands. I think it is an affinity that a lot of Thai people have with England, through education, for the last few decades the involvement of the royalty, and so on. People like Khun Sawet and Khun Konthi, who have been educated, reached the pinnacle of their careers, holding high-ranking positions in the community, felt a certain affinity [with the idea]. In order to serve the Thai community which has increased . . . they had the ambition that there should be one [a temple] in London.

Endowing Wat Buddhapadipa with royal status, as discussed above, not only immeasurably increased the status of the temple itself in the eyes of Thai contributors and visitors, it further increases the barami of its sponsors, especially as they attended the annual kathin ceremonies as long-distance merit makers. By being visually placed within a ritual order, ceremonial participants attain higher placement within the larger social order—which at Wat Buddhapadipa encompasses both the Thai and Anglo-international orders. As noted by Gray, “Packed with awe-inspiring symbols of disinterest and detachment, royal rituals are potent devices for transforming the private, particular interests of participants into disinterested, collective and legitimate interests” (1991, 47). The array of those private, particular interests include Khun Sawet’s promotion of vipassana and Dr. Konthi’s honoring his mother and the maintenance of personal ties between them and those they asked to assist them in their sponsorship.

At the same time, donors articulated their involvement as a donation to the larger good—for their king or for their country. The sponsorship of this temple involved a number of prominent
people; the modesty of the principal organizers of the project (reference was made specifically to Khun Sawet and Dr. Konthi) has underscored the merit of the project as well. As one of the supporters observed, “I think it shows actually the whole thing was not just because one man has billions of baht and wants to build a monument to himself. . . . [I]t is an effort that started very humbly at the beginning. . . . [F]rom that day on people recognized that it is a special effort by a lot of people to make it possible.” He believes that the volunteer nature of the project enhances the image of Thailand as well, “particularly in Wimbledon which is a very prime area, a beautiful location, a top-class residential area all around there. I think they [foreign observers] must have recognized that we are a country that needs to be reckoned with, with the kind of voluntary effort it took to build that.”

From the point of view of the English or an international community of visitors and residents, Thailand’s constructing such a temple stakes out a position of high visibility in a prestigious context, in London, an international center of finance, investment, and trade. The temple embodies the cultural values of the Thai community, in recent years becoming increasingly visible in London and throughout Europe. Further, by having the ubosot designed in “Thai traditional” style (despite architectural features that its architect intended to be modern), it asserts an officially sanctioned version of Thai identity, one promulgated by the government’s Fine Arts Department. On its hill in Wimbledon, the ubosot communicates a sense of Thai particularity, but Thainess possessing historical depth and cultural sophistication. General Kriangsak Chamanan, former prime minister of Thailand and active member of the London Buddhist Temple Foundation, articulated this position in his letter of gratitude to Chalermchai:

Your work there is important, and will help support the propagation of Buddhism, art and culture in the aspect of the murals. This is the identity of the Thai nation in the Western hemisphere. It is a fine example. (Kriangsak 1984)

The establishment of this prestigious temple in London was accomplished through the activation of a series of “influential personalized relationships” between monks and lay supporters, private citizens, corporate executives, and government officials (Taylor 1993, 268). What is important here, I argue, is the not the conjunction of public and private interests, but rather the consideration of how individual Thais project those diverse and sometimes competing interests into the international arena. The individuals who worked most in the sponsorship of Wat Buddhapadipa enacted personal desires to make merit—one expressing gratitude for attaining new levels of awareness, another his love and sense of obligation toward his mother. They also worked to construct a temple that would represent the Thai nation in a manner that recalls the history of Anglo-Thai relations and that articulates an elite vision of “Thai tradition.” Wat Buddhapadipa asserts both a Thai presence and its cultural “net worth” in the global arena. It also extends the boundaries of the Thai imaginary beyond those of the nation itself. A detail in the murals addresses this point: outside the walls of the Deer Park, where the Buddha gave his First Sermon, Khun Sawet and his wife Sobha bow to the king of Thailand. Here the king, dressed as a tourist with a camera around his neck, is seen visiting the farthest reaches
of his kingdom (Plate 29). The king is accompanied by three men who, I was told by one of the artists, generically represent the military, businessmen, and the government civil servants (kharatchakan)—the modern configuration of the Thai ruling elite who helped to build this temple. While the painted landscape is ambiguous (although the ubosot itself appears in the middle distance behind His Majesty), the actual setting is in England.