

# Ayutthayan Protective Practices and Devices: Manual of Wat Pradusongtham

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## Abstract

This article presents a summary and analysis of protective practices and devices described in an eighteenth-century manual from Wat Pradusongtham. This temple was an important meditation center during the late Ayutthaya period and the seat of a monk of a *Rachakhana* rank. The manual describes the legend and characteristics of the Triple Gem Qualities yantras which are three protective diagrams that represent the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, along with the *Ratanamālā* protective chant associated with them. It also provides instructions for visualizing four Pali syllables, *na*, *ma*, *a*, and *u*, which represent the four precious gems and the four elements (*dhātu*) that make up the body and the physical world. These four gems are used by the adept to manipulate the forces of nature, cure illnesses, perform miraculous powers, and activate protective devices.

## Keywords

protection, protective practice, protective device, yantra, meditation,  
Ayutthaya, Theravada Buddhism, paritta, saiyasat.

## 1. Introduction

During the Ayutthaya period, the Siamese Sangha was divided into two divisions: forest-dwelling monks (*araññavāsī*), who were charged with meditation practices, and town-dwelling monks (*gāmaṇvāsī*), who were tasked with engaging in scriptural study and administrative duties. Wat Pradusongtham was a prominent meditation center that housed the *araññavāsī* *Rachakhana*, the second-highest position in the Sangha, subordinate only to the Supreme Patriarch. Its original name was Pradurongtham, which was the result of the merging of two temples, Wat Pradu and Wat Rongtham, and was renamed Pradusongtham during King Rama IV's reign (1851–1868) after the name of its first recorded royal patron, King Songtham (Boromracha I, r. 1608–1628), the 21<sup>st</sup> monarch of Ayutthaya.<sup>1</sup> It also served as the residence of King Uthumphon (r. 1758), the second-to-last king of Ayutthaya, who entered the monkhood after being forced to abdicate. King Uthumphon is known for preferring the orange robe over the crown. After briefly disrobing to assist with Ayutthaya forces against Burmese armies, he was re-ordained and returned to reside at Wat Pradusongtham.

King Taksin (r. 1767–82), in his effort to revive the Sangha after the sack of Ayutthaya, invited a renowned meditation master, Phra Achan Di from Wat Pradusongtham, to become Thonburi's first Supreme Patriarch. Two early-Bangkok Supreme Patriarchs, namely, Saṅgharāja Suk Kai Thuean of Wat Ratchasittharam (1733–1822) and Saṅgharāja Don of Wat Mahathat (1761–1852), also studied meditation at the temple. Supreme Patriarch Suk was ordained at Wat Pradusongtham and served as Abbot of the nearby Wat Tha Hoi before King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) invited him to take up residence in newly established Bangkok to supervise meditation practices there.

This paper explores a manual of protective practice and devices from this renowned temple preserved in a collection of traditional meditation texts titled *Phuttharangsi Thritsadiyan: Book of Samatha and Vipassanā Meditation of the Four Periods* published in 1935 (henceforth, *Phuttharangsi Thritsadiyan*).<sup>2</sup> The book was compiled and edited by Phra Mahājotipaṇṇo (Chai Yasothonrat) of Wat Boromniwat, Bangkok, under the supervision of its Abbot, Phra Upāli Khun-upamachan (Chan Siricando), a senior Thammayut monk who dedicated his career to collecting and preserving traditional manuscripts nationwide (Yasothonrat 1935). In the preface, Chai Yasothonrat states that the manual was obtained from Wat Manichonkhan, Lopburi, in 2478 B.E. (1935 C.E.), and belonged to “Wat Pradurongtham, from Ayutthaya, the ancient city” (Yasothonrat 1935, 10–11). Phibul Choompolpaisal's 2019 article titled “*Nimitta* and visual methods in Siamese and Lao meditation traditions from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day,” discusses the entire *Phuttharangsi Thritsadiyan* book and dates the manual to the eighteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> For the history of the temple, see Wat Pradusongtham (2012).

<sup>2</sup> หนังสือพุทธรังษีธิปไตยว่าด้วยสมถและวิปัสสนากัมมัฏฐาน ๔ ยุค.

Phra Upāli Khunupamachan (1856–1932), who supervised the compilation and editing of this book, was an influential figure in the history of the Thammayut *nikāya*. He was a pivotal leader in the movement and served as the intellectual and administrative backbone for both its reformist branch and its ascetic forest tradition. As a high-ranking administrative monk, Phra Upāli had access to monastic libraries and ancient temple archives across the country that were closed to the general public. In supervising the compilation and publication of the book, he must have carefully scrutinized each manuscript before assigning it to a specific period.

Moreover, the Triple Gem Qualities (Thai: *Phutthakhun, Thammakhun, Sangkhakhun*) yantras presented in the manual have also been dated to the Ayutthaya period by Thep Sarikabut (1919–1993), an authority on Thai traditional knowledge and belief systems. Thep Sarikabut is today widely revered as the twentieth-century doyen of Thai astrology and occult knowledge. He authored and compiled over 100 textbooks, many of which are still used and studied today. His *Khamphi Phra Wet (Compendium of Occult Sciences)* series, first published in 1958 and reprinted several times, is a comprehensive collection of ancient mantras, yantras, and apotropaic rituals. In its fourth volume (*chattuthaban*), Sarikabut presents two sets of yantras from the *Treatise on War Strategy (Tamra Phichai Songkhram)* and Wat Pradusongtham. According to him, both sets have been passed down from the Ayutthaya period (Sarikabut 1958a, 9 and 103). The Triple Gem Qualities yantras, which appear first in Wat Pradusongtham's set, are said to have been presented to King Narai (r. 1656–1688) by Phra Phrom Muni of Wat Paknam Prasop (Sarikabut 1958a, 104). This statement, according to Ake Nakornthab (2017, 23), corresponds to the Luang Prasert version of the Royal Chronicles which states that King Narai studied occult knowledge at the school of Phra Achan Phrom from a very young age. Upon ascending the throne, the king bestowed the monastic title of Somdet Phra Phutthachan on his teacher.

The manual is divided into three related sections. The first section addresses meditation and presents a method for visualizing Triple Gem Qualities yantras. These yantras comprise three protective diagrams representing the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. While the first section of the manual emphasizes the attainment of mental absorptions (*jhāna*) and insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*), the second and third sections, which have not been mentioned in any prior scholarship, provide detailed descriptions of the qualities and usage of these yantras and the *Ratanamālā* protective chant associated with them. It also provides instructions for the practitioner to gain four precious gems representing the four basic elements (*dhātu*) that make up the body and the physical world, and to use them to cure illnesses, perform miraculous powers, and activate protective devices (Yasothornrat 1935, 369–82).

Because their research is more focused on meditation than protection, previous scholars have largely ignored the second and third sections of the manual.<sup>3</sup> Even the editor and compiler of the book, Chai Yasothornrat, regarded them as miscellaneous and thus separated this content from the first section and added it to the very end of the book. In copying these sections, Yasothornrat (1935, 382) explains that, because these instructions are of ancient origin, his job

<sup>3</sup> These include Mettanando Bhikkhu (1998), Choempolpaisal (2019) and Cholvijarn (2021).

was to preserve rather than question or contradict them. In my earlier readings of the manual, as with other scholars, I focused on the first section and overlooked much of the content of the latter two. Later, I came to realize that these miscellaneous sections hold religious and historical value, specifically in the way monks at one of the most prominent temples of the late-Ayutthaya period addressed their practical and worldly concerns and how these instructions were regarded as essential in their daily lives and those of their patrons and followers.

The late-Ayutthaya identity of Wat Pradusongtham's manual is also evident in its internal methodology. As noted by Choompolpaisal (2019) and the author's previous research on Wat Pradusongtham (Cholvijarn 2021), the system of meditation presented in the text is characterized by complex visualizations of Khom characters, the visions of light sphere *nimittas* (image manifestation), their placement at specific bodily bases, and the incorporation of Abhidhamma understanding of consciousness and causality. These approaches represent a pre-modern paradigm that stands in stark contrast to the rationalized and scriptural reforms and revival of meditation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of its meditative content aligns with Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithuean's *Matchima Baep Lamdap* system, which has been passed down unbroken since the late Ayutthaya period and whose written instructions survive at Wat Ratchasittharam to this day. The manuscript preserves a set of practices consistent with the Old Meditation (*boran kammaṭṭhāna*) tradition, as found across the region.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, both Choompolpaisal (2019) and I conclude that the manual dates to the eighteenth century CE, originating as a product of the late-Ayutthaya period—or, at the very least, a Thonburi or early Bangkok text derived directly from late-Ayutthayan sources.

The second and third sections of the Wat Pradusongtham manual provide the origins and usages of the Triple Gem Qualities yantras, the *Ratanamālā* protective chant, the visualization of the syllables *na*, *ma*, *a*, and *u*, and the practical construction of protective devices. I adopt a combined textual and comparative historical approach to analyze the manual. Where interpretation is required, it relies on a combination of scholarly perspectives and comparisons with similar contemporaneous practices and devices. By pointing out their roots, providing historical evidence of their use, and comparing them with other pre-modern examples, this article situates these practices and approaches within the broader evolution of Thai protective knowledge. In the final section, this article attempts to assess the manual's overarching historical and religious significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Also known as “Old Meditation” tradition or *boran kammaṭṭhāna* (Thai: *kammathan baep boran*). A common characteristic of this tradition is that the meditation objects, processes and states described in the Pali Canon and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*) are usually experienced as *nimittas* appearing as spheres of light on and inside the meditator's body. These luminous sphere *nimittas*, which, in some lineages, contain Pali syllables are regarded as the visual manifestations of the meditator's own mind (*citta*) that has attained the meditation objects, processes or states invoked. See Crosby, Skilton and Gunasena. (2012), Crosby (2013 and 2020), Skilton and Choompolpaisal (2014 and 2015), Kyaw and Crosby (2022), and Cholvijarn (2021, 2025a and 2025b).

## 2. Triple Gem Qualities Yantras

In the course of Ayutthaya history, various practices and devices were developed to offer protection against war, natural disasters, and non-human beings. Their main aim was not only protection, but also other worldly benefits such as enhancing one's wisdom, power, and charisma, promoting wealth, and curing diseases. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, in a 2024 article titled "Before the Amulet: Concepts and Devices in Old Siam," demonstrate the extensive usage of these practices and devices in the Ayutthaya period through evidence of literature, law, and accounts of foreigners. These include the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the *Three Seals Law* (compiled in 1805, but based on Ayutthaya-era laws), and the record of Nicholas Gervaise (1662–1729). Baker and Phongpaichit (2024, 19–29) describe these practices as "the science of manipulating forces of nature" and divide them into three categories: 1) words and numbers, which mainly refer to Pali formulas, mantras and heart syllables;<sup>5</sup> 2) natural and intrinsically powerful materials such as mercury, gems, tusks, special kinds of eggs and plants; and 3) constructed devices made by adepts, which include activated powder, water, knives, swords, metals, and bandeaus (Thai: *prachiat*).

Yantra, a diagram consisting of geometric, animal, and deity designs accompanied by Pali phrases, which, according to Baker and Phongpaichit (2024, 29), belongs to all of the above three categories, is noted as being the most prominent in the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. The use of these yantras for healing and protection is also mentioned by Gervaise. Yantras can take many forms, such as engravings on pieces of metal, ink drawings on cloth, tattoos on different parts of the body, soaked in oil or water, then, sprayed onto objects, consumed or applied to the skin, etc.

The application of these yantras during the Ayutthaya period is further demonstrated in the study by Buddhiso, Duangloy, and Phumathon (2023) on the *Soḷasa* yantra of Wat Na Phra Men, one of the few temples in Ayutthaya that survived the Burmese sack of 1767. According to their research, the temple's survival after such devastating destruction elevated the yantra to one of the most efficacious "*khlaeokhlat*" devices, meaning that it is believed to be imbued with the power to evade danger and attain invulnerability (Buddhiso, Duangloy, and Phumathon 2023, 28). The *Soḷasa* yantra was directly placed above the entrance to the ordination hall at Wat Na Phra Men, together with other yantras above the hall's exit and on the left eye of the principal Buddha image named Phra Phutthanimit. All of these yantras thus served as a structural defence intended to protect the entire hall, its treasures, and the congregation within the Wat. Because Wat Na Phra Men was a royal temple, the yantras preserved there represent an elite, state-sanctioned tradition of protective knowledge developed by the kingdom's learned monastics. Moreover, its influence persisted into the early Bangkok period when, in 1782, King Rama I ordered it inscribed on the top of the Bangkok City Pillar to bring protection and prosperity to the newly-established city (Buddhiso, Duangloy and Phumathon 2023, 28). The three Triple Gem Qualities yantras in Wat Pradusongtham's manual, known in Thai as *Phutthakhun*, *Thammakhun* and *Sangkhakhun* yantras, are remarkable as they are treated as both protective and meditation devices. They are

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<sup>5</sup> Heart syllables are Pali syllables that serve as abbreviations and representations of objects to be recollected and/or invoked in protective rituals. These objects include individuals, deities, texts, Dhamma states, meditation subjects, stages of enlightenment etc.

composed of Pali syllables in Khom script<sup>6</sup> derived from the canonical *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula, one of the most ubiquitous *parittas* (protective chants) found in chanting books across the Theravada world.<sup>7</sup> The *Iti Pi So Bhagavā*, the formula appears throughout the Pali Canon (*Tipiṭaka*) and describes the various qualities (*guṇas*) of the Triple Gems. In the *Dhajagga Sutta* (S i 218), the Buddha instructs his disciples that whenever they enter a forest or an empty house, and fear arises in their minds, they should neither recollect the banner of Indra nor those of other *deva* kings as these deities are not devoid of greed, hatred, and delusion. Instead, they should recite this formula to remind themselves of the qualities of the Triple Gem, and in doing so, their fears, terror, and horror will disappear.<sup>8</sup>

The first diagram, the Buddha Qualities yantra, contains fifty-six circles arranged in eight rows and seven columns. Each circle contains a Khom syllable taken from the first section of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula describing the qualities of the Buddha.<sup>9</sup> The second diagram, the Dhamma Qualities yantra, consists of thirty-eight circles, each with a Khom syllable taken from the second section of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula describing the qualities of the Dhamma.<sup>10</sup> The third diagram, the Sangha Qualities yantra, likewise contains 121 circles, each with a number and a Khom syllable taken from the third section of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula which describes the qualities of the Sangha.<sup>11</sup> The syllables of the three yantras are not written in a straightforward order but are placed from one to the next in L-shaped and clockwise directions (in the same way the knight moves in chess). Due to its association with the knight, the Thai yantra tradition calls it the horse grid (Thai: *tarang ma*). As a visualization method, this arrangement provides the requisite complexity for the practitioner to cultivate deep concentration (*samādhi*) and *jhānas*. *Jhānas*, translated as mental absorptions, are states of deep concentration in which the mental hindrances are suppressed and awareness is fully absorbed in the object of meditation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Khom script, which is derived from the round-shaped Khmer Mul script, has been used in Thailand for writing Pali from at least the 13th century.

<sup>7</sup> This consists of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. For the overview of the uses of *Dhajagga Sutta* and other protective chants in Theravada Buddhism, see Bizot and Lagirarde (1996), Skilling (1992), Harvey (1993), Bernon (1998), Patton (2010), and McDaniel (2011).

<sup>8</sup> When I refer to the Pali canon, I cite the volumes and page numbers of the Pali Text Society editions.

<sup>9</sup> *Iti pi so bhagavā araham sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasaṃpanno sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussānaṃ buddho bhagavāti*. “The Blessed One is an arahant, perfectly enlightened, accomplished in true knowledge and conduct, fortunate, knower of the world, unsurpassed leader of persons to be tamed, teacher of devas and humans, the Enlightened One, the Blessed One;” translation by Bodhi (2000, 319).

<sup>10</sup> *Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opāyiko paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhīti*. “The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise;” translation by Bodhi (2000, 320).

<sup>11</sup> *Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvagasaṅgho ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvagasaṅgho sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvagasaṅgho yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭha purisapuggalā esa bhagavato sāvagasaṅgho āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhiṇeyyo añjalikaraṇīyo anuttaram puññakkhettaṃ lokassāti*. “The Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples is practicing the good way, practicing the straight way, practicing the true way, practicing the proper way; that is, the four pairs of persons, the eight types of individuals — this Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of reverential salutation, the unsurpassed field of merit for the world;” translation by Bodhi (2000, 320).

<sup>12</sup> The first *jhāna* consists of five factors: applied thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), joy (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*) and one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*). The second *jhāna* consists of three factors: joy, happiness and one-pointedness of mind. The third *jhāna* consists of happiness and one-pointedness of mind. The fourth *jhāna* consists of one-pointedness of mind and equanimity (*upekkhā*). The five hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) are sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), ill-will (*vyāpāda*), sluggishness (*thīna-middha*), agitation (*uddacca-kukkucca*) and doubt (*vicikicchā*).

The knight's move (horse grid) in yantras, according to Nakornthab (2017, 64), may originally have been a display of a poetic technique or a form of wordplay and stylistic recording favored by ancient linguists. In later periods, the inscribing of these diagrams became a matter of secrecy, known as "shrouding the knowledge" (*bang witcha*). Moreover, the arrangement allows the ritual master to draw each syllable in a clockwise, auspicious direction and avoid landing in the previously drawn circles.

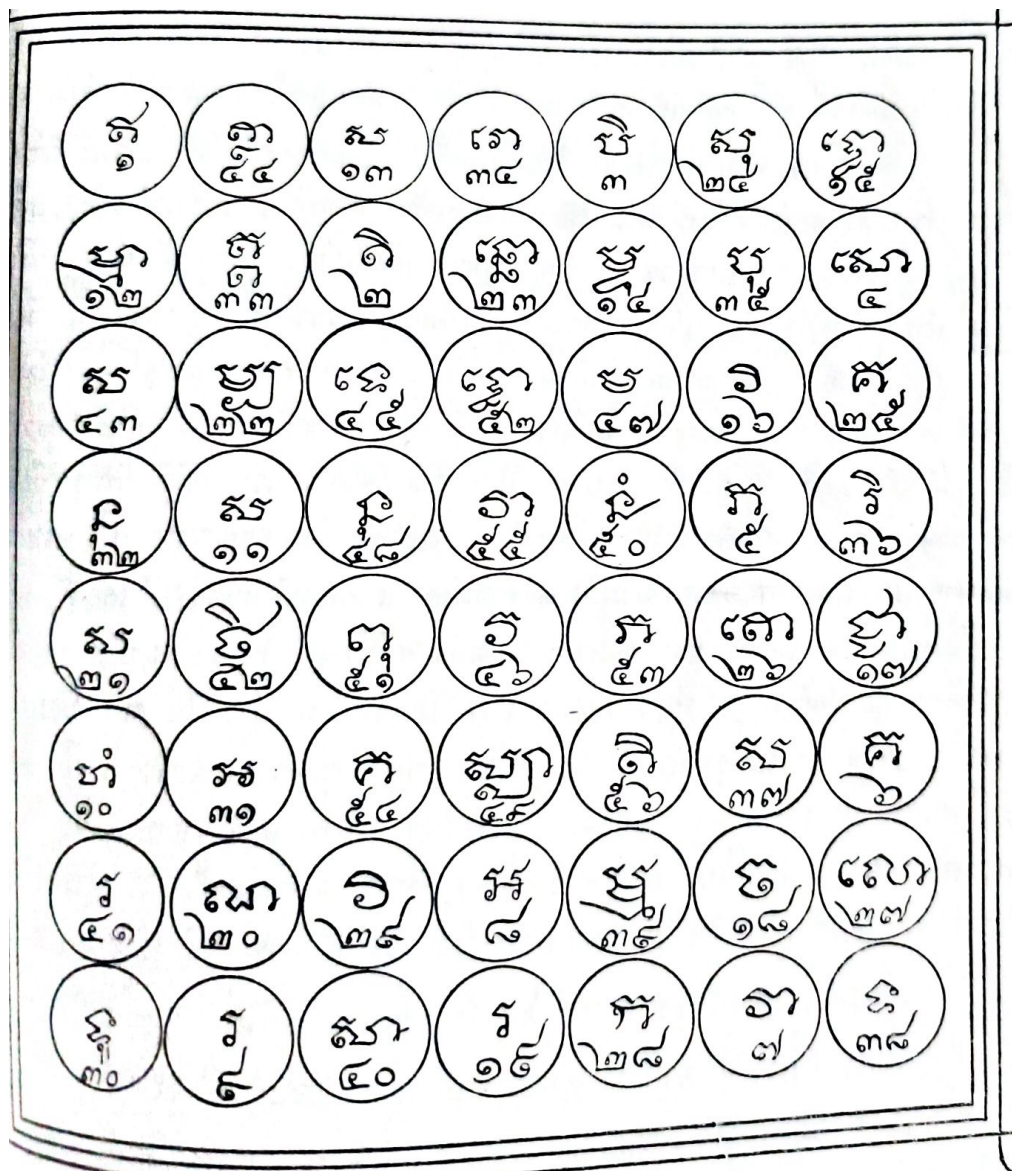


Figure 1. The qualities of the Buddha yantra. (Reproduced from Yasothonrat 1935: 267)

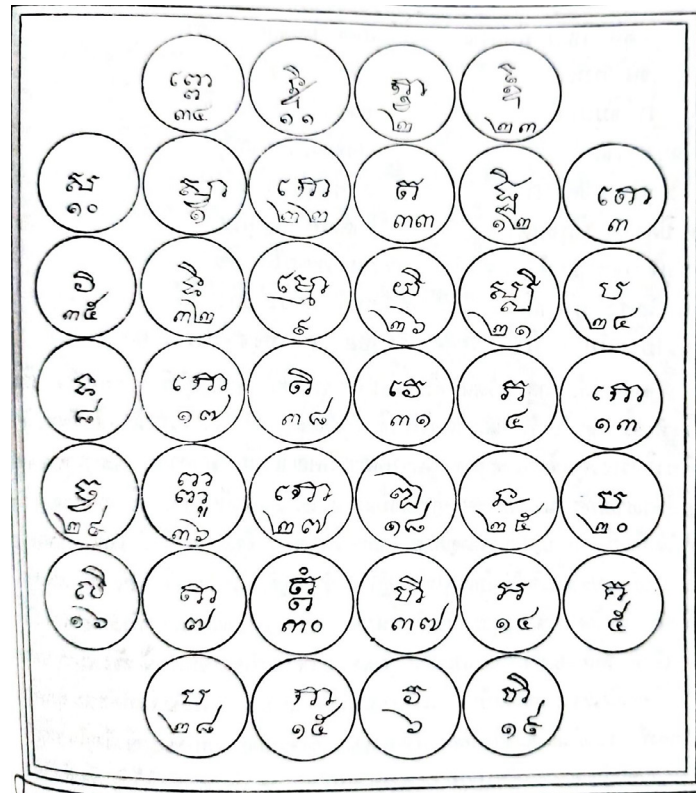


Figure 2. The qualities of the Dhamma yantra. (Reproduced from Yasothonrat 1935: 275)

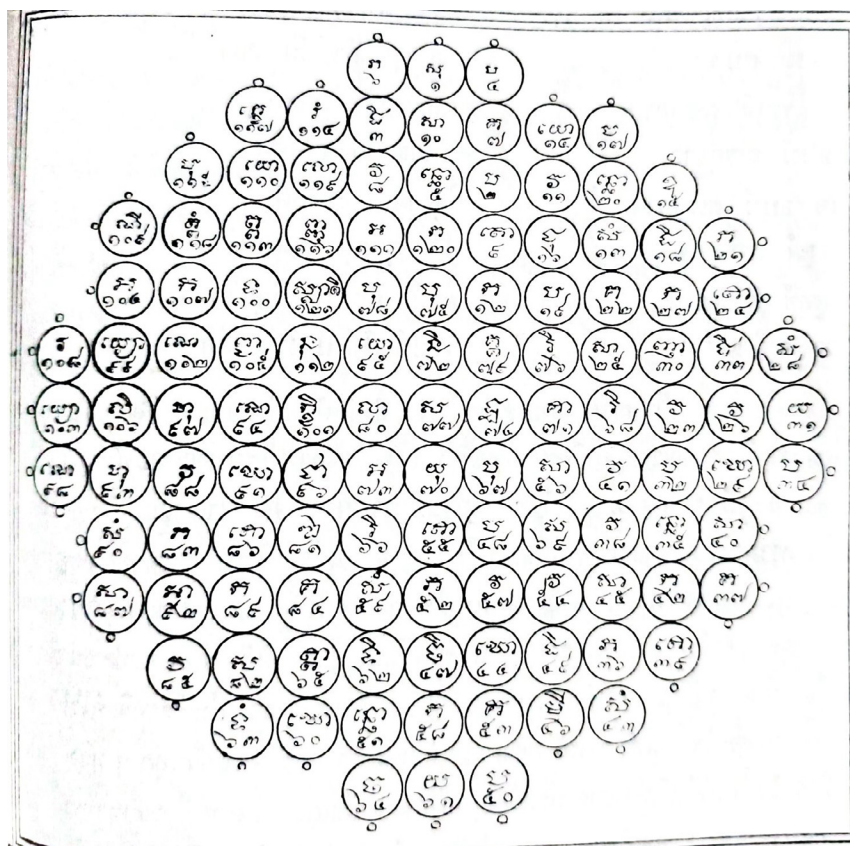


Figure 3. The qualities of the Sangha yantra. (Reproduced from Yasothonrat 1935: 281)

While the first section of the manual provides instructions for visualizing these Triple Gem Qualities yantras in meditation, the second section outlines their legendary origins, usage, and protective qualities. The three yantras are said to be of great antiquity, handed down from “fifty-six prominent teachers of India in B.E. 572” (Yasothonrat 1935, 369).<sup>13</sup> The number fifty-six matches the number of syllables in the Buddha’s qualities section of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula. As for the year of creation, the number 572 is not numerologically significant. However, when five, seven and two are added together, the total of fourteen corresponds to the number of verses of the Sangha qualities in the *Ratanamālā* protective chant. The manual states that these fifty-six teachers inscribed the yantras on a rock in a royal pool reserved for monks who were studying the Pali Canon. Drinking its water is said to cause “those who have no wisdom to gain wisdom and those who already have wisdom to gain even more wisdom” (Yasothonrat 1935, 369). The yantras can be used to prepare sacred water to cure illnesses, extend life, attract wealth, and protect against ghosts, thieves, fire, and enemies. During wartime, they should be written on a piece of paper or white cloth, fashioned into a flag, and raised in front of the enemy. It states that: “wherever the flag is waved, the enemy will scatter” (Yasothonrat 1935, 369).

Another usage of the Triple Gem Qualities yantras is to inscribe them on pieces of gold, silver, copper, or lead and wear them as *takruts*. *Takruts* are metal sheets engraved with yantras, which are rolled around cords and worn on the neck, waist, or arm. According to Baker and Phongpaichit (2013, 228; and 2024, 32), they are the most common form of yantras in *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, and are also mentioned in King Rama I’s *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. In the manual, *takruts* inscribed with the three yantras are said to enhance the wearer’s “*decha*.” This Thai word, which is derived from the Pali “*teja*,” denotes power and appeal, as “one who wears them will be both feared and loved at the same time” (Yasothonrat 1935, 369). It also recommends soaking the *takruts* in water and sand, then sprinkling them around the house to protect it from robbers and enemies or onto goods to promote sales.

The ritual of soaking the *takruts* should be performed on a Thursday of the waxing moon, an auspicious day, and involves the offerings of 156 incense sticks, 156 candles, 156 flowers and two *baisis* (tiered ornament of flowers and banana leaves) for the Triple Gem (Yasothonrat 1935, 370). During the act of sprinkling, the power and perfections (Thai: *decha-barami*) of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are invoked by the adept and transferred to the objects being protected or enhanced (Yasothonrat 1935, 370). Fifty-six again matches the number of syllables in the Buddha’s qualities of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula. The number one, in the Thai yantra tradition, according to Buddhiso, Duangloy and Phumathon (2023, 35), represents the virtue of *nibbāna*, the path to which is said to be singular and unified.

## 2.1 Modern Applications

Although the three yantras are no longer used as a meditation device, their reputation for protection has not diminished over the centuries. Thep Sarikabut (1958a, 104) informs that the *takruts* of these yantras, which have been sacralized at Wat Tum, Ayutthaya were presented

<sup>13</sup> *Matthayom prathet* (มัธยมประเทศ), literally “middle country,” which is synonymous with India. 572 BE. would be equivalent to the year 29 C.E.

as gifts to King Rama V (r. 1868-1910). Wat Tum is an ancient temple known as the site where Ayutthayan military regalia were consecrated to ensure victory in war. Figure four shows the Buddha's Qualities Yantra activated at Wat Traimit Withayaram, Bangkok, by Somdet Phra Maharatchamongkhonmuni (Thongchai Dhammadhajo) (1953-), the renowned ritualist and member of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand. The yantras were made as gifts for participants in a 1992 fortune-enhancing ceremony at the temple.<sup>14</sup>

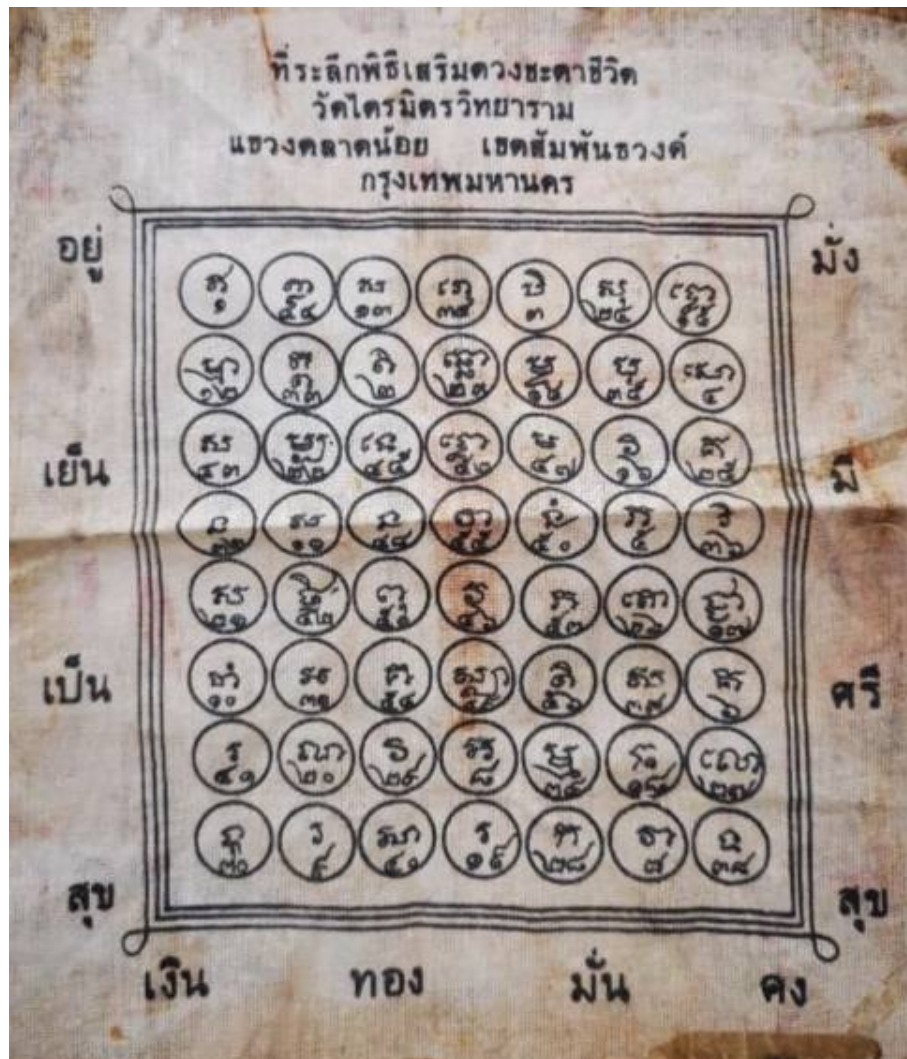


Figure 4: Buddha's qualities yantra of Wat Traimit Withayaram, Bangkok (Photo by the author)

Other recent examples of these yantras are those created at Wat Mai Amphon, Nakhon Ratchasima in April 2004 by the well-known meditation monk Phra Thep Witthayakom, also known as Luang Pho Khun Parisuddho (1923-2015) of Wat Ban Rai. All three Triple Gem Qualities yantras were printed on a single white cloth along with a picture of Luang Pho Khun. The cloth also includes a caption stating that the yantras were taken from Wat Pradusongtham's manual.

<sup>14</sup> Yantras of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula, with Khom syllables written in a similar knight-step style have also been identified by Bizot and von Hinüber (1994, 52-3) in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Cambodia.

### 3. *Ratanamālā* Protective Chant

The next part of the second section of the manual lists protective and miraculous powers obtainable from reciting the *Ratanamālā*, a non-canonical Pali protective chant of unknown origin and date. According to François Bizot (1981, 162-3), the earliest evidence of this chant is a donative inscription from Pagan, Myanmar, dated 1442 C.E.<sup>15</sup> The chant is integral to the Triple Gem Qualities yantras, as it is to be performed during both their visualization and activation (Yasothornrat 1935, 307; and Sarikabut 1958a, 104). The former would require the practitioner to place their concentration (*samādhi*) on each syllable of the yantras from the first to the last, while reciting the verses of the *Ratanamālā* in order to recollect the Triple Gem's qualities; the latter would require the ritualist to recite the same verses but this time as an incantation to sacralize the syllables being drawn, inscribed, or tattooed.

As an *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* derived chant, the *Ratanamālā* adds a stanza of Pali verses beginning with each of the syllable of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula to elaborate on the Triple Gem's qualities. The stanzas are provided to the fifty-six syllables of the qualities of the Buddha, thirty-eight of the qualities of the Dhamma, and fourteen of the qualities of the Sangha, totalling 108 stanzas. Thus, all the syllables of the entire Buddha and Dhamma formulae, but only the first fourteen syllables of the Sangha formula, are used in this chant.<sup>16</sup>

Chanting these verses while visualizing the yantras is described as equivalent to “finding the Buddha” and enables the adept to develop miraculous powers such as flying through the air and passing through mountains (Yasothornrat 1935, 370). Many of its protective qualities, similar to those mentioned above, focus on the dangers of wars, enemies, robbers and non-humans. The list of non-humans includes snakes, elephants, tigers, crocodiles, buffalo, scorpions, ghosts, and demons. Other benefits include boosting one's trade, enhancing attractiveness to *devas* and high-ranking officials, and curing illnesses.

Whereas this manual covers only the standard *Ratanamālā* with its 108 syllables and verses, an elongated version of the chant is documented by Thep Sarikabut (1958b, 117-134) in his book *Khletlap Saiyasat (Secrets of the Occult)*. This longer version adds two elements to the beginning: the invocation “*namo buddhāya siddham*” (“homage to the Buddha, may there be success”), and the complete Pali alphabet.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, it provides an additional chanting verse for every single syllable of both the invocation and the alphabet before continuing to the standard 108 syllables. As I shall discuss below, the fifteenth-century Wat Traphang Nak inscription, one of the earliest known examples of an *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* yantra, also begins with this exact invocation.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For discussions of its use in Northern Thai Buddha image consecration ceremonies, see Swearer (2004); and for its Cambodian editions and uses, see Bizot and von Hinüber (1994) and Walker (2018). For general discussions on yantras and protective chants, see Bizot (1981), Becchetti (1991), Bizot and Lagirarde (1996), Skilling (1992), Harvey (1993), Bernon (1998), Patton (2010), and McDaniel (2011).

<sup>16</sup> For example, for the syllable “*pī*” (the third syllable), the *Ratanamālā* elaborates with the verses starting with the syllable *pi*: “*piyo devamanussānaṃ piyo brahmānamuttamo piyo nāgasupaṇṇānaṃ piṇḍriyaṃ namāmihaṃ*,” which describes the Buddha as the most beloved among humans, *devas*, Brahmas, *nāgas* and *garuḍas* (Yasothornrat 1935, 270).

<sup>17</sup> *a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e, o, ka, kha, ga, gha, ṇa, ca, cha, ja, jha, ña, ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṇa, ta, tha, da, dha, na, pa, pha, ba, bha, ma, ya, ra, la, va, sa, ha, ḷa, and aṃ.*

<sup>18</sup> Officially registered as Sor Tor 33.

Moreover, the *Ratanamālā* performs a crucial role in one of the main powder-erasing (*lop phong*) rituals. Maneeratana and Tudkeao (2018), in their study of ancient *lop phong* literature, identify five main scriptures that form the basis of this practice: *Pathamang*, *Ithache*, *Trinisinghe*, *Maharat*, and *Phutthakhun*. In premodern Thailand, they were essential texts in the curriculum of students of occult knowledge; studying them would provide an in-depth understanding of the structural systems of yantra numerology and the ability to craft them with precision. The last of the five, the *Phutthakhun* scripture, is also known as *Ratanamālā* because its verses are prescribed as an essential part of its powder-erasing technique. This involves writing and erasing each syllable of the Buddha's qualities in the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula while reciting the corresponding verse of the *Ratanamālā*. The syllables are then repeatedly erased to form various heart syllables such as *na-mo-bud-dhā-ya*, *ma-a-u*, and *i-svā-su*. After this, the powder is drawn into the figure of the Buddha (*ong phra*) and activated using incantations. While these devices may be associated with worldly concerns, Maneeratana and Tudkeao (2018, 12) demonstrate that scriptures such as the *Trinisinghe* used the same numeral systems to illustrate profound concepts such as *suññatā* (emptiness) and *nibbāna*.

### 3.1 Modern Applications

Today, the *Ratanamālā* is commonly chanted in protective rituals and ceremonies to activate Buddha images and amulets and is depicted on yantras throughout Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. A late-19th-century Cambodian folded manuscript of this text is preserved in the École Française d'Extrême-Orient's library in Phnom Penh. Its *ānisaṃsa* (benefit) section, translated by Trent Walker (2018, 60), describes the chant as "a golden vessel that always ferries living beings into *nibbāna*." Those who regularly chant it will escape all their past lives' sins and will be reborn in Tusita heaven after death (Walker 2018, 60). In 1924, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943), an influential Thai scholar widely regarded today as the father of Thai history, ordered the publication of the book, *Iti Pi So Konlabot (Iti Pi So Riddles)*, to be presented as gifts to monks and novices visiting the Wachirayan Library.<sup>19</sup> The book aims to provide a definitive collection of all Pali variations of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula. The *Ratanamālā* and its Thai translation are included in it.

## 4. Manipulating the Elements

Whereas the first section focuses on meditation and the second sections provides instructions for protective practices, the third and final section integrates these two bodies of knowledge by applying meditative visualization skills to practical and supernormal benefits. It offers two sets of four visualization diagrams. The diagrams are titled "Method of Walking the Elements" (*Withi Doen That*), each featuring concentric circles encircled by Pali syllables *na*, *ma*, *a*, *u*, positioned at the four cardinal directions. *Na*, *ma*, *a*, *u* are heart syllables that can represent many objects consisting of sets of four. Heart syllables are Pali syllables that serve as abbreviations and representations of objects to be recollected and/or invoked in protective rituals. In this manual, they are understood to represent both the four great elements (Pali: *dhātu*) and the four precious

<sup>19</sup> Wachirayan Library, established by King Rama V in 1905, is the precursor to the National Library of Thailand.

gems (Thai: *kaeo*).<sup>20</sup> The syllables are written in the Tham (Dhamma) Isan script, a local variant of the Tai Tham script used for Pali texts in Isan (northeastern Thailand) and Laos. Although the Tham Isan script is not uncommon in traditional religious texts of central Thailand, it is less popular than Khom, suggesting that these diagrams may have originated in the Isan/Laos region. In premodern Thai meditation, *doen that*, or walking the elements, is a generic term for meditation methods that involve visualizations of the elements, represented by sacred Pali syllables (Cholvijarn 2025a). Other related meditation systems, such as that of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kaithuean (1733–1822), also include their own *Doen That* techniques. However, *Withi Doen That*, in this manual, is unique for its use of the syllables *na*, *ma*, *a*, *u* and the Tham Isan script, and its application for entirely worldly purposes. The four syllables stand for the four great elements: *na* = water, *ma* = fire, *a* = wind, and *u* = earth, which, in Indic religions, form the basis of the physical world and the human body. The earth element is the aspect of matter that is solid in the physical world, both internally and externally. Water refers to what is liquid, fire denotes heat, and wind signifies the movement of air. The manual states that the Buddha and the sages praise the practice of contemplating the four elements. Without these elements, all *devas*, Brahmas, and the entire three worlds would be annihilated (Yasothonrat 1935, 374).

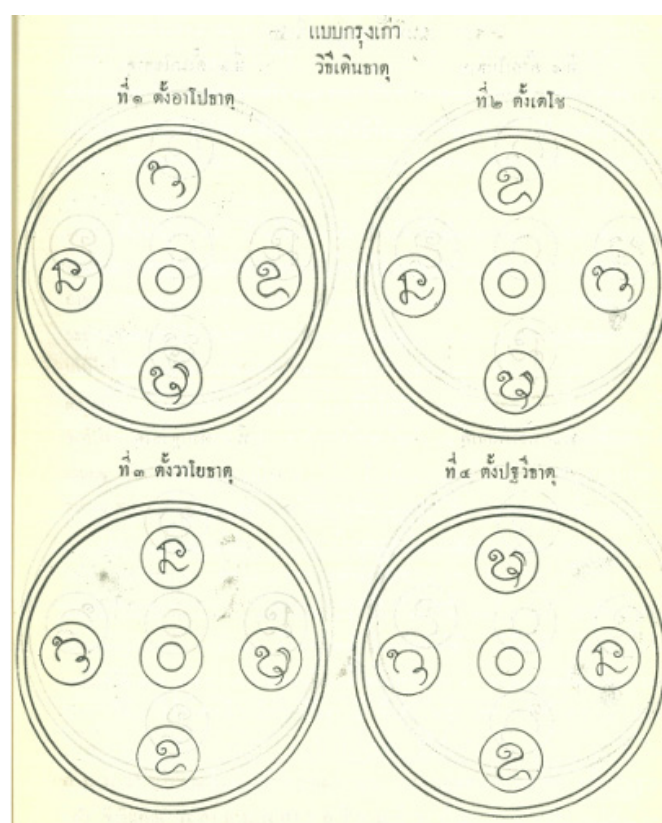


Figure 5: First set of visualization diagrams for “Walking the Elements”  
(Reproduced from Yasothonrat 1935: 376).

<sup>20</sup> *Na*, *ma*, *a*, and *u* can also represent: the first Buddhist council (the Dhamma, and the three arahants: Kassapa, Ānanda, and Upāli), and the four individuals one is indebted to (parents, the arahant, and the teacher).

As shown in figure five, the top-left diagram is used for visualizing the water element; the top right is for visualizing the fire element; the bottom left, the wind element; and the bottom right, the earth element. The objective of this exercise is to gain mental absorptions (*jhāna*) and *nimittas* (image manifestations)<sup>21</sup> of the four precious gems, 1) *kaeo mani chot*, 2) *kaeo phaithun*, 3) *kaeo wichian*, and 4) *kaeo patthamarat*, to be seen at four places in and on the body:

*Kaeo mani chot* is the syllable *na*, the water element, and appears at the head.  
*Kaeo phaithun* is the syllable *ma*, the fire element, and appears at the chest.  
*Kaeo wichian* is the syllable *a*, the wind element, and appears at the back.  
*Kaeo patthamarat* is the syllable *u*, the earth element, and appears at the mouth  
 (Yasothonrat 1935, 374).<sup>22</sup>

The manual does not specify how the diagrams are to be visualized, which incantations are to be recited during the visualization, or how the gems are to be seen. In the absence of a living practitioner, I have relied on my interview with Phra Khru Sitthisangwon (Wira Ṭhānavīro) (1949-) (henceforth, Luang Pho Wira), the meditation instructor at Wat Ratchasittharam, Thonburi, and the lineage holder of *Matchima Baep Lamdap* meditation of Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean, to provide his interpretation of practices. As mentioned above, the meditation lineages of the two temples are connected as Supreme Patriarch Suk Kai Thuean was ordained and trained at Wat Pradusongtham before becoming the abbot of Wat Thahoi in Ayutthaya.

Luang Pho Wira (2026) states that in *Matchima Baep Lamdap*, a similar diagram is used not for visualization but as a guideline for the meditator to attain a vision of the “*dhamma* sphere,” with the spheres of the five elements within it. One of the most important *nimittas* (image manifestation) to be gained at the *samatha* level of this system is a vision of the meditator’s mind appearing as a luminous sphere in and on the body. This *dhamma* sphere, also known as “*phra tham duangkao*” (“gem sphere of the Dhamma”), is seen at the nine bodily bases and said to contain the spheres of the five basic elements (earth, water, wind, fire, and space), which are positioned at its center and in the four cardinal directions. The sphere of the wind element appears yellow; the sphere of the earth element appears green; the sphere of the fire element appears red; and the sphere of the water element appears white. The space element at the center of the *dhamma* sphere is translucent. These elements can be manipulated using mental concentration for purposes of curing illnesses, performing miraculous powers, and activating protective devices. The objective of visualizing the above diagrams, according to Luang Pho Wira (2026), is, therefore, the same as *Matchima Baep Lamdap*’s *samatha* stages - to attain the visions of the *dhamma* sphere. Some of the miraculous and healing feats mentioned in the manual as the outcome of obtaining these four gems include using the earth and fire elements to transform “an old person into a young person,”

<sup>21</sup> *Nimitta* (Thai: *nimit*) is a Pali term translated as a sign of concentration, an image manifestation, an eidetic image, or a mental image, and refers to different kinds of visions that arise in meditation. For Pali textual references, see, for example, *Bhikkhunūpassaya Sutta* (S v 154), *Upakkilesa Sutta* (M ii 152), *Saṅgaṇikārāma Sutta* (A iii 422–23), and *Visuddhimagga* (chapters iv and viii).

<sup>22</sup> แก้วมณีโชติ แก้วไพฑูรย์ แก้ววิเชียร แก้วปัทมราช

“betel leaves into money,” “a flower into a crocodile,” and “tamarind leaves or rice into wasps;” as well as using *kaeo phaithun* “to cure illness within” and using *kaeo patthamarat* “to cure illnesses outside” (i.e. of others) (Yasothonrat 1935, 374-7). The manual’s instructions on protective devices use the power of the elements to activate various natural and constructed objects such as “scented water,” “tiger’s teeth,” “cremation coals,” and “Gavampatis” (Thai: *phra khwam*). For example, “to enhance one’s *decha* (power), take a tiger’s tooth and file it in scented oil, and activate it with the fire elements eleven times. This will cause all to fear you” (Yasothonrat 1935, 377).

Gavampati refers to an image of one of the Buddha’s arahant disciples known for his supernormal powers. He is usually depicted as a monk with his hands covering his eyes and is today recognized among Thai amulet circles as *phra pit ta* (monks with eyes closed). One reason Gavampati is chosen as an object of protection is his ability to manipulate the natural elements. In the commentaries to the *Theragāthā* (109-111), at the request of the Buddha, Gavampati is said to have used his supernormal power to hold back a tide from drowning a group of monks who were sleeping on the bank of the river Sarabhu. According to François Lagirarde (2019, 191), archaeological and literary evidence indicate that Gavampati has been the object of worship in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos since the 7th century CE. His image was found in the ruins of the Dvaravati stupa Chula Pathon in Nakhon Pathom. Another example dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century is kept at The Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.<sup>23</sup> Gavampati is associated with protection in the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen* and in the *Chronicle of Wat Pa Daeng* that records the history of the Wat Pa Daeng tradition of Lanna (northern Thailand) in the 15th century (Baker and Phongpaichit 2024, 32; and Lagirarde 2019, 193). In the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, Gavampati is to be placed in the mouth to enhance the wearer’s speech, carried into battle, and soaked in water for protection and invulnerability (Baker and Phongpaichit 2024, 32).

In this manual, Gavampati is used to confer invisibility, stating, “to become covered, carve a piece of *mai ra-ngap* wood into a *phra khwam* [Gavampati] and inscribe *kaeo mani chot* on the left eye, *kaeo wichian* on the right eye, *kaeo patthamarat* on the face, and *kaeo phaithun* on the chest, and then proceed” (Yasothonrat 1935, 374). *Mai ra-ngap*, also known as *mai yarap*, is a touch-me-not, a type of creeping plant whose trunks and roots are popularly used as amulet ingredients. This instruction indicates that the adept must carve the corresponding syllables onto various parts of Gavampati’s body while simultaneously transferring the power of the four gems from their body into it. Carrying the carved image with them will render them invisible to the enemy.

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<sup>23</sup> See Dupont (1954, 87), Woodward (1997, 54) and Lagirarde (2019, 193).

### 4.1 Modern Evolution

The meditation systems of Supreme Patriarch Suk and Wat Pradusongtham became the sources of a popular twentieth-century meditation system known as *Sammā Arahaṃ* (or *Witcha Dhammakaya*). Developed in 1916 by the late Abbot of Wat Paknam, Phra Mongkhon Thepmuni (Sot Candasaro) (1884-1959), *Sammā Arahaṃ* incorporates the *dhamma* sphere, seen as a luminous sphere two finger widths above the navel, which also contains the spheres of the six elements. The spheres of the six elements in *Sammā Arahaṃ* meditation include the five elements above, plus the consciousness element at the center of the sphere inside the space element. They are said to govern the meditator's body and mind and can be manipulated for healing purposes. In *Seeing the Bodies Within: Exploring Sammā Arahaṃ Practice of Theravada Buddhism*, the author (2025b) establishes the connections between these three meditation traditions and provides evidence that Luang Pho Sot Candasaro studied meditation at both Wat Pradusongtham and Wat Ratchasittharam and incorporated aspects of these ancient techniques into *Sammā Arahaṃ* meditation.

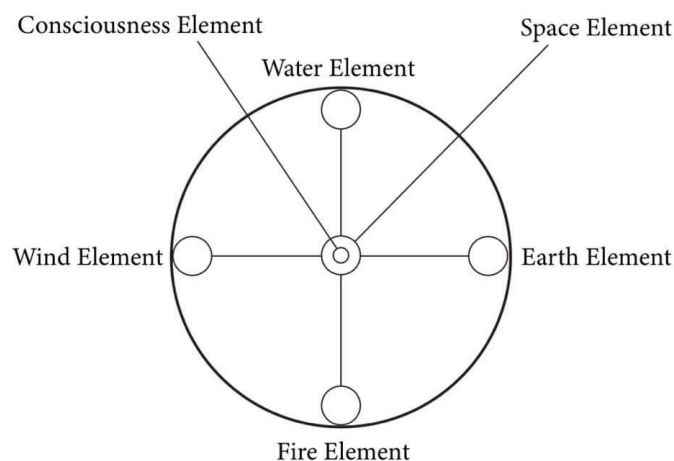


Figure 6: A picture of the *dhamma* sphere containing the spheres of the six elements in *Sammā Arahaṃ* meditation

## 5. Roots of Thai Protective Knowledge

The roots of protective knowledge in Thai Buddhism are a combination of practices and beliefs relating to the miraculous and protective powers of the Buddha and his enlightened disciples and the perception of Pali as a sacred language. The accounts of the power of the Buddha and the enlightened ones appear throughout the Pali Canon and its commentaries. For example, two of the Buddha's epithets described in the *suttas* are "without fear from any quarter" and "granter of security."<sup>24</sup> His physical presence in a location is said to bestow protection on

<sup>24</sup> For example, *Theragāthā* (510), *Therīgāthā* (333) and M i 386.

the people in that vicinity. The *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (D i 116) states that “in whatever town or village the ascetic Gotama stays, non-humans do not harm the people of that town or village” (Skilling 1992, 110-11). Miraculous powers (Pali: *iddhi-pāṭihāriya*) are described in the *suttas* as the result of the attainment of *jhānas*. The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (D i 47), the second discourse of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, incorporates some of these feats to the benefits of the ascetic life: multiplying oneself, becoming invisible, passing through solid objects, sinking into the ground, walking on water, flying through the air, touching the sun and moon with one’s hands, and traveling to the Brahma realm. The most well-known miracle performed by the Buddha is the Twin Miracle at Savatthi (*yamaka-pāṭihāriya*) recorded in the commentary to the *Dhammapada* (209-213), in which he creates a jeweled walkway and, standing on top of it, enters the *jhānas* and simultaneously emits fire and water from his body to conjure a ray of six colors (*chabbanna-ramṣī*).<sup>25</sup>

After the Buddha’s final *nibbāna*, his miraculous and protective powers were extended by later Buddhist traditions to his relics, images, and spoken words (*buddha-vacana*). Some of the renowned images, such as the Emerald Buddha, Phra Phutthasihing, and Phra Bang, were considered palladia or sacred protectors and bringers of prosperity and became prized possessions of powerful monarchs.<sup>26</sup> With regard to *buddha-vacana*, Pali was believed to be a pure, sacred, and universal language, spoken by the Buddha. Buddhaghosa, the influential fifth-century commentator and author of the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*), saw Pali as the root language (*mūla-bhāsa*) of all beings (Vsm 441). The Brahmas and gods in heaven, the hungry ghosts, the asuras, and the beings in hell all understand Pali. If a child were raised without a spoken language, they would eventually learn to speak Pali on their own (Crosby 2020, 127). From this understanding, the Theravada tradition developed the practice of memorizing and reciting *parittas* (Thai: Phra Parit) for protection. Among the most popular canonical *parittas* are: *Maṅgala Sutta*, *Ratana Sutta*, *Metta Sutta*, and *Dhajagga Paritta* (*Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula). The non-canonical *parittas* such as *Ratanamālā*, *Jinapañjara*, and *Bāhum-Mahākāruṇiko* appeared later and are inspired by the canonical works.

Traditional meditation and protective knowledge adopted this view of Pali but developed it even further to conceive Pali as potent, imbued with creative force, and as having phonemes capable of representing multiple entities larger than themselves. This understanding, according to Kate Crosby (2020: 110), is derived from traditional Indic grammar. Underlying the sophisticated system of grammar developed in Brahmanical Hinduism is the belief that Sanskrit is a language of communication with the gods, and through the performance of ritual sacrifices, its creative forces can be harnessed to control and maintain the universe. Proper performance of rituals, including accurate use of language, ensures that the universe continues. These Brahmanic rituals are not solely aimed at macrocosmic purposes. The fourth and last collection of the Vedas, the *Atharvaveda*, makes use of this creative force for worldly goals. It is the earliest extant Indic literature to provide a collection of chants and mantras for numerous personal gains ranging from

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of this miracle, see Sanu Mahatthanadull (2023).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Reynolds (1978) and Road-ari (2024).

curing diseases and protecting against humans and non-humans to securing good marriages and success in battles. It also provides invocations and rituals to activate charms and protective devices. The creative usage of Sanskrit in these ancient texts was later adopted by Theravadins and applied to Pali. Pali, then, became a tool to access the powers of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha used not only in meditation and chanting but also in protective practices.

## 6. Context and Significance

In his 2017 thesis, Nakornthab traces the historical development of Thai yantras from simple linear texts to complex geometric tools for both pedagogical and protective purposes. Although the exact origins of these diagrams remains uncertain, archaeological evidence indicates their use dates back at least to the Sukhothai period. A key chronological marker is the discovery of the yantra character *Tho*<sup>27</sup> inscribed on a silver palm leaf that was recovered from the crypt of the *cetiya* at Wat Phra Borommathat in Kamphaeng Phet. The inscription is generally dated to King Lithai's reign (1347-1368) and identified by Nakornthab (2017, 18) as the oldest *yantra* discovered to date. The *Tho* is an important root character in the Thai *yantra* tradition, symbolizing the Dhammas of all Buddhas, and its deposition in this *cetiya* demonstrates that sacred symbols already functioned as protective devices in the fourteenth century.

This early development towards embedding Pali texts into a physical landscape for protection is exemplified by the Wat Traphang Nak inscription.<sup>28</sup> This inscription, in the Khom Sukhothai script and dated to the fifteenth century by Cha-em Kaeokhlai (1986), was discovered in Mueang Kao Subdistrict, Sukhothai Province. It is one of the earliest known examples in which the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula is deliberately mapped out to forge a sacred boundary rather than merely recorded for reading. After opening with the invocation, the inscription lists all the Pali alphabet, along with the complete Buddha's qualities of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula, which are then placed into a geometric grid. The invocation and the list of vowels and consonants match the heart syllables of the elongated version of the *Ratanamālā* as documented by Thep Sarikabut (1958b, 117-134).<sup>29</sup>

Because the inscription includes both the alphabet and the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* directly below it, the inscriber thus carved the two ingredients of the *Ratanamālā* into a single surface. While carving and sacralizing the syllables, the Wat Traphang Nak ritual master would most likely have recited the corresponding *Ratanamālā* verses associated with those specific letters. To enhance the boundary's protective force, the names of the Four Heavenly Kings—Virūpakka, Kubera, Dhatarattha, and Virūlhaka—are inscribed at the outer cardinal directions. Nakornthab (2017, 19) views this inscription as a significant evolutionary step and an early prototype of the yantra, showing how Pali syllables and Buddhist teachings were being transformed into protective grids (*yan tarang*) that would become more widespread during the Ayutthaya era.

<sup>27</sup> เทอ (Tho character)

<sup>28</sup> Officially registered as Sor Tor 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Namo buddhāya siddham, a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e, o, ka, kha, ga, gha, ṇa, ca, cha, ja, jha, ña, ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṇa, ta, tha, da, dha, na, pa, pha, ba, bha, ma, ya, ra, la, va, sa, ha, ḷa*, with only the final “am” vowel missing.

Among the earliest evidence of the usage of the knight's move (horse grid) technique is the Phra Thong Saen Sae inscription. Dated to 1488 CE, this inscription was discovered on the bronze base of the Phra Chao Thong Saen Sae Buddha image at Wat Sankanyan Mahantaram in Chiang Mai and is currently housed at Wat Pa Tueng.<sup>30</sup> It is organized into a seven-by-seven grid, the inscription features a Pali verse beginning with “*Pathamam sakalakkhanamekapadam.*” This incantation utilizes the heart syllables of the Four Noble Truths—*du*, *sa*, *ni*, and *ma*—arranged in a shifting, alternating pattern. Nakornthab (2017, 19) observes that, unlike earlier inscriptions, which recorded texts linearly, the Phra Thong Saen Sae inscription organizes its syllables into an intricate table and became one of the templates for the subsequent knight's move technique used in yantra composition.

The historical development presented above sheds light on how the complex yantras of the late Ayutthaya period did not emerge in a vacuum but rather were heirs to these early regional prototypes. A line of textual continuity may be drawn between the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods through their mutual reliance on the canonical *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula and the *Ratanamālā* chant. Whereas the Wat Traphang Nak inscription marks a transition, when Pali texts were not merely recorded for reading, but inscribed on geometric grids to demarcate a sacred boundary, the Wat Pradusongtham manual shows how this spatial arrangement eventually evolved into elaborate, separate enclosures representing the qualities of the Triple Gem.

The Phra Thong Saen Sae inscription used the knight's-move technique on a seven-by-seven grid to arrange the heart syllables of the Four Noble Truths; Wat Pradusongtham, on the other hand, adopts this same technique, but applies it to three separate diagrams, encompassing fifty-six, thirty-eight, and 121 syllables, respectively. This expansion produces an even distribution of sacred text across all three diagrams that causes every single part of each yantra to possess equal protective weight—a structural refinement of the earlier Lanna model.

This segmented approach, however, contrasts markedly with the *Soḷasa* yantra of Wat Na Phra Men. The Triple Gem Qualities yantras transform the relatively simple *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula into three separate diagrams, whereas the *Soḷasa* yantra relies on complex numerology to create a more integrated and layered structure. The *Soḷasa* yantra is composed of three yantras: the inner core consisting of the *Chaturō* yantra; the middle layer, the *Trinisinghe* yantra; and the outer layer, the *Ariyasat-Soḷasa* (sixteen noble truths) yantra (Buddhisaro, Duangloy and Phumathon 2023, 33-34).<sup>31</sup> The concept of *soḷasa* (sixteen) denotes both the sixteen qualities of the Buddha and the sixteen levels of the form realm (*rūpa-loka*). Encircling this entire device is an incantation invoking the thirty perfections (*pāramī*) of the Buddha. The *Soḷasa* thus represents a more developed concentric defense system, moving from a nine-square core (*Chaturō*) outward

<sup>30</sup> Officially registered as Chor Mor 21.

<sup>31</sup> The *Chaturō* yantra is a three-by-three grid containing the numbers one through nine, in which the sum of the numbers in any direction (horizontal, vertical, or diagonal) always equals fifteen. The *Trinisinghe* yantra, derived from the powder-erasing scripture of the same name, consists of four sets of three numbers. The objective is for these three numbers to add up to fifteen, with each group containing the number five, which represents the five Buddhas of this eon. The *Ariyasat-Soḷasa* yantra is constructed using an outer frame filled with exactly sixteen numbers. See Buddhisaro, Duangloy and Phumathon (2023).

through the *Trinisinghe* to the sixteen-square *Ariyasat-Soḷasa* layer, all bound together by the thirty perfections. Rather than separating the virtues, it centralizes them into a single, unified whole. Although their layouts differ, both the Triple Gem Qualities and *Soḷasa* yantras seek to encapsulate the Buddha's protective power.

With regards to the three categories of premodern Thai protective knowledge mentioned by Baker and Phongpaichit (2024, 19–29), namely, “words and numbers,” “natural and intrinsically powerful materials,” and “constructed devices,” all three can be identified in the Wat Pradu-songtham manual: yantras bearing Khom syllables of the *Iti Pi So Bhagavā* formula; the number symbolism of the yantras and *Ratanamālā*; the use of heart syllables *na*, *ma*, *a*, and *u*; natural and constructed devices, such as Gavampati made of *mai ra-gnup* wood, *takruts* made of gold, silver, copper and lead, sacred sand and water, tiger's teeth, cremation coal, etc.

Today, these practices fall under the umbrella term of *saiyasat*, a Thai word variously translated as magic, occult science, apotropaic rituals, “ritual arts of efficacy,” and “science of influencing natural forces.” The last two terms were coined by Erick White (2017) and Baker and Phongpaichit (2024), respectively. Prior to the twentieth century, *saiyasat* did not refer to these arts and sciences, but specifically to Brahmanical Hinduism. The word is believed to have derived from several Pali and Sanskrit words and has been variously translated and interpreted as “excellent knowledge” (Coedès 1924), “Śaivism” (Wright 2000), and “sleeping knowledge” (McGovern 2024). *Saiyasat* is rarely found in Ayutthaya-era literature, and when it does appear, it is juxtaposed with the word “*phutthasat*” which denotes the “knowledge of the Buddha.” It is referred to only twice in *The Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, once in the Ayutthaya laws and once in an inscription on the base of a statue of Shiva (Baker and Phongpaichit 2024, 19; and McGovern 2024, 95). The inscription, dated 1510, states that the lord of Kamphaeng Phet established this image to help uphold “*phutthasat*” and “*saiyasat*,” i.e., the two religions of Buddhism and Hinduism (McGovern 2014, 96). It is therefore unsurprising that *saiyasat* is not mentioned anywhere in the manual. The terminology of all three sections is mainly derived from Pali literary sources and their practices center on recollecting the qualities and invoking the power of the Triple Gems. The origin story of the yantras, the description of the chanting of the *paritta* as equivalent to “finding the Buddha,” and the statement about the Buddha praising the practice of contemplating the elements can be seen as an attempt by the author(s) of the manual to align its practices with “*phutthasat*.” They presented these practices as rooted in the knowledge of Buddhism and its protective and miraculous aspects as natural outcomes of rigorous meditation in the first section.

There is also an absence of any mention of amulets (*phra krueang*) in the manual. *Phra krueang* are small Buddha images believed to have the power to protect and bring good fortune, and are carried or worn as clay, metal, and coin tablets. As discussed extensively by Srisakara Vallibhotama (1994), M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati (1997), Justin McDaniel (2011), Chalong Soontravanich (2013), Baker and Phongpaichit (2013 and 2024), the practice of making and

wearing these amulets is a recent cultural phenomenon, developed through nineteenth-century Thai royal elites' antiquarianism and the discovery of votive tablets (*phra phim*) in the vicinities of ancient ruins. Votive tablets, which originally served as reminders (*cetiya*) of the Buddha, and as foundation deposits for religious monuments, were traditionally considered too sacred to be kept in houses or worn on the person (Soontravanich 2013, 188-90). Inspired by the practice of wearing yantras, bandeaus, *takruts*, Gavampatis and other devices,<sup>32</sup> over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it gradually became fashionable, first among the elites, then the general populace, to wear tablets bearing images of the Buddha for protection. Four of the League of Five (*benchaphakhi*), the most prestigious amulets on the market, were originally *phra phim* discovered in the ruins of religious monuments. The fifth amulet of this league, Phra Somdet, was created in the second half of the nineteenth century by the renowned monk Somdet Phutthachan To (Brahmarasī) of Wat Rakhang, Bangkok (1788-1872).<sup>33</sup>

Today, all devices mentioned in the manual are still part of mainstream Buddhism in Thailand. The rituals that activate them and use of *parittas* and heart syllables are also part of mainstream Buddhist practice regularly performed by monastics of the Thammayut and Mahanikai lineages throughout the country regardless of their social and economic standing. The popularity of amulets and other devices has not diminished over the centuries. As shown above, the Buddha's qualities yantra was recently made by one of the highest-ranked monks in the country, Somdet Thongchai Dhammadhajo, as gifts for those who attended a fortune-enhancing ceremony at Wat Traimit, Bangkok. One could argue that some of these devices have seen a surge in popularity in recent decades due to their internationalization, commodification, and trade.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the meditation techniques associated with them have greatly declined since the nineteenth-century and are no longer part of mainstream meditation. Practices such as the visualization of the Khom and Tham Isan syllables, and visions of gems at various locations on and inside the body that represent the four elements etc., which may have been regarded as inseparable from these rituals, chanting, and objects, have been marginalized by Theravada reformists and scholars who sought to connect Buddhist meditation with rationalism. Meditation increasingly came to be confined to the realm of the mind, while practices regarded as somatic and supernatural were excluded.<sup>35</sup> The reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, therefore, favored more rationalized and simplified approaches to meditation. Today, much of the meditation practice in Theravada countries is text-based reconstructions of early meditation practices that were developed for mass settings and to meet the needs of people in the modern world.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> One of these devices includes "*phra krings*," small Buddha images with a hollow cavity containing a ball that rings when shaken. They may have originated from China and have also been found buried at various ancient Khmer sites.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of Somdet To and his amulets, see McDaniel (2011).

<sup>34</sup> See McDaniel (2011), Kit-arsa (2012), and Soontravanich (2013).

<sup>35</sup> With regard to the historical developments and processes that led to the marginalisation of traditional Theravada meditation, see Crosby (2013 and 2020).

<sup>36</sup> One such example is the "dry insight" *vipassanā* traditions from Myanmar, which downplay *samatha*, an aspect of Buddhist meditation associated with *jhānas* and miraculous powers.

## Conclusion

Wat Pradusongtham's manual provides perspectives on how monks at one of the most influential temples of the late-Ayutthaya period addressed their concerns through meditation, rituals, and miraculous powers and how these concerns also reflect the needs of their patrons and followers. Instead of presenting their use through evidence from the literature, laws, and foreigners' records, this article explores the application of the techniques through the instructions of actual adepts - meditation and ritual masters who practiced and taught at this well-established center.

The Triple Gem Qualities yantras, the chanting of the *Ratanamālā*, and the meditative manipulation of the elements can all be traced back to earlier developments in Theravada Buddhist practices and beliefs. With regard to the yantras, the fifteenth-century Wat Trapang Nak inscription and the Phra Chao Thong Saen Sae inscription both serve as structural prototypes for the later Ayutthayan models. Their spatial arrangement of texts became a framework that the Wat Pradusongtham masters refined into the three Triple Gem Qualities yantras. The protective practices and devices of the Ayutthaya era were, therefore, not novel inventions but rather a highly evolved continuation of a long-standing regional knowledge that sought to emulate and harness the Triple Gem's protective and miraculous qualities.

Moreover, the Triple Gem Qualities yantras are remarkable for their usage as both protective and meditation devices. This suggests that the pursuit of *nibbāna* and the practice of manipulating the forces of nature, what today's practitioners would call "*saiyasat*," were not seen as contradictory and may have been inseparable in premodern Thai Buddhism; indeed they were practiced, developed, and taught together in the same monastic settings. Through its Pali terminology and constant references to the Triple Gems, the manual's authors presented these practices as rooted in "*phutthasat*," and their protective and miraculous aspects were seen as natural outcomes of attaining *jhānas*. This suggestion corroborates Maneeratana's and Tudkeao's (2018, 12) finding that the numeral systems in the ancient *Trinisinghe* scripture are used for both worldly concerns, such as war and health, and for illustrating profound concepts such as *suññatā* (emptiness) and *nibbāna* which are associated with insight meditation (*vipassanā*).

The absence of *phra krueang* in the manual also corroborates other scholars' findings that their making and wearing are recent phenomena, introduced by the Thai upper class in the late-nineteenth century. Among Wat Pradusongtham's protective devices, yantras, *takruts* and Gavampatis appear to be the most important. The chanting of the *Ratanamālā* and the heart syllables *na*, *ma*, *a*, and *u*, are also prominently featured in the manual. As these chants and devices remained part of mainstream Buddhism, some even seeing a surge in popularity in the last few decades, the meditation instructions attached to them declined during the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reforms and were gradually replaced by more rationalized and simplified approaches.

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