The Monk With a Mission

The acting head abbot of Chak Daeng Temple near Bangkok has a unique mission — to convert the polluted city's waste plastic into robes for his fellow monks! Meet Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangkaro, the acting abbot of Chak Daeng Temple near Bangkok. Building upon a 2,600-year tradition started by Buddha himself, who encouraged ordained monks to fashion their robes out of cloth from scrap heaps and graveyards — he helps process 10 tonnes of plastic waste every month into monks' robes!

Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangaro, Abbot of Chak Deang Temple stands inside the recycling centre of the temple.

In 2005, when Dhammalangkaro moved to Bangkok to teach Buddhism and manage Chak Daeng's temple grounds, he found it full of garbage. Back then, plastic waste there was either burnt or thrown in River Chao Phraya. Sadly, this resulted in severe pollution in the river, contributing to the loss of marine life, poisoning of aquifers and the uncontrolled growth of algae. Burning plastic also resulted in severe air pollution. About eleven years ago, he visited Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan to study plastic recycling and saw how they were able to make shirts, trousers, bags and more from recycled plastic. Thus, the idea of making monastic robes from recycled plastic was born.

Today, he and other monks in the monastery sift through all the plastic waste they receive from neighbouring areas. This plastic is compressed into bales and shipped to the factory where it is converted into fibre and eventually woven into monastic robes.

Monks attest that the fabric is easy to wash, doesn't smell or crease and is light on skin. Their novel recycling enterprise has employed over 30 local villagers, including some that are differently abled. Most of all, it is keeping some plastic from being thrown in the Chao Phraya river, one of the most polluted water sources in Thailand. For the monks of course, their clean up and recycling project has a spiritual aspect: "We need to clean material waste out, as well as cleaning the waste in the brain, and then, we will find true happiness," the abbot says.

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At the end of every day Buddhist monks from Chak Deang Temple will bring garbage produced by the temples activities to the recycling centre so that it can be recycled.
For over a decade this unique Thai Buddhist temple just outside Bangkok called Wat Chak Daeng has pursued ways to recycle waste particularly plastics. Under the guidance of Phra Mahapranom Dhammalangaro the temple has recycled everything from food waste to plastic bottles and began inviting people to join in their recycling activities to raise awareness about how people can recycle waste in every day life.
From humble beginnings the temple started to attract attention when it began a project that recycled plastic bottles turning them in to saffron coloured monks robes which it continues to do today. Now, it receives daily deliveries of plastic bottles from across the country which adds up to 10 tonnes per month which it then recycles to make the robes and other clothing items.
At the recycling centre, located in the grounds of the temple, over 10 tonnes of plastic bottles are sent and delivered each month. They are separated, cleaned, sorted and ultimately crushed in to bales by a team of volunteers. These 'bales' are then sent to a factory and recycled, part of which are

turned in to orange monks robes.

A volunteers empties donated plastic bottles, already separated and cleaned, in to a compacting machine that will produce a large ‘bale’ of crushed bottles. This will then be sent off to a factory for recycling and being made in to monks robes amongst other things.

After having sent compressed plastic bottles to a factory to be recycled in to orange cloth, a small team of women sew the material in to monks robes at the sewing centre inside the temple grounds. Here a monk inspects the material.

Author: The India Story Agency for Sacred Groves
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