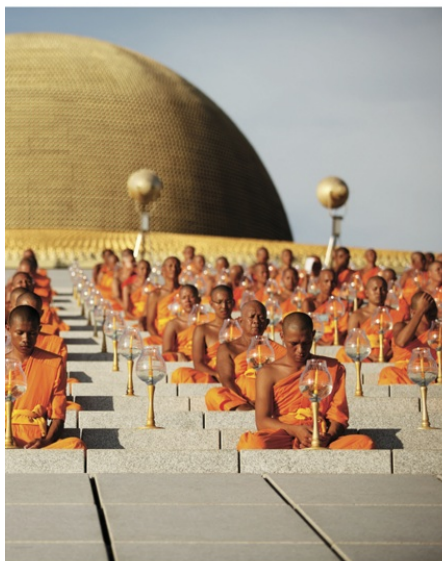




LEFT: monks light candles and meditate during the annual celebration of Makha Bucha, which commemorates a day when 1,250 enlightened monks converged to pay respect to the Lord Buddha without an appointment; **ABOVE:** as the mass ordination draws to a close, a monk fits in one last prayer; **BELOW FAR LEFT:** US monk Joshua Jayintoh meditates in the temple's grounds; **BELOW LEFT:** monks meditate during Makha Bucha



SPRAWLING COMPLEX

Wat Phra Dhammakaya's origins lie in the 1970s, when a tiny religious movement led by a group of young Buddhists grew out of a swampy area of paddy fields on the outskirts of Bangkok. These founding members wanted to spread the teachings of Phra Mongkolthepmuni, a monk who died in 1959 and was said to have reached enlightenment after almost four decades of meditation. The name Dhammakaya comes from an old Pali word meaning 'the body of Dharma' or 'enlightenment'.

The movement's popularity quickly grew, as it drew in increasing numbers of Thais who wanted to escape the everyday stresses of modern life. Donations of land and money allowed it to expand, and today, it commands a sprawling 400-hectare complex, complete with several temples, vast dining rooms that

can cater for thousands and a kitchen capable of cooking a tonne of rice at a time. Its reach goes far beyond Thailand, its teachings and meditation practices taught in more than 30 centres in 18 countries, including three in the UK in Newcastle, Manchester and London.

But the temple isn't without its critics, many of whom are suspicious of its rapid growth and enormous financial support. In response, the temple has kept a low profile – media approaches are carefully vetted, and visitors who take a tour of the facilities leave knowing little of the inner workings. But as the host of some of the world's largest and most visually spectacular religious ceremonies – which get bigger every year and can involve hundreds of thousands of participants – it seems unlikely that it will be able to keep out of the public eye for much longer. **G**