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International Centre of Thailand  
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Artisanal Handicraft

# Making Monk's Alms Bowl



“**Monk’s alms bow**” or Bat is a container for Buddhist monks. It is used to receive food offering and is considered as one of the eight necessities of a Buddhist monk prescribed in the Tripitaka.

“**Bat Bu**” is the word that calls hand-crafted or ‘Bu’ steel alms bowl. It is a local wisdom which has been around since the Ayutthaya period. The unique feature is the eight seams around the alms bowl. Upon tapping, it will produce a resonating sound like a bell. The alms bowls which comply with the monk’s discipline must be made from steel and clay.

Alms bowl is consisted of one piece of rim, two pieces of steel sheet called Gong Bat, four pieces of Na Wua or lotus petal shaped steel, and one piece of frame. It is made by welding (mixing borax and copper to link the metal steels and leaving light fading seams) the pieces sheets together. The bowl is then hammered into shape before going through black oxide to prevent from rusting. This is how the ancient hand-crafted Bat Bu is made. It is a reflection of ancestral wisdom and craftsmanship of the artisans.



## Uniqueness which reflects local wisdom and expertise of artisans

**Making monk's alms bowl** requires laborious works from various artisans in each of the process – from making the rim, putting the pieces together, combining Gong Bat, blowing, designing, hammering, and filing to create ancient hand-crafted alms bowl featuring eight fading seams. The dark alms bowls that are used by Buddhist monks are created from local wisdom from hand-shaping the bowls and baking to prevent rust. Baking would reduce carbon that is the cause of rust. This process is called blackening or Rom Dum. Baking and applying liquid mixed with Thai Copper Pod on the bowls before baking until the bowls become completely black.

Another method that can be used is by baking or being smoked in teak woods. The resulting bowls would have green color.

## Shapes of Alms bowls

Alms bowls come in five shapes which are derived from nature:

Ancient Thai shape: wide base, pointed bottom that can't be placed on flat ground and requires a tray.

Ta-Koe shape: base similar to ancient Thai shape but with round bottom that can be placed on flat ground.

Lemon shape: round shape like lemon. It can be placed on flat ground.

Look Chan shape: short, round shape similar to Lemon shape but shorter. It can be placed on flat ground.

Tiger Head shape: similar to ancient Thai shape but with flat base. It can be placed on flat ground.

Ancient Thai and Ta-Koe shapes are ancient





designs which have existed over hundreds years ago. Lemon and Look Chan shapes have been here around 80-90 years. Tiger head, the latest shape, was established 30 ago. The last one was commonly used by Dhammyuttika Sect. The most popular ones at the moment are lemon and tiger head shapes.

The wisdom of making alms bowls is a part of Buddhism-related handicraft, which has been with Thai Buddhist way for a very long time. The ancient way of making hand-crafted alms bowl usually takes around one week and needs traditional tools.

At present, hand-made alms bowls are seen less and less. They are only made as souvenirs or are directly ordered by the monks. As a result, most of the artisans in Ban Bat have turned to take up other jobs. Only three families of artisans in this community continue making their traditional craft.

## The Way of Alms Bowls Artisans

Monk's alms bowl is very important to people in Ban Bat Community. The largest place to manufacture alms bowls in Thailand is "Ban Bat Community" which is located in the area of Meru Poon Intersection near Wat Saket, in Soi Ban Bat, Bamrungmueang and Boriphat roads, Samranrat sub-district, Pom Prap Sattru Phai district, Bangkok. It is assumed that the ancestors were originally from Ayutthaya who migrated to set up a small village to make steel alms bowls in Bangkok during the Burmese-Siamese War, around B.E.2326. In the reign of King Rama I, the King, royal families, and high-class people like to build temples. Thus, Bangkok had been populated with temples and monks. Alms bowls making was a very prosperous career then and could support the lives of people in Ban Bat community. Here is the only community in Thailand which makes ancient hand-made alms bowls. The eight seams around the alms bowl is the unique feature of Ban Bat's alms bowl.



Ban Bat's alms bowl is famous because the community persists with an age-old method of crafting the bowls from slabs of steel using their hands and a hammer. The work requires laborious works from various artisans in each of the process – from making the rim, putting the pieces together, blowing, designing, hammering, and filing. Expertise and tremendous amount of effort are needed. Making one piece of alms bowl takes several days to complete.

Theravada Buddhist monks which account for most of the monks in Thailand come from Lanka School of Sukhothai period usually use lemon shape bowls with 7-8 inches in size. Vipassana or Dhammyuttika Sect which was found during King Rama III, on the other hand, usually use Ta-Koe or tiger head shape bowls with 9-10 inches in size. King Rama IV, who followed the latter, ate only one meal per day during his monkhood.



## Making Process

In the past, the steel bins which are used to carry asphalt which the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration uses to make road. The bins are taken to burn away the remaining asphalt in the area near Wat Saket and Ban Bat. Once done, the used bins are taken to Ban Bat Community. This type of bins is made from thin steel which is easy to make alms bowls and inexpensive. At present, galvanized metal sheets and copper sheets are used instead. This is because these are easy to buy, unlike the asphalt containers which are difficult to obtain nowadays.



## Tools Used in Making Alms Bowls

Hammer of various sizes (1.5 – 2 pounds) to flatten the surface of the bowl

Forceps are used in bending the steel (serration)

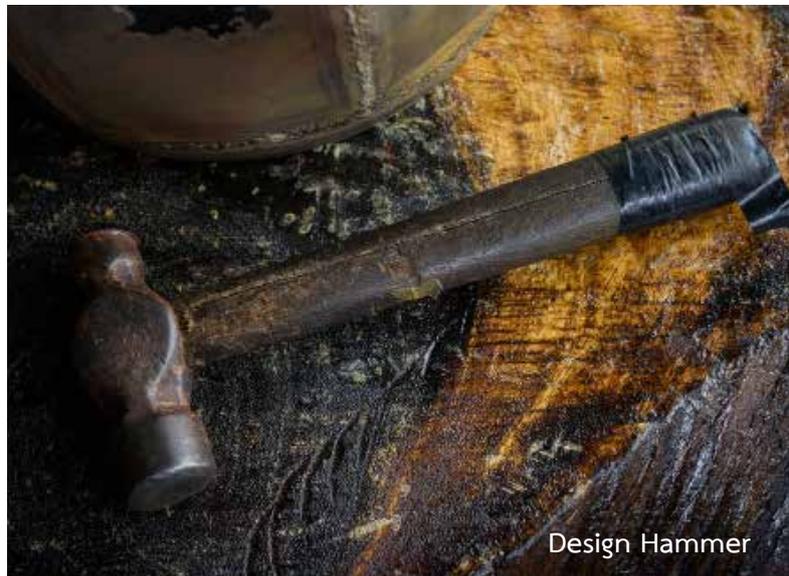
Steel anvil is used as support during the hammering and forging the rim of the bowl.



Hammer and forceps



Steel anvil



Design Hammer



Cutting iron scissors



Stands (Kalon)



Wooden support pad (Tang Lai)



Supporting tips (Look Kalon)

Cutting iron scissors

Design Hammer is used in making the designs.

Design anvil is made from hard wood to support the curvy part of the bowl while making the designs.

Scissors are used in cutting metal sheets.

Stands and supporting tips (Kalon and Look Kalon) of various sizes to provide support during the production processes. They come in various sizes and are used in different occasions, depending on how much precision is required on the particular process. For example, forming process requires high precision. Thus, the finest and smallest stand is required.

Furnace is used for combining seams and blowing pipe.

## Steps in Making Alms Bowls

The alms bowls which are compliant with the discipline have to be Bat Bu consisting of 8 pieces of metal sheets and hand-made. The age-old method of crafting the bowls takes a very long time. The important steps in making such bowls are as follows:

### Step 1 – Forging the Rim

It is considered as the first step in making alms bowls. The rim will determine the shape and size of the bowl. It is achieved by cutting the metal sheet according the required size. In case of 9 inch bowl, the sheet needs to be cut to 15 inch long as to make spaces for constructing the ends. Once getting the required size, the sheet is bended into a circle. The material used comes from oil tank lid or metal sheet.

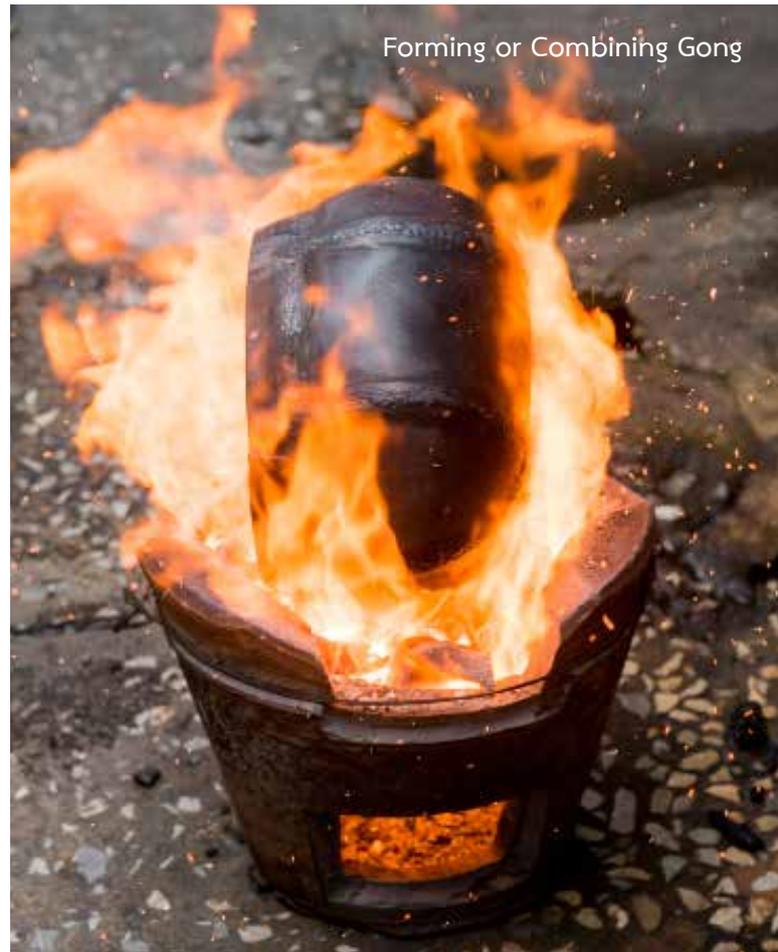
The process takes around 4-5 minutes. While forging, the steel is bended into a crescent moon shape so that it is easy to combine both ends together. The sheet used for this purpose is galvanized metal sheet no. 20. If larger sheets are used, they need to be cut into 20x20 inch size first. The sheet used to make the rim will determine the thickness of the bowl. The sheet used to make the body will gradually be slimmer as appropriate. All the tools used in making alms bowls are made from steel. They are ancient tools which have been passed down.



Forging the Rim



Forming or Combining Gong



Forming or Combining Gong

### Step 2 – Forming or Combining Gong

The artisan will cut the sheet into cross shape called “Gong”. The gong is bended and attached to the rim. After the forming is completed, there will be four Bodhi leaf triangles. The artisan will measure and cut the sheet into four Anthurium leaf-like pieces called “Na Wua” or “Lotus Leaf” that will work a seam to join other parts together. The sheet needs to be bended slightly according to the shape of the bowl. After combining each part together, we will get a bowl with eight seams. Nowadays, the seams are reduced to six pieces for ease of combination.

In performing this step, the artisan must have high expertise, especially in cutting the sheet into cross and lotus leaf shapes. The difficulty lies in the fact that the cutting needs to be performed one at a time. Each piece needs to be marked in order to make it easy to combine with other pieces.

### Step 3 – Combining seams or blowing (Pao Laen)

This step is to combine the seams to be the same piece by applying copper powder and borax on the bowl in order to ensure that there is no hole and to prevent from rusting. In the old days, a hand-operated furnace is used to pump the wind. However, at present large alms bowls require a firewood furnace. After firewood becomes hard to obtain, a charcoal furnace with electric blower is used. This method has been passed down until today.

Baking of alms bowls require large-size fire until the bowl becomes red. During the process, the bowl needs to be flipped on all four sides so that each side is equally exposed to the fire. Next, the bowl is left cold in the open air. It is forbidden to pour water onto the steel as it will become harden and difficult to forge and form into shape. When dried, the bowl is then scrubbed with dishwashing liquid and left to dry.



Hammering the seams



Designing

#### Step 4 – Hammering the Seams

The seams need to be hammered so that they are flattened and smooth. This process requires a lot of labor. The technique used depends on the preference of the artisan. Some starts from the rim to the bottom and some starts in the middle outwards. Consistency in hammering is needed. It takes approximately two hours to complete one piece.

#### Step 5 – Designing

This process is designing the shape using “Design Hammer”, a curved pointed hammer, to hammer the inner area of the bowl. The support pad is made from rectangular piece of wood with approximately the same size with the bowl, called “Tang Lai”. It is made from hard wood such as Ormosia. The whole process takes around two hours, depending on the expertise of the artisan.

#### Step 6 – Forging

A steel hammer is used to strike the outside of the bowl in order to flatten the protruding areas so that every part is even. Moreover, the seams are hammered to be leveled. The bowl is then “forged” on the wooden anvil to create the desirable form. A file is used to give the glossy final touch.



Forging



Blackening (Soom or Rabom Bat)

### Step 7 – Blackening (Soom or Rabom Bat)

In ancient time, sulfur is applied on the bowl to prevent from rusting. The bowls are gathered together in a big pot and the fire is started. Teak wood scraps from the shops nearby Wat Saket are used because teak wood produces high temperature fire. The bowl which has passed through this process will have black color. Coconut oil is applied on top. However, at present coconut oil is replaced by rust-resistance oil.

### Step 8 – Coloring

It is the last step to add colors to the bowl. This includes “Soom Kiew” (producing green color) and blackening (completely black color). The choice of technique depends on the preference and expertise of the artisan. This step also includes carving the design, and affixing seals or signature.

Most of alms bowls are black. The artisans of Ban Bat use two methods in producing the desired color: “Soom Kiew” and “Rom Dum” or blackening. Teak wood scraps are used as fuel for Soom Kiew process which makes the bowl metallic green like jewel beetle.

The blackening process is burning the bowl until it has black color. Then, the bowl is left to cool before applying liquid, a mixture of Thai Copper Pod leaves, alcohol, and shellac oil, on the outside. After dried, burn the bowl again. If you want to have a completely black color, the liquid needs to be re-applied many times. The bowl needs to be burned on a sunny day to achieve glossy beautiful effect. At present, designs are created by using hammer forging the desirable effect, called “Bat Tee Med”.



Coloring



## Selecting Alms Bowls

Touching to feel the seams in the inner bottom bowl whether they are rugged or smooth. Some people use a stick tapping on the bowl to listen to the sound. Hand-made bowls will make a resonating sound like a bell. Each bowl has different sound. Some people choose to buy the one which has the most beautiful sound.

## Knowledge on Bat Bu

**In Vinaya Pitaka**, it is specified that alms bowls must have eight seams, to signify that it is one of the eight necessities of a Buddhist monk.

**Monks in Dhammyuttika** Sect in northeastern region which are especially strict and people who are interested in making offering to the monks often choose Bat Bu instead of modern bowls.

**Modern alms bowls** are made by machine and can be quickly produced at a time. They do not have seams but the quality is low.

**The old bowls** can be repaired. Ban Bat community can also repair the old unused bowls. The people who left monkhood normally left their alms bowls at the temple. They could not be thrown away because alms bowls are considered as sacred items.

**There are both copper and steel seams.** The copper ones, when burned, the cross marks can be seen clearly.



## Beliefs on Paying Respect to the Grand Master before Making Alms Bowls

Making alms bowls is not an easy task. The artisans of Ban Bat believe that there was “great grandpa” or “grand master” who was a normal person with high expertise and was a great teacher of alms bowls making. This person had been respected by the people from generations to generations. The spirit house worshipping the grand master is built in the middle of the village so that people can worship and pay respect. It is also believed that this spirit house would help protect everyone from harm so that they can live happily. On the first Thursday of April every year, paying respect ceremony is organized for auspiciousness by offering desserts and most importantly rice whisky.

## Background and story of alms bowl

### The first alms bowl of the Lord Buddha

In the story of life of the Buddha and first chapter of Vinayapitaka, it is mentioned that the first alms bowl of Lord Buddha was the one offered by Brahman Kadhikan when he entered the monkhood by the bank of Anoma River. The alms bowl suddenly disappeared when receiving a very special rice dish “Matupayas” from a woman by the name of Sujada. The Four Heavenly Kings, each of whom watches over one cardinal direction of the world, learned about this and each came down to offer the Lord Buddha a stone alms bowl with green radiation. The Lord Buddha received four alms bowls and made a pray to combine them into one. This story was the origin of the Buddha image in the attitude of uniting the four alms bowls. The tradition in making alms bowl with seams is representation of the act of combining alms bowls.



The Vinayapitaka listed two types of alms bowls that can be used: clay and steel, with size between 7-11 inches. The size should not be larger than 11 inches. The bowl consists of eight pieces of metals: one piece of frame, two pieces of side covers, four pieces of Na Wua, and one piece of rim.



## Alms Bowl Usage Practice

Lord Buddha forbids the Buddhist monks and novices to use alms bowls making from precious metals, being afraid that they will be put in danger from theft. During the Buddha period, besides receiving food offerings, the monks had to travel to

various towns to preach Dharma. Apart from this reason, using valuable alms bowls made from silver or gold would stimulate lustful desire. However, the current alms bowls are not very strict and sometimes stainless steel are used for certain ordinations such as ordination on the cremation of a close relative or ordination during Buddhist Lent.



## The Differences between Ancient vs Modern Alms Bowls

Ancient alms bowls are hand-made and very intricate. It takes longer time to make than modern alms bowls. The 9-inch bowls would take one week to make. In the past, pins were used to join the pieces together. However, at present, the pieces are joined together instead. This is because the artisans who made the pins all have passed away and there was no one to take over the work. Apart from this, the ancient alms bowls were made with a furnace but have changed to a stove with electric blower.

Most of modern alms bowls are made by machine. The modern ones, consequently, do not have seams. Using machine, 100 bowls can be made per day. The manufacturer has a prototype so that many pieces can be quickly produced at a time.

Hand-made alms bowls from Ban Bat are made in accordance with the discipline. The monks who are very strict will not use machine made bowls, as they violate the discipline.



Hand-crafted steel alms bowl (Bat Bu)

Comparing the quality of hand-made bowls with machine-made bowls, the hand-made ones are highly valuable because they are durable and come in wide variety of shapes which were passed down from the local wisdom of the ancestors. Each of the alms bowls is hand-made combining the spirits of artisans from various fields into one. The price of hand-made bowls has increased constantly. The future of alms bowls making at Ban Bat community therefore cannot be guaranteed. If Thai people see the value and would like to preserve the art as well as the products, they should give support by buying the products.

Even though there are only a few families who know how to make alms bowls, the sound of hammering the bowls are still resonating within the community. This is like announcing to the passers-by that this community is still very much alive and actively living the legacy of ancient alms bowls production.



General alms bowl



#### References

*Interview of Mrs.Aree Sairatthong, Trok Ban Bat, Boriphat Raod, Pom Prap Sattru Phai District, Bangkok.*  
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