

## THE BUDDHISM OF THAILAND AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

- 1) For the Theravada Buddhists of Southeast Asia and Thailand a wat, or temple, is not a building but a place, usually enclosed with a wall or fence and having a gate. Within the wat there may be several structures. This wat is located in the town of Nongkhai, by a lake. The edifice under construction will shelter the statue of the Buddha. The tower behind the statue is decorative, the pavilion to the left is a symbolic recreation of the Bo trees with their wide spreading branches and many leaves. In the shade of Bo trees the Buddha preached many if not most of his sermons. Even today Buddhist sermons, using the sacred language of Pali, are preached in the shade of the Bo tree.
- 2) The squares of gold leaf, pasted on the Buddha image represent a popular (but unofficial) belief that if you have some ailment, and you place gold leaf on the Buddha at that exact spot, your illness will go away. In Nongkhai it seems many people have had tooth aches and headaches.
- 3) On festival days the temple yard may be decorated. Buddhism is a faith of great joy and celebration.
- 4) This is the house where the priests live. Buddhist priests, or monks, are celibate. They are forbidden to own anything other than the robe they wear and a bowl which each priest uses to beg for his food each day. The small gazebo like area is the place for the temple gong. One function of the wat, especially in small villages, is to mark the times of the day by striking the gong. Cheap watches were then just beginning to make their way up country .
- 5) At dawn every day priests leave the temple to beg for the food they will eat that day. Whatever they receive must be eaten that day.
- 6) Later in the day the priests may offer classes in Buddhist faith, or even, as in this case, guided tours of the temple. This is a Buddhist sculpture dating from when this area was part of the Khmer empire.
- 7) Or the priest may be called on for personal counseling or advice.
- 8) In addition to Buddhism, the popular faith of the people includes this fertility worship shrine, common to Hinduism..
- 9) A gathering of elementary school children at that shrine. Everyone knew it was not part of the faith, but they did not want to take chances.
- 10) Every dwelling has a small shrine or house for the spirits living in that place. Alas, you can see it is not in the best of shape. I am told that is one reason why foreign teachers were asked to live in that house. We would not appreciate the peril we lived amid, and we wouldn't care. So I let it all be; but a neighbor came by every now and then and burnt a little incense for my spirits.
- 11) This is a statue of the Buddha in Kantarawichai. It is said to be a thousand years old and according to tradition was built by a prince when that village was a large city to atone for his misdeeds he is said to have killed his parents so he could be the ruler of Kantarawichai).. The Buddha here wears the white sash of the cold season.

12) We visited this shrine many times. And despite its remote location and the general poverty about it. it was always a spiritual experience.

13) According to legend built two statues, but a tree has thoughtlessly grown around the second one. The man standing by the statue is Mr. Suksan, the Chairmen of the English Department at the Teachers Training College of Mahasarakham, where I taught.

14) Sometimes people who felt they were too poor to offer their gifts directly to the priests would leave "pha ba" or forest cloths (in this case a saffron robe and a mat for sleeping) by the statue in the tree. The priests would discretely come at another time to receive such gilts.

15) Another unofficial ceremony comes from the Buddhist Laotian culture. It is called the Bai See. It is a good luck ceremony. A circle is formed and a string or rope is held by all. Best wishes and good fortune are offered, especially if someone is about to take a journey. A party follows.

The following pictures covers the great festival days of the Buddhist year as celebrated in northeastern Thailand (Isan);

16) The Buddhist year begins in mid-April with Songkran, or New Year's. People gather in the temple yard in great throngs.

17) A queen of the new year may be chosen from among the young women.

18) Children bring pots,

19 & 20) which they will fill with water and then pour over a statue of the Buddha. This "washing" symbolizes the prayers that the for the greatly needed rains, may be abundant and the rice crop bountiful.

21) If you have water left over – and who doesn't? -- there is nothing to prevent you from pouring it on other people, as those in this jeep are setting out to do.

22) Two minor festivals of the Buddhist year take place in January and in May. The ceremonies forr them are identical. The Festival of Makha Bukha takes place in January, it recalls the event when 1,350 of the Buddhas followers gathered unannounced under a tree when the Buddha came there to rest.

The second festival is called Visakha Buddha. It recalls the day two thousand five hundred or so years ago the Buddha was born, and on that same days years later was enlightened and still on that very say day, he died.

Each festival begins at at dusk with the lighting of candles and joss or incense sticks.

23) Led by the temple priests everyone walks around the temple grounds three times.

24 - 26) It gets quite dusty and smoky and smelly and hot before the walk is over. Even so, as the procession continues a sense of joyful reverence prevails..

27) Finally, at the edge of the shrine building, the incense and candles are placed, prayers are offered, flowers are left as well. Incidentally, the young man in the middle was one of my third year students. One of the most cheerful persons I have ever met, his English was beyond hope,

but he delighted in using (abusing?) it as often as he could. But how cold anyone get made at someone with a smile like that?

28) The man standing is the chancellor of the Teachers Training College, Mr. Wisan Siwarat. He was known throughout the country as a devout Buddhist, a wise and loving teacher, and a brilliant administrator.. He had taken the college from being among the worst in the country to, undeniably, the best Teachers Training College in Thailand. Ajan (or teacher) Wisan is offering prayers on behalf of the entire college to the priests.

For the next few pictures, we step out of Buddhism.

To the people of Isan old and new faith are wisely and inextricably intertwined.

29) Each June in northeastern Thailand and in Laos there is a celebration called the Bong Fai, or rocket festival. Here some neighbors are taking their rockets to the launch pad!

30) Once gathered and usually in the temple yard, the usual procession begins. This time it is led by the village headman who is wearing the orange sash. Since every Buddhist male must spend at least one month in the priesthood, the headman is here acting as a lay priest.

31) Meanwhile others are providing music on drums and the can. The can is a Lao/Thai version of a harmonica. It consists of several reeds of varying shapes into which you blow to provide a rhythmic chord structure. Others will sing.

32) After the procession and the singing, the various rockets are examined. Beta may be placed on the side.

33) Another procession, this time priests are involved, to give religious legitimacy.

34) and people dress up in all sorts of costumes.

35) Finally, the rockets are shot off. The belief behind all this is that if the rockets pierce the clouds the rain god will be pleased and will release the waters, thus insuring a bountiful crop. I trust you noticed that no women were part of all this. I don't know whether that shows women to be wiser Buddhists or whether the Bong Fai is for men only.

Back to the official Buddhist calendar of festivals

36) In mid-August a sixty day period called Buat Nak begins. This is a time of introspection. This is the most sacred time of the Buddhist year. Buat Nak, begins with a day called Grabuan Hae Tien, or the presentation of candles. Since the college was located outside the provincial capital, the ceremonies for this day took place in downtown Mahasarakham. Despite its solemn purpose, it is a day of great joy. Some students from the College are doing traditional Thai dances.

37) Others are dressed in Khmer costumes, recalling the centuries when this part of the world was part of the ancient Cambodian empire. They are a small band.

38) Since more recently northeastern Thailand was part of the Laotian empire some College students are dressed in traditional Lao costumes doing Lao dances. Our school was famous throughout Thailand for its folk heritage dancers and bands. Preserving folk culture was a very important part of the educational program we offered our students. Founded by Ajan Wisan it is part of today's Mahasarakham University.

39) Stories are told about the Buddha that are identical to tales told about Solomon. Here students are acting out one of those stories.

40) Sometimes the celebration strayed from the religious. A popular song that originated in Mahasarakham and became the rage even in Bangkok sang about a village headman's dog who had the best of everything.

41) This is the enacted story of a buffalo who knew the Buddha was a sacred person.

42) Here the Buddha, it is remembered, judged between the claims of two men.

43) And here the story of how one day two women came to the Buddha each claiming to be the mother of the baby. Do you know how it is also said King Solomon also solved that problem?

44) "Grabuan Hae Tian" in English means the offering of candles. During Buat Nak the priests do not leave the temple. They do not beg for food, it is brought to them. They spend their days studying the Buddhist scriptures. Since electricity is not common in temples, the most common gift given to priests on this day is candles. Our students would organize by classes and carve these enormous candles, one for each class, to give to the priests.

45) This float by one of our classes retells a Lao/Thai folk story about Siang Muan, a wise minister of the King who solved a terrible problem by climbing up a tree.

46) Buat Nak, ends with a celebration that is a little more subdued than the Grabuan Hae Tian. It is called Tod Kathin. It takes place in mid-October. Buddhist priests own nothing other than the robes they wear and the bowls they carry daily during most of the year to gather their food. Consequently, the devout must offer them new robes. And so at the end of the time of introspection, when the short-term priests are leaving the temples, there is another time of giving robes, Tod Kathin.

47) Who knows why, but a bit of Chinese New Year's traditions, the famous dragon dance, got involved in this. But remember the most sacred of times in Buddhism is still an occasion for celebration.

48) so, more dancers!

49) And Lao musicians! (I should mention that the curved building in the background is the Mahasarakham Ritz/Carlton.)

50) Eventually all this settles down for a more traditional procession.

51) It is still festive. The umbrella, here in a stylized form, is a sign of honor and veneration. Priests are worthy of being under five umbrellas, the king would walk in the shade of seven!

52) and the people.

53) Finally, the gifts. In this case it was a cabinet some of the College students made for the temple. In it the priests could keep sacred books and new robes for the priests.

54) This photograph was taken at a different Tod Kathin; the man under the umbrella to the left is the provincial governor, and these are his officials. These are their gifts to his neighborhood temple. Of course, their gifts must be presented with great dignity. The priests will get only the robes; the officials will keep the platters.

55) the end the procession around the temple!

56) The girls have worked for days preparing these flower arrangements. Gifts of beauty are as appropriate as things more practical.

57 Then, save a foreigner who could not be expected to understand the Buddhist sacred language, Pali (nor did most of the Thais, everyone gathered in the pavilion for a sermon.

58) The man on the left was completing his term as a priest on this day. Mr. Chitipong, my next door neighbor at the College, had spent two months as priest. And tomorrow he would be married after which he would return to his duties as a teacher of manual arts and agriculture.

59) The last festival of the Buddhist year is in many ways the loveliest. It is called Loy Krathong. Krathong means raft in English. Rafts are commonly made out of banana leaves.

60) Again the College encouraged the students to work as classes (though most also made their own individual rafts as well.

61) At dusk everyone gathered in back of the classroom buildings. On many years we would have had to go to the river, but this year, for no known reason, it had flooded months and months after the last rain. The flood waters covered up the student gardens and reached almost up to the buildings themselves.

62) In each little raft a burning candle was placed along with a coin and a flower. The rafts are then placed in the water. It is believed if you can watch your raft float out of sight – loy means out of sight – all of the year's troubles are gone as well for you. If it sinks while still in sight, you get to keep your troubles for another year. Alas! Mine sank! Quickly, too! The very next day, half way around the world from us, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. A coincidence? Who knows, but it is something you'll never forget.

63) This is not a religious holiday even though we are giving gifts to the priests at our neighborhood temple. Buddhism teaches one should never miss an opportunity to do something good for others.

64) It is Teachers Day. On this day teachers from all the schools gather at the provincial offices where we give gifts to the priests. To Buddhists knowledge is sacred. Until the last century in Thailand the priests were in charge of all schools. So on Teachers' Day we remembered our origins and gave thanks for those who taught the generations before ours.

65) Finally, pictures of one of the most renowned Buddhist traditions: the cremation of the dead. When a Buddhist dies, his or her body is placed in a plain box and buried in a plot in the back of the temple. For a period – usually between six to eight months – family and friends will do good

things in the name of the deceased person. At a time determined to be auspicious the body of the deceased is taken to his/her home. From that home a procession winds its way to the temple. Besides a pot of burning incense with its fragrant aroma, this procession included a three piece band.

66) This funeral celebrated the life of the mother of one of the teachers, and the family was showing its position in society by providing pedicabs for the priests. The chancellor of the College, Mr. Wisan Siwarat, carried a photograph of the deceased. From the first priest to the last person in the procession a long white sash, held by each person, bound us together in this solemn but joyful day. The sash was a visible sign of our human unity and oneness.

67) at the rear of the procession a cart bearing a now resplendent paper and fopil covered coffin.

68) Again, the procession around the temple

69) in the pavilion prayers were offered for the deceased.

70) The coffin is taken to the pyre:

71) a procession by honored guests or important people follows,

72) gifts are provided for the priests,

73 & 74) flowers are placed on the coffin,

75 & 76) ceremonial flowers are distributed among the guests, others are placed on the pyre,

77) a traditional band provides joyful music because this is a happy time,

78) candy is given to the children,

79) after everyone has eaten a festive meal, final prayers are offered by the family,

80) and at last the pyre is lit!