

Religion in Thailand

Compiled from information from an earlier article by Marja Woensdregt and Chompuu Kanjanda

Thailand has always been a Buddhist country. Often described as more a way of life than religion, Buddhism pervades Thai life and influences their conduct in countless subtle ways. Over 95% of the Thai people are members of the Theravada Buddhist sect. Thailand has long been tolerant of other religions, but the numbers involved are quite small; one million Muslims predominate in 4 provinces bordering Malaysia; 250,000 Christians and small groups of Hindus, Sikhs and believers of Confucius Ethics. There is a complete freedom of worship, exemplified by the role of the King as protector of all religions.

1. HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN THAILAND

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Thailand in 1518 and they were allowed to open a Christian mission. In fact the Thai king gave a large donation to build the first Christian (Roman Catholic) church in the country. English traders who arrived in 1612 were agents for the East India Company and were more interested in building a factory than a church. Under King Narai, who was interested in the West, European missionaries and adventurers exerted considerable influence at court. However, when King Narai died in 1688, members of the government, fearing the missionaries proselytizing efforts, killed or expelled all Westerners from Thailand. It remained a closed country to the Europeans for the next 100 years.

In 1780, King Taksin allowed French missionaries to enter Thailand, and like a previous Thai king, helped them build a church. In the early part of the 19th century it was estimated that there were 1,000 Thai Christians in Bangkok, descendants of the Portuguese who were widely intermarried with the Thais. Protestant missionaries arrived in 1828, and the continuous residence of American missionaries dates from 1833. After 18 years, 22 missionaries had failed to make one convert, but their non-religious impact was profound. They brought modern scientific knowledge and western medicine to the country. In 1835, American missionaries set up the first printing press using the Thai alphabet.

King Mongkut learned English from his American missionary friends who also introduced him to Christianity. However, he could not accept Divine Revelation or Redemption of Sin, only pure human reason. He is quoted as saying, "What you teach them to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish." Still, he saw no harm in the Christian faith if it helped other people and both the Catholics and the Protestants benefited from his help in many ways. Although in the early part of this century, the Presbyterian missionaries saw growth occur in the Thai church, this began to level off after a few years. Then, during the 2nd World War, numbers declined, but began to rise again after the war ended when there was an influx of missionaries and new missions, e.g. OMF, New Tribes, WEC. However, it was not until the 1970s that any significant trends began to be established in terms of church growth.

Introduction to Buddhism

2. 1990's

Even though to be born Thai means to be born Buddhist, the average Thai person is not much more a Buddhist than many people in the Western world consider themselves to be Christian. Some rituals are followed by most people, but only a few follow all the rules of Buddhism. It seems that Buddhism has lost a lot of its attraction to the Thai people. The economic turmoil of the recent years has caused a new openness in the Thai people as many are looking for meaning in life besides materialism. "The power of God is moving in Thailand, the darkness is lifting over Thailand...it has never been so easy to lead a Thai person to Christ!" *Peter C. Wagner at a 1996 conference of 7000 Thai believers in Bangkok*

3. ORIGIN

Buddhism began in India about 500 years before Christ's birth. People at that time had become disillusioned with certain teachings in Hinduism, such as the caste system and the belief of an endless cycle of re-births. Many different sects of Hinduism arose, of which Buddhism is the most successful. It denies the authority of the 'vedas', the Hindu sacred scriptures. However, since Buddhism developed out of Hinduism, we still find many Hindu elements in Buddhism.

4. THE BUDDHA

The founder of Buddhism is Siddharta Gautama. Archeological discoveries claim his historical character, but very much like a fairy tale. There even are 500 stories describing the 500 lives of Buddha before attaining Nirvana. In short, the life of Buddha is portrayed like this:

Siddharta Gautama was born about 560 B.C. in the Northwest of India. His father was a king, and he grew up in wealth. One day, going outside the palace he was confronted with suffering, sickness, old age, death and poverty. This greatly distressed the prince and he started to think of a way to help people in their suffering. When he saw a religious man, devoted to meditation, he gave up his wealth, his wife and son and put on a yellow robe. He went into the forest to look for knowledge from among the religious leaders, through asceticism and studying. However, he did not find any satisfactory answers.

One day, meditating under a fig tree he attained "enlightenment", having, by himself, obtained the truth about life. From that moment on, he was "The Buddha". He was then 35 years old. After receiving enlightenment he met 5 ascetics. He held his first sermon for them. They became his disciples and the monastic order "sangha" was established. From that day on they went around sharing the truth with others.

According to tradition Buddha's birth, enlightenment and his death, all took place on the full moon's day of the sixth month of the year. These three great events are celebrated on "Visakhabucha Day" in May. Buddha died when he was 80 years old and he attained "Nirvana".

Introduction to Buddhism

5. BUDDHIST MISSIONS

Buddhism spread quickly over a large part of India and beyond. It reached its height during the reign of King Asoka (273-232 B.C.), who became the great patron of Buddhism. Missionaries were sent out to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In these countries we have the Theravada School of Buddhism, whereas in the Northeastern Asian countries people follow Mahayana Buddhism, a school of Buddhism arising later.

6. BUDDHISM IN THAILAND

By the time it came to this area, the Thai central plains were still inhabited and ruled by Mons/ Khmer (Ankhor kingdom), who practiced Brahmin religion. The Thai came in late from the South of China in the 13th century and they conquered the Mons and Khmers, thus establishing the Thai kingdom of Sukhotai in A.D. 1238. King Ramkhamhaeng invited Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to teach his people the Buddhist religion, although Brahman beliefs and practices continued to co-exist. Around 1350, the Sukhotai kingdom was replaced by the Thai kingdom of Ayuttaya (1350 – 1767) which also practiced Buddhism. The city was full of temples and pagodas, which were destroyed by the Burmese in 1767.

After the fall of Ayutthaya, Buddhism declined. It revived again during the Bangkok period, especially during the reign of King Mongkut (1851 – 1868), who had been a Buddhist monk for 27 years. During his intensive studies, he discovered that many things in Buddhist life and belief had changed, and he sought to bring Buddhist teaching and conduct back in line with the original teaching of Buddha.

His follower, King Chulalongkorn, unified Thai Buddhism by legally allowing for only one central order of monks, the Sangha. Buddhism, though mixed with Brahman rituals and local, animistic practices, slowly but surely developed into the national religion, with the kings being the protectors and defenders of the faith. Thus developed the strong ties between Nation, Religion and King, as represented by the 3 colors of the Thai flag. Therein developed the idea that to be Thai is to be Buddhist.

The Teachings of Buddha

At his enlightenment, Buddha came to understand the following truths which have become the central teachings of Buddhism.

The teachings of the Buddha are called "Dharma" (Thai: Thamma).

A. THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS (Thai: aryasat sie)

1. There is suffering
2. The cause of suffering (the craving for personal satisfaction)
3. Suffering can cease (when craving is stilled)
4. The means to stop suffering (following the Eight Fold Path)

B. THE EIGHT FOLD PATH (Thai: Mak pet)

1. Right Views (wisdom) - Accepting the 4 noble truths
2. Right Intentions (wisdom) - Free from ill will, lust, cruelty and untruthfulness
3. Right Speech - No lying, no slander, no abuse, no idle talk
4. Right Behavior - No killing, stealing, no sexual misconduct
5. Right Occupation - Earn your livelihood in an honest way
6. Right Effort - Avoid and overcome evil thoughts, arouse and maintain good thoughts
7. Right Contemplation - Be observant, alert, free of desire or sorrow
8. Right Concentration - Focusing of the mind in meditation

C. THE BUDDHIST PROHIBITIONS/ PERCEPTS (sin)

By keeping the 1st 5 precepts, we prohibit sin. If we would be free from sin, we must keep the prohibitions as a first step and do what is right as a 2nd. Precepts 1 – 5 need to be kept by laymen, however, in daily practice people tend to view them more like things you try to do on special days and occasions.

1. *Don't kill*
2. *Don't steal*
3. *Don't lie*
4. *Don't commit adultery*
5. *Don't take strong drinks*

The next five or (or just 6 – 8) are being kept in addition by novices, and sometimes are observed by laymen on special occasions.

6. *Don't touch money or gold/ silver*
7. *Don't use perfume*
8. *Don't sleep on a soft mattress*
9. *Don't dance or sing*
10. *Don't eat after 12.00 P.M.*

The monks must memorize and observe 227 monastic rules!!!

The Teachings of Buddha

A. THE LAW OF KARMA (Thai: kot heng kam)

The Law of Karma, often translated as the law of cause and effect plays an important part in Buddhist beliefs. Karma means that every act has some ultimate religious reward or punishment attached to it through re-births being worked out in many lifetimes.

Popularized karma means, "Do good and you will get good results. Do bad and you will get bad results." Karma implies that we are the authors of our own destiny. My present behavior will determine my future. No one can influence my destiny for good or worse. No one can help me. I solely depend on myself. Doing good (by following the eight-fold path) means gaining "merit", doing bad (through anger, self-satisfying desires and ignorance) means gaining "demerit". Merit leads to peace and well being, sin causes suffering.

In the endless wheel of life a person is traveling from suffering to Nirvana (a state of non-existence or extinction). In this process he must pass through countless reincarnations, which is determined by his karma from the merit/demerit relationship of his own effort in life. As the karma action of past existence has determined his present state, so present action will determine his next existence.

MERIT / DEMERIT (Thai: bun/ baap)

The central concern of religious activity is to gain as much merit and reduce as much demerit as possible. One way of gaining extra merit is by doing religious acts, like offering food to the monks, donating money to the temple, keeping the precepts and be doing (non-religious) acts of charity, like giving to the poor.

One way for a man to gain merit is by becoming a monk. By this he does not only make merit for himself, but (if unmarried) also for his mother (and if married for his wife). This is an exception from the general karma rule!

HEAVEN / HELL (Thai: sawan/ narok)

Following death the spirit of the person will first go to hell with many levels in order to pay for the demerit and be purged. After that he will go to heaven and enjoy his accumulated merit. If a person has a large balance of merit, he would go to heaven directly. Once his merit is used up, re-birth into the next existence occurs.

B. THE MONASTIC ORDER (Sangha) (Thai: phra song)

Every male of 20 years and older can become a Buddhist priest/ monk. In order to become a monk, one needs to undergo a ceremony, shave the head, wear the saffron robe, forsake home and the world, live at the temple and follow the 227 precepts. One can enter into the monk hood for short or long periods of time. Monks perform religious ceremonies and services for the lay believers.