

Thai Buddhism - Some Indigenous Perspectives

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The Buddha is reported to have said that his teachings (the *Dhamma*) are difficult, that they are not for everyone, but to be understood and followed by an intellectual elite. People who have been brought up in countries where the Christian tradition as well as a democratic system has prevailed are often a little puzzled when they hear this statement. A doctrine of salvation that is only accessible to the select, what kind of soteriology can that be? How is it possible that hundreds of millions of human beings call themselves Buddhists when their teaching is only suitable to a few of them?

The answer to this rather rhetorical question lies in the special role of the Buddhist order of monks and nuns, the *Sangha*. The Buddha preached in the first place to members of the *Sangha*, he addressed those who had forfeited private property and who had sworn off all forms of greed.

Buddhist monks and nuns were those who by following a strict written code of behaviour and by adopting the right attitudes assisted one another to break through the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. Incidentally, by their exemplary life-style they gained the admiration of a lay public, who could earn for themselves a measure of positive *Karma* by supporting those who devoted themselves fully to the teachings.

The central role of the *Sangha* can hardly be overestimated: the bulk of the Buddhist written tradition was made for and on behalf of the monks and nuns.

How crucial the *Sangha* was for the perpetuation of Buddhism may be illustrated by the devastating effect that the Muslim invasion of India had on Buddhism. From the beginning of the twelfth century the Muslim rulers in Delhi expanded their control over most regions of India. Hinduism survived centuries of Muslim rule, Buddhism did not. One of the reasons for the disappearance of Buddhism from India was that Buddhism in contrast to Hinduism, depended to a much larger extent upon the *Sangha* and when the Muslims destroyed all Buddhist centres such as the famous Nalanda University and persecuted the members of the Order this particular creed could not survive.

It is quite possible that members of the *Sangha* who were fleeing from the Muslims revitalised Buddhism in areas North and East of India and contributed to the establishment of Buddhism as the dominant religion in virtually all urban centres of Mainland Southeast Asia.

I would like to draw attention to four characteristics of Buddhism that appear to have been relevant during its spreading over Mainland Southeast Asia.

1. The first characteristic is that the teaching of the Buddha is often perceived of as a kind of minimal formula, a philosophical core that did not concern itself with many mundane aspects of life. The effect of the Buddha's teaching limits itself largely to ethics. In a Buddhist country there are often no typically Buddhist religious prescriptions as to whether and how to perform certain ceremonies such as marriage, it has no direct reference to children's education, does not concern itself with life-cycle rituals, it does not even specify how Buddhists should behave towards the inhabitants of heavens and hells.

2. Secondly, in the Buddhism as it spread over Southeast Asia a man or woman became a fully-fledged monk or nun simply by the careful performance of the ordination as it is described in the *Vinaya Pitaka*. Any person who finds him or herself a preceptor and who undergoes the prescribed ordination ritual becomes a full voting member of the order. He or she does not need to be doctrinally schooled, in Mainland Southeast Asia it is not relevant to ask in what an aspiring member of the order believes: an introduction into some Buddhist texts usually follows later, gradually Buddhist scholars can acquire textual knowledge according to their inclination and capacity.

3. In the third place when we disregard a limited number of international grand councils of short duration Buddhism spread without developing a permanent central organisation that supervised doctrine. If we were to ask a group of monks an important doctrinal question, such as whether or not someone can transmit beneficial karma to a deceased person, we will most likely collect a variety of opinions, the more learned monks often stating that theoretically, it is doubtful that any karma will change or influence the dead, others being firmly convinced that it is a straightforward transaction.

4. Fourthly: When Buddhism spread outside India it was superimposed upon a series of existing local beliefs and practices. In every culture there developed a unique way in which Buddhism came to terms with these local substratum. This is why Buddhism in Thailand is different from that of China, Laos, Sri Lanka, Burma, Japan or Tibet. To illustrate this point, we may note that in Tibet the prayer wheel is a common sight, but that particular contraption is unknown in Thailand.

The religious world upon which Buddhism became superimposed is usually little studied. There are several grounds for this neglect. One of the chief reasons why the study of the non-Buddhist religious frameworks remain hidden is because there are few easily accessible and

reliable sources of information. Then there is the low status accorded to the so-called „accretions“, all things that do not conform with the Buddhist doctrine are felt to be not particularly worthy of study.

Now the Tai peoples¹ lend themselves particularly well to a study of religious acculturation, because their acceptance of Buddhism falls largely in historical times and is relatively well documented. It began over nine hundred years ago when the Tai peoples lived in what is now the southeastern part of China. In the middle of the eleventh century a major series of wars broke out between the Tais and the Chinese, during which the Tais at first gained various skirmishes before losing the whole war. Probably to escape the consequences of this defeat, from the year 1055 onwards large numbers of Tais fled over the Red River into the region now known as northern Vietnam, and during the subsequent centuries they fanned out over the whole of mainland Southeast Asia, from Assam to Southern Thailand. They took control of all low-lying valley areas suitable to rice growing in regions now called upper Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, northern Burma, reaching as far as Assam in Northeastern India and the Chinese Province of Yunnan.

Those Tai-speaking peoples who conquered Mons who already adhered to Theravada Buddhism apparently accepted the Buddhist religious ceremonies from the outset with a good measure of alacrity. The Inscription of Rama Khamhaeng which was the first stele to be written in the Thai language and which is dated 1292, mentions various types of monasteries and annual state-sponsored Buddhist ceremonies.²

The spread of Buddhism

While the fact that the Thai accepted Buddhism is undisputed, the way by which Buddhism gained favour with the country's élite is, however, a little-studied field. From local chronicles and inscriptions it would appear that during the 13th, 14th and 15th century a preoccupation with relics of saints played a major role in this spread of Buddhism. This may be taken as an early acceptance of the magical side of Buddhism, a feature that puzzles and embarrasses some puritans up till the day of today. The Buddhism that spread in those centuries was not simply the ascetic ideal of the monks as we can extrapolate from the Buddhist scriptures. Instead we gain a picture of competing groups of monks, many of them claiming supernatural powers and being supported by supernatural objects. That is why in most ancient towns in Thailand we find a

¹ The word Tai refers to the whole range of Tai-language speaking peoples which includes the so-called „Shan“ languages, Lue, Lao, Black Tai, White Tai, Chuang, but also the Siamese, or Thai.

² For details see A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, „The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 A.D.)“, ⁱⁱ *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 59, Pt 2, 1971, pp. 179-228.

monastery of the great relic: Wat Mahathat, where a huge monument housed a particular sacred object.

This leads us to return to the question as to what sort of religion the Tais did possess before they came into contact with Buddhism and we may add the concomitant problem of whether or how their original religion and the new Buddhism did blend together.

What sort of religion the Tais had can be to some extent reconstructed by studying the whole range of Tais, particularly the Tais of Vietnam and those in Assam who never became Buddhists. Religious ceremonies that all Tais have in common may safely be taken together to stem from the cultural common heritage going back to the first millennium when they still occupied tracts in southeastern China. They include a regular spirit and ancestor propitiation, whereby contacts with the supernatural world is made by means of animal sacrifices, a chicken may suffice for a family ritual, a pig for a village, a buffalo for a state ritual. We can reconstruct particularly with the non-Buddhist Tais in Assam and northern Vietnam spirit possession and a sort of State Shamanism during which the chief gods enter the bodies of priests and priestesses who utter prognostications.

One interesting feature all Tais have in common is the preoccupation with *khwans*, elements of vitality, the loss of which will cause illness and may even lead to death. All Tais possess elaborate ceremonies to contain, recall and strengthen khwans. When someone's khwan has been missing for some time a spirit medium may be called in. This religious specialist chants a traditional text which amounts to a search in the upper worlds, combating evil spirits before returning with the missing vitality. He then puts it back into the body and binds it securely with a piece of white cotton thread.

Having in a most perfunctorily manner presented some features of the traditional pre-Buddhist religion of the Tais we now come to the confrontation with Buddhism from the early centuries of the second millennium onwards to the present time. In the course of a single lecture, however, I can do little justice to this complex matter, other than to draw attention to some broad issues. To help us enter the issues and by way of illustration of how interesting this topic is I will mention only a few examples: Chief among them is the *Upasampada*, the Ordination Ceremony.

The Ordination Ceremony

The choice of this ceremony may surprise some of you. After all, there is probably nothing more Buddhist (also in the eyes of the Thai Buddhists themselves) than the Ordination of a

monk or nun. The Upasampada may take place, in accordance with the Buddhist scriptures, during or after the year a person becomes 20 years of age.

While the Ordination is word for word and gesture for gesture described in the textures, we can nevertheless demonstrate how an ancient substratum that may well go back to pre-Buddhist Tai religion, has left its mark.

1. In the first place the Thais have a peculiar custom, that is not based upon Buddhist texts, of encouraging all young men to spend some time in the Order. Only when he has done so a man is called „ripe“. In the north of the country a period as a novice may suffice, but in the centre and the south he must be a fully-fledged monk at least for the duration of one *vassa*, or rainy season.

The three-and-a half month period of *vassa* that a young man should spend in the Buddhist Order is experienced as a very trying time: it is the time when religious life is stricter than usual, when the rural monks rise at four in the morning (instead of half past five during the time outside *vassa*) to join in prayer and meditation, this is when the new monks must also study assiduously for their religious exams. It is a hardening period, a period to prepare the young man for life as adult.

In Thailand all males are encouraged to join for a period of at least one *vassa*. The Thai ordination may be seen as a general kind of rite de passage, to make a man fully adult. Even government officials can take three months off with pay in order to be ordained. This general custom is a function that is not based upon the Buddhist scriptures, it is a typically custom, possibly going back to a feature of pre-Buddhist society.

2. The initiation aspect of the ordination is often celebrated the night before a 20-year old person is ordained; in contrast to the upasampada ritual the pre-ordination ritual which cannot be found in the Buddhist texts consists of an elaborate khwan-binding ceremony, called *tham khwan naak*, the binding of the life energy of the ordinand.

Central in this khwan-binding ritual is a tree-like structure in front of which the young man is positioned while a lay ritual specialist calls the gods to witness, around which candles are wafted, and from which strength is given through anointment and food. The ceremony of *tham khwan naak* is presided over by a local lay religious practitioner who chants a lengthy text strengthening the soul of the candidate and reminding him to be grateful to those who have reared him. All this can be seen as preparation for the ordeal of changing himself from young man to Buddhist monk. The ceremony has never been detailed manner analysed but it is not

difficult to recognise shamanistic features in the tree-like structure, the circular movements of the candle ceremony and the haunting chant by the religious specialist.

3. A third remarkable feature of the Thai ordination is the fact that in traditional Thailand no women are allowed in the order, notwithstanding the fact that fully-ordained nuns, *bhikkhuni*, are mentioned frequently in the texts. By drawing attention to the indigenous perspective, to a Southeast Asian substratum upon which Buddhism was grafted, we may be able to find possible explanations for this unusual exclusion of women from the order. While the Vinaya Pitaka explains that the Buddha, albeit reluctantly, accepted women as *bhikkhuni*, as fully ordained members of the order, and while this is a normal feature of Buddhism, say in Korea, the Thai Sangha has until the present, shunned women from being ordained. The reasons for this and other unusually exclusive behaviour also seem to lie in indigenous substratum, deeply rooted in the basic concepts of magical power in which women are perceived as threatening, as we will note once more at the end of this lecture.

Buddhist architecture

A second example of how we may enrich our perception of present-day Thai religion by taking note of possible pre-Buddhist features deals with the very architecture of a Thai Buddhist monastery architecture. Thai monasteries are particularly striking with their *uposatha* temples and their *viharas*, both structures consisting of long rectangular buildings with dominating roofs and huge gables, an architecture that does not seem to be part of the Indian religious traditions, such structures do not occur in the Silpasastras. Instead such structures show striking parallels with traditional Southeast Asian architecture, particularly with the communal men's houses in various traditional non-Buddhist cultures of the region.

We can pose a hypothesis: the temple architecture of the Thais is inspired upon the old pre-Buddhist Southeast Asian architecture. By extension, many of the ideas underlying communal behaviour in the monastery, such as the way the monks and novices sit in circular groups for most of their meals, the orientation of the buildings, the use of drums and gongs in the monastery as well as the traditional toilet facilities, all aspects for which the Buddhist texts do not provide explicit guidelines, may have their roots in those same traditional Southeast Asian cultures.

If we distinguish between two religious traditions that had to come to some sort of accommodation to one another, which, it must also be noted is a vast oversimplification, we may juxtapose different religious sub-spheres that may be placed parallel to one another. An attempt is made to do so in Table 1:

Table 1, Indigenous Religion and Buddhism juxtaposed

LIKELY INDIGENOUS FEATURES	BUDDHIST CEREMONY
rite de passage of young men	ordination of young monks
a period of trying circumstances	Vassa (a whole rainy period)
life in secluded men's house	life in the Buddhist monastery

It would seem possible that an indigenous practise was Buddhized: a unique mixture that is typically for Thailand, Laos and Cambodia came about: instead of the Order being the refuge for a few, it became the path for hundreds of thousands of young men who serve as full members of the Sangha, well knowing that they will leave the order after one season.

The relationship between Buddhism and indigenous principles is often quite harmonious, causing a blend of religious practices that needs some effort to unravel.

Table 2, A Model for Studying the Relationship between Indigenous Religion and Buddhism

1. Harmoniousness, in principle parallel features in both religious that blended
2. Neutrality, features in each religious system that remained untouched when after both systems came into close contact
3. Hostility, features that are diametrically opposed, where confrontations will cause drastic change

As an example of the first category we may note that the Buddhist pantheon and the indigenous ancestor cult appear to have blended among the Thais to a harmonious mixture of ideas. The supernatural beings range from the great gods, such as Indra, and other categories of powers such as pretas to the indigenous *thaen*, *phi* and ancestors. In the second group we may list the differing conceptions of the human body, with the Buddhist-Indian tradition and healing practices being kept and transmitted fairly unchanged, and the indigenous ideas concerning khwans remaining unaffected. As a typical example of an area where the two religious orientations were diametrically opposed we may mention the Buddhist insistence upon ahimsa, and the indigenous central role of animal sacrifices. During the centuries, the animal sacrifice

gradually was displaced, only few traces of such practices still being visible to the trained observer.

Simple as the model seems, it helps discern features that remain hidden to those who approach Southeast Asian forms of Buddhism from the textual tradition only.

I have already mentioned that Thai local chronicles and inscriptions demonstrate, that during the 13th 14th and 15th century a preoccupation with relics of saints played a major role in the spread of Buddhism. This may be taken as an early acceptance of the magical side of Buddhism, a feature that puzzles and embarrasses some puritans up till the day of today. The basic Buddhist rituals that take place outside the monastery feature a cotton thread which runs from the shrine of the lord of the earth to the dwelling where the ceremony will take place, it surrounds the whole dwelling before being led through a window to a Buddha image, from there it goes around a bowl of water and is then led to the hands of all Buddhist monks present.

Indigenous ideas of magical power may well be the inspiration of the use of the cotton thread among Buddhist monks in Mainland Southeast Asia and from there it may have spread to Sri Lanka.

The cotton thread conveys the concentration of the monks like a magnetic or electric charge, the power of the chanting which makes the traditional house tremble fills the bowl of water with beneficial power, it is reinforced by the Buddha and the shrine of the god of the earth, causing all present to be enveloped in a cleansing positive aura. This belief in the power of the Buddhist sutras and the efficacy of the set-up of objects may well represent one of the lucky solutions of the Thai concept of magical power and the beneficial features of the recitation of the Buddhist Sutras. A simple translation of the Pali words chanted does not suffice to understand what goes on. The proposed model goes some way to open one's eyes to clues with which to unravel the puzzles.

A final issue illustrates the peculiar ways the Buddhist magical power runs. A Thai Buddhist monk may receive food directly from the hands of a male, but when a female presents food, she must place the food upon an intermediary substance, such as a piece of cloth or a sheet of paper. The principle at work is that a woman should not be in direct contact with a monk, but at the same time they do not want to deprive her of the chance to make merit by handing over a gift to a member of the order. It is believed that a woman, by her very nature and by the productive generative powers she exudes, is a danger to the magical charge that a meditating monk possesses, and that is why the Thais use an insulator between the monk and a woman.

Again, our model helps explain hitherto insufficiently explained puzzles.

By way of conclusion I reject the simplistic stance that the Thais practise a pure form of Buddhism. I also reject the idea that they are but animists at heart who use a pro-forma Theravada-Buddhist disguise to worship in their own pre-Buddhist ways. Instead I propose to regard their religion a unique outcome of a lengthy and fruitful accomodation, resulting in the unique type of Buddhism that best be called Thai Buddhism and best be analysed using tools such as those mentioned above.