

Thai Buddhism

Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC) was the founder of Buddhism.¹ Because the Buddhist scriptures were written hundreds of years after the life of Gautama, there are many critical problems in describing his life. The picture that arises from these scriptures, the *Tipitaka*, is as follows: Gautama was a prince in northern India, sheltered by his father from the harsh realities of life. When one day he became aware of the problem of suffering, he decided to leave behind his wife and child, his home, and his wealth to look for an answer. First he studied with Brahmin hermits, but was disappointed that they did not know how to escape the cycle of reincarnations. Then he lived as an ascetic for several years, only to find out that this did not help him reach his goal. Finally he claimed to have reached enlightenment after prolonged meditation. Hence the honorific '*Buddha*', which means the enlightened one.

Buddhism evolved in two major schools, Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada Buddhism claims to be the more orthodox of the two and emphasizes the teachings of the *Buddha*. Mahayana Buddhism came into existence later. It started to regard the *Buddha* as an eternal, omnipresent Principle or Being. At the same time it emphasized the importance of *bodhisattvas*, more or less divine beings on the way to Buddhahood who devote themselves to the well-being of people. Mahayana Buddhism became the larger of the two schools, and has China as its heartland. Some of the ethnic Chinese in Thailand hold on to Mahayana Buddhism, but most now are adherents of Theravada Buddhism, which is the dominant school in Thailand.

Any student of Buddhism in Thailand soon discovers it is not a monolithic whole. Several ways to classify its different strains have been proposed. In this paragraph Melford E. Spiro's classification is followed, which distinguishes between *nibbanic*, *kammatic*, and apotropaic Buddhism.² Because the latter term never gained much traction, it is replaced here by 'folk Buddhism'. The distinctions made here between these categories are not necessarily understood that way by Thai Buddhists. B.J. Terwiel noted in 1975 that "informants were classifying merely to please the researcher; the categories under discussion had little relevance in their minds."³ Though this has changed to a certain extent probably through the influence of state sponsored religious education in the schools, it remains true for many people.

Nibbanic Buddhism

Nibbanic Buddhism emphasizes the Buddha's message (*dharma*) about *nirvana*. The message that Gautama came to proclaim after his enlightenment, is known as 'the four noble truths'. The first truth is suffering. Life basically is suffering. The second truth is that desire is the cause of suffering. This includes worldly desires for possessions and enjoyment, but most of all it means the desire for existence as a separate entity. This desire is rooted in ignorance: not realizing that the self is imaginary and has no existence in reality. The third truth is that suffering ceases when desire ceases.

¹ The main sources on Buddhism are Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, Cambridge, 1970; David Bentley-Taylor, "Buddhism", in: Norman Anderson, *The World's religions*, 4th revised edition, 1975; Kenneth Walls, *Thai Buddhism: its rites and activities*, 3rd rev. edition, Bangkok, 1975; B.J. Terwiel, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism", in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, 35:3 (1976), pp. 391-403; A. Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation", in: *Journal of Asian Studies*, 36:2 (1977), pp. 241-266; Suwanna Satha-Anand, "Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhist Struggles for Modern Relevance", in: *Asian Survey*, 30:4 (1990), pp. 395-408; Pattana Kitiarso, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand", in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36:3 (2005), pp. 461-487; Pattana Kitiarso, "Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums in the Politics of Thai Popular Religion", in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 6:2 (2005), pp. 210-226; and the personal observations of the present author.

² Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, New York, 1970.

³ Terwiel, p. 393.

When the lust for life, the passion to exist, has ceased, than suffering ceases as well. The fourth truth is the path which leads to the cessation of suffering, and is called the eightfold path. The eightfold path consists of right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right mode of livelihood, right effort (working towards universal love), right awareness (introspection), and right concentration. This last and highest step means concentrating on a single object, until all distractions have disappeared, and then going beyond "either pleasure or pain into a state transcending consciousness, ultimately attaining full enlightenment, which is the highest possible state of perfection"⁴.

Three concepts are important to understand orthodox Buddhism: *karma*, *anicca*, and *nirvana*. *Karma* is the totality of actions in life. Good and bad deeds result in good and bad *karma*. This *karma* has to be lived out in the next life. This theory readily explains one's station in life and any good or bad thing that may happen to someone. Orthodox Buddhism emphasizes that it is the *karma* that is lived out in the next life. The soul is not reincarnated, because Buddhism does not believe in the existence of a permanent soul. This leads to the second concept: *anicca*, which means impermanence. According to Buddhism, there are only fleeting phenomena, but no objective reality. Even what people call their 'self' or 'soul' is forever changing, every moment different from the last, and therefore an illusion.

Misery only doth exist; none miserable.
No doer is there; naught but the deed is found.
Nirvana is, but not the man that seeks it.
The path exists, but not the traveler on it.⁵

The third important concept is *nirvana*. The eightfold path is said to lead to the cessation of suffering, the end of the cycle of incarnations, which leads to *nirvana*. There is no 'becoming' anymore; the illusion of self-hood has stopped. Gautama took pains to explain *nirvana* as a state that is neither existence nor non-existence.

While the teaching about *nirvana* forms the heart of the teaching of the Buddha, it does not play a major role in Thai Buddhism. It is widely believed that *nirvana* is unobtainable in this era for even the most revered of monks. It is cause for a heresy process if a monk claims to be a 'stream winner', which means to be in an incarnation that will, through consecutively better incarnations, eventually lead to *nirvana*. With *nirvana* out of the picture as a practical concern, Thai Buddhists have placed other concerns in the heart of their religion.

Kammic Buddhism

Because reaching *nirvana* is seen as impossible, a more attainable goal is to build up good *karma* to ensure rebirth in a better life. Building up good *karma* is mainly done through merit-making. The most certain way to do that is through taking care of the monks, both through giving food and through taking part in the main temple ceremonies. These and other rituals to make merit are the most important aspects of *kammic* Buddhism for almost all Thai.

From the beginning, Buddhism has been a religion centered on the *Sangha*, or the order of monks. Until today the over 260,000 monks in over 31,000 temples⁶ are the centre of Buddhist life in Thailand. Every village has a temple. Every morning the monks walk around, and many women line

⁴ Bentley-Taylor, p. 173

⁵ Visuddhimagga, quoted in Bentley-Taylor, p. 176.

⁶ National Statistical Office, *The 2000 Population and Housing Census: the Whole Kingdom*, Bangkok, 2002, table 3.7.

up to offer food to them. Four times in every lunar month there is a holy day (*wan phra*) during which more people, again especially women, go to the temple to offer flowers, incense, and gifts to the monks. There is a service with Pali chanting, and a Thai sermon. Some very religious people will promise to keep the eight precepts during that day. Except the five general ones that every Buddhist should keep (refraining from taking life, stealing, unchastity, lying, and drinking alcohol) these include as extra ones refraining from eating after noon, from entertainment, and from sitting or lying on a mattress.

There is a perceptible difference between rural and urban religious life. In the villages the temple still is the core of the community, and most people in one way or another take part in the various festivals and ceremonies in the temple. In the cities many people do not go to the temple anymore, and even if they do the temple is not nearly as important a social function as it is in the rural areas.

During the year there are five major Buddhist festivals. The first one is *Visakha Puja*, which is in remembrance of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, all said to have taken place at full moon in the same month of the year. Sermons on this day will focus on the life of the Buddha. The second major festival is *Magha Puja*, in remembrance of the day when 1250 disciples of Buddha, all enlightened, are said to have congregated, without prior invitation or knowledge, 3 months before the Buddha died. The third festival is *Khaw Bansa*, or the beginning of the Buddhist lent. This is the start of a three-month period in the rainy season during which the monks are not allowed to sleep outside the temple. In many villages they do not even go out to beg for food. Instead, the local population takes the food to the temple. It is a period of more intense religious study for the monks, and of more religious activities, including giving presents to the monks, for the lay people. This period ends with the fourth festival, *Ohk Bansa*, or the end of the Buddhist lent. The last major festival is *Phra Kathin*, during which robes are given to the monks.

These are all temple-centered ceremonies. Most temples have other ceremonies as well so that the people have the opportunity to provide the monks with the 'four necessities', shelter, food, clothing, and medicines.⁷ Many temples have annual fairs. For example, in the Northeast of Thailand every village temple has an annual festival where a *moh lam* (singer of traditional songs) with his troupe will perform till day-break. The widespread drunkenness and fighting during these occasions seem to have little to do with Buddhism, but because the proceeds go to the temple, the whole festival is still considered as merit making.

Outside the temple there is an important role for the monks in several house ceremonies. Gautama did not prescribe any ceremony for the *rites de passage*. Inevitably this was seen as a need, and in Thailand the Buddhist monks filled that void, even though there is no sanction for this in the Buddhist scriptures. The main occasions where monks are invited for a house ceremony are for weddings (though they have no part in the actual wedding ceremony), dedication of a new house, and funerals. The funeral rites are the most elaborate and often last up to seven days. In all these ceremonies there is chanting by and presenting gifts to the monks. Holy water, consecrated white cords, and incense sticks play an important role in these rituals.

The position of the *Sangha* in Thai society is however not without its challenges. There is much talk about crisis in the *Sangha*.⁸ The reasons most often mentioned are the inflexible top-down organization of the *Sangha*, as ordered by law and closely connected to the state, and the moral failings of some monks, which have resulted in several high profile sexual and corruption scandals. Urbanization also contributed to a lessening role for the *Sangha*, since life in the cities is less naturally centered on the temple and the monks than it is in the villages.

⁷ Walls, p. 115

⁸ For a short overview of authors covering this subject, see Pattana Kitiarsa, "Faith and Films: Countering the Crisis of Thai Buddhism from Below", in: *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 34:2 (2006), pp. 264-290.

Reform movements like Suan Moke and Santi Asoke try to promote a Buddhism that places a major emphasis on the teachings of the Buddha, but these movements have been more successful in attracting attention from scholars than in becoming broad-based mass movements.

Folk Buddhism

Kammic Buddhism plays an important role in everyday life. Yet most Thai Buddhists are as often, and as intensely, concerned with the world of the spirits and spirit appeasement. These phenomena are best described as animistic. For a good understanding of Thai Buddhism it is important to realize that *nibbanic* and *kammic* Theravada Buddhism never exist in a society without this strong substratum of what is here called folk Buddhism. A. Thomas Kirsch wrote that “it has frequently been observed that Theravada Buddhism is never the sole religious component in these societies, that there are invariably ‘non-Buddhist’ religious elements present as well.”⁹ The Buddha did not deny the existence of gods and spirits; he just taught that their existence is not relevant to obtaining enlightenment. This left open the possibility of engaging the gods and spirits. Their help is enlisted with the problems of daily living. Buddhist teaching about enlightenment does not address these issues directly. Folk Buddhism serves to fill that gap.

The two main contributing streams to folk Buddhism are Brahmanism and animism. Brahmanism probably became influential both as a survivor from pre-Buddhist history and through the Brahmanistic court rituals that are held until today. Brahmanistic practices focus on the *thewadas*, angelic beings or gods. Their help is especially asked to ensure health, prosperity, and good luck. All ceremonies at various points in the life cycle and in the cycle of the seasons are mainly Brahmanistic in nature.

Animism, the beliefs and practices that deal with spirits, is the second important strain of folk Buddhism. Spirit doctors play a role in appeasing the spirits and healing the sick. However, because the spirits are both capricious and cannot be controlled, animistic rituals are seen as less certain to produce the desired results than Buddhist and Brahmanistic rituals. Interestingly, “[m]any of these features associated with the animist rituals (use of whiskey, dancing, and trance-like state) stand in direct opposition to many paramount values of Buddhism (sobriety, self-restraint), and of Folk Brahmanism as well.”¹⁰

Yet generally no contradiction is felt between the magic of folk Buddhism and Buddhist teaching. On the contrary monks also play a central role in folk Buddhism. Terwiel noted that in the view of Thai villagers strong Buddhism leads to strong magical powers: “In the view of many farmers, strong [Buddhist] discipline is related to strong forces emanating from the members of the Sangha when they perform their rituals.”¹¹

The influence of folk Buddhism is found in many different ways. Most Buddhists wear amulets to be protected wherever they go. When a contingent of Thai soldiers was sent out on a UN mission they carried on average about 50 amulets on their bodies. Some amulets were officially issued by the military.¹² The most common amulets are Buddha images. The power ascribed to these amulets depends, among other things, on the spell used to prepare the amulet, and the monk who consecrated it. Much of the income of many temples in Thailand comes from selling amulets and holy water and other practices that are more animistic than Buddhist. The blessing of the most

⁹ Kirsch, p. 242.

¹⁰ Kirsch, p. 258.

¹¹ Terwiel, p. 400.

¹² *Asia Times*, 11 September 2003.

popular living Buddhist monk, abbot Khuun, was sought by many national level politicians. He grants his blessing by spitting on their head. Besides Buddha images many other amulets exist. They can be almost anything, from a splinter of wood, to seeds, to women's underwear, to images of popular monks. Many men have amulets to increase their potency.

In 2006 one kind of amulet created a craze in the country that had not been witnessed before.¹³ Jatukam amulets originated in Nakhon Sri Thammarat in southern Thailand and display pictures of two legendary princes. Almost overnight these amulets became popular after people claimed they were miraculously protected or became miraculously rich because of them. Within one year hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on these amulets. Brochures were printed with choices of Jatukam amulets for purchase. An airline carrier arranged a special flight during which monks made the amulets so they would be especially powerful. A bank promised an amulet for everybody who opened a new account.

Fortune telling is also a major part of the folk beliefs of Thai Buddhists. There are many fortunetellers, many of them palm readers. For almost every ceremony a monk or a Brahmin priest will divine an 'auspicious time'. Other major occasions for animistic ceremonies center on new buildings. The ground-breaking ceremony, the ceremony of consecrating the main pillar to invite spirits to come and live there, and the house-warming party are all very much related to spirit beliefs.

Not only markets, but almost all Thai houses, have a spirit house on the compound for the spirits of the plot of land. Flowers, incense, and water (or whiskey) are offered to the spirits to ask for their protection. On special days there are offerings of food. Larger spirit houses are found alongside most markets and commercial buildings. The power of these spirits is believed to be local.

Another venue where spirit beliefs can be easily seen is the markets and shops. Many shops have an image of Mae Kwak, a Chinese goddess who invites customers to come in. Her food of choice seems to be red Fanta soda. Other shops have the Japanese equivalent, Maneki Neko, a cat-god whose paw is gesturing as long as its battery does not run out.

Ancestor worship is especially strong among the Chinese, and to a certain extent among the Isaan (Northeastern Thai), who will often have a spirit house for their ancestors instead of for the spirits of the land. In Bangkok many Isaan have the two spirit houses side by side.

Another interesting feature of religious life in Thailand is the worship of the spirit of king Chulalongkorn. In most Thai houses a picture of this king can be found. Sometimes this is just to show respect for the monarchy and for one of the great kings of Thailand, but more often than not, fruit and other gifts are offered to his spirit. Those most serious about his worship will refrain from eating beef.

The explicitly dark side of the spirit worship is that people will put curses on others and will offer their bodies to the spirits if the spirits help them. There are many spirit doctors offering these kinds of services. They also claim to be of assistance in casting out spirits.

A naïve evolutionary view of the history of religion might lead to the thought that folk Buddhism will grow weaker and orthodox Buddhism stronger. Newer research shows that this is not the case. Pattana Kitiarsa shows how in urban settings spirit mediums and all kinds of innovative folk Buddhist

¹³ See e.g. "A present help in adversity", in: *The Nation*, 27 January 2007, and "Jatukam fever reaches new heights", in: *Bangkok Post*, 10 June 2007.

cults are getting stronger instead of weaker.¹⁴ He argues against the older syncretism paradigm of Thai religion proposed by, among other, Terwiel and Kirsch. The syncretism paradigm emphasizes the paramount importance of Theravada Buddhism. Pattana states that this approach fails to give enough attention to developments in the total picture of Thai religion. Pattana prefers to talk about 'hybridization' rather than syncretism. He believes that the concept of a 'hybrid', a mixture from various origins, serves better to study the newer spirit-medium cults and other religious developments in their own right.

The hybridization of Thai religion means that more and more of the religious life of Thai people exists outside the purview of state-sponsored Buddhism. The *Sangha*, tied to laws governing its functioning, is not able to react in creative ways. Even less than in the past it can fulfill all the religious needs of the Thai people, particularly in the cities. As shown by the recent growth of spirit-medium cults, the religious situation in Thailand is open to change. The direction that change will take will become clear in the future.

This article is paragraph 2.6.2. from Marten Visser, *Conversion Growth of Protestant Churches in Thailand*, 2008.

¹⁴ Pattana Kitiarso, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand", in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36:3 (2005), pp. 461-487.