

THE BUDDHA'S FOOTPRINT

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After four months in the United States, we have finally arrived back in Thailand again. On our taxi ride from the Bangkok airport, I chatted with our Thai driver and caught up on the local weather and politics (apparently there is a new prime minister and I did not know it). Our driver asked what we were doing in Thailand and where we lived so I had an opportunity to ask him about the Temple of the Buddha's Footprint, the focal point of the town that we call home here in Thailand. Something I have never understood about the shrine to the Buddha's footprint at this temple is why the footprint is about four feet long. Surely people couldn't believe that the Buddha's foot was four feet long, could they? If his foot was that big, then certainly the rest of him must have been of gigantic proportions. The only other time I had asked Thai people about it, they had replied that you need to have faith. I am a man of faith and I believe many things that seem incredible but faith must also have some reason to it as well. If the man that is historically identified as the Buddha was of normal proportions, then certainly he must have a normal size foot. So, I asked our driver about this mysteriously large footprint and got a rather satisfying answer, that helped me to understand how it is that Thai Buddhists understand this abnormally large sacred footprint.

Our driver explained that whatever the Buddha touched or stepped on was sacred. Some of those common objects that were rendered sacred by the Buddha's touch have been preserved and because of their great holiness and power, have come to be revered by people. In the case of the Buddha's four foot long foot print in our town, the stone upon which the Buddha originally trod must have grown in size over time because of its sacredness. Hence, piecing together what I learned from our driver's explanation, it seems that pilgrims to the Temple of the Buddha's Footprint regard the supernatural size of the footprint as evidence of its great sacredness. And therefore, it is a particularly good spot to make offerings, earn merit, and gain good karma.

In many ways, our Thai driver's explanation of the sacredness of the Buddha's footprint reminded me of the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of relics. A bone fragment or scrap of clothing from one of the saints is held in particular esteem because it belonged to a holy person and therefore it is able to aid one to come closer to God. In both cases however, no physical object is able to bring a person closer to God as interesting as that object might be because of its association with a famous person. Only Jesus Christ can bring a person into right relationship with God. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 2:5) and "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:19,21)