

The Significance of Phra See Ahn for Northeastern Thai Buddhists

Context: This is part of an interview done in Isaan by Paul DeNeui (P) with Mr. Khampan Sudcha (K), a thirty-eight year old Thai evangelist working for the Lower Isaan Foundation for Enablement (LIFE) in Roi Et, northeast Thailand. The conversation was taped on January 2, 2004, and later edited into English by Paul DeNeui.

P: Let me ask you about the Buddhist prophecy of *Phra See Ahn*. I understand it speaks of one who was to come. Who is *Phra See Ahn* and what is this prophecy all about?

K: Understand that this legend is primarily significant to those [northeastern Thai] who are now at least sixty years old or older. For young people today it is not meaningful any more however, the story of *Phra See Ahn* is still told in some places. I myself heard it from my elders and from the *maw lom* singing when I was growing up.

P: Do you believe that this prophecy about *Phra See Ahn* is referring to Jesus?

K: Yes. It is about Jesus.

P: Did this prophecy come before the Buddhist era?

K: No, it started in the Buddhist era since some parts of it still remain to be fulfilled. [In our northeastern Thai culture] there is the [written] Buddhist teaching and there is the oral teaching. The oral teaching are the legends that have been passed down from generation to generation; some of these are prophecies that have to do with Buddhism. The legend of the *Phra See Ahn* is from our oral teaching.

P: Is there anything in the oral tradition that alludes to those who would believe first?

K: Yes. Mostly, it has been young people who have responded to the message of Jesus before their parents. This is also true in the *Yoreh* group [cult]. They say that *Phra See Ahn* has come. I have talked to several of their members who say that *Phra See Ahn* is coming to relieve the world and that those who came after Buddha are part of him. But when I ask them to translate what they are saying they are unable to do so.

P: After listening to your explanation of *Phra See Ahn* have there been some who have made a decision of faith and followed Christ?

K: Yes. There are several who have believed because of explaining it. Father Lee [in Roi Et] was one. Many of the older generation who have become God's children in Roi Et have believed because of having this prophecy explained to them. I can say that hundreds of these people are children of God [Christians]. They have come to know God because of the prophecy of *Phra See Ahn*, the one they were anticipating.

P: Are you are saying that this anticipation has prepared them to receive God?

K: Yes. Many people waiting for *Phra See Ahn* are actually waiting for Jesus.

P: What can you tell me about the person of *Phra See Ahn* from the prophecy?

K: Can you explain the meaning of *Phra See Ahn* or [as his name is fully said] *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri Yoh*? Do you know what this name means?

P: No. Tell me about it.

K: You have to translate back to the root words of *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri Yoh*. Start with the second word "see." This word "see" comes from the Sanskrit root "seerī" which means "excellent" or "full of glory." But the Bible says that all people have sinned and have fallen short of God's glory [Romans 3:23]. However, when Jesus came he was born a human just like us but full of God's glory [John 1:13-14].

Jesus was born with "seerī," God's glory. The word "glory" is the same [Thai] root word found in the [Thai] term for "excellent." We don't try to force our own meaning on these words but we are trying to understand what the heart meaning is of the words in the Scripture and the words that people are using. In Buddhism this word is translated this same way.

So put this together with the first pronoun, "Phra" [the honorific for a Holy One] and you have "Phra See," the most glorious Holy One. A Holy One does not have sin. Jesus did not have a wife nor did he father any children therefore, in the Thai way of thinking he did not have sin. But if an ordinary person fathers children he is considered less than perfect and therefore has sin .

The next term, "arriyah" means "big" in the sense of "all-powerful." For example, when we say the Thai word, "arriyapraphet" this means a large, powerful country. Or the word "arriyahtham" which means a "great, powerful teaching." Another word is "arriyasatsee" which means "the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism." But the term "Phra See Arriyah" means the all-powerful, glorious

Holy One. And who could be greater or more powerful than the one who created the heavens and the earth? All other religious leaders were born after the creation of the world but Jesus was the Word who existed with the Father and was the Father before the creation of the world.

People who hear this get excited. They start to see that what they have been waiting for in the *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri*. If the terms are explained word by word they can understand.

The next word "*meht*" comes from the word "*meddha*." This means merciful and kind—an action towards other people. Therefore when we put these words together *Phra See Arriyah Meht* means the all-powerful, glorious Holy One who acts in mercy. We say: [another part of the *Phra See Ahn* prophecy]:

Kee tood ko tang jah dai kert ben dee
[The outcasts and lepers will become the best]

When he comes all will be without sin. This means that, for example, even an old grandmother, out in her field, will be able to go to heaven because someone can read the Bible to her and she can understand it herself and go to heaven. Those who were born in the poorest and lowest levels of society will be reborn in sinless excellence. They will find God before others. I usually give the example of the poor villagers. Who in the village finds God first? It is the poorest of the poor, when they experience the mercy and kindness of God in their lives. When they understand the Bible teaching that God loved them so much that he was even willing to die for them they see that there is only one willing to do that. This is Jesus, the merciful and kind one who they were waiting to come. I tell people that if they don't believe me to go ahead and study it for themselves and see if the root meaning of this name is what I am explaining or not.

Buddha is not the merciful one because if any person is not born with all thirty-two parts then that person cannot become a monk. Also, in order to be a Buddhist monk a person must be born male.

The word "*tri*" means three. This is the same as in the Thai flag that has three colors and is known as the *tritrong* (three-colored flag). For Isaan people the "three" part of this title refers to heaven, earth, and hell. The Great One has a love that reaches into all three places. We understand that heaven is the place of God. The earth is the place God created. Hell is the dwelling place of Satan and his demons. God is greater than all three of these places; he takes care of all three levels. Buddha is not able to do this. Opening to the beginning of the Bible people can read about the God who created the earth and is the owner of the heavens and the earth. This is the meaning of the One in Three all-powerful,

glorious Holy One who acts in mercy. Old people hear this and have to admit that it is the truth.

The final word is "yoh" from "yowah." This comes from the word that means wind. This points to the Holy Spirit who is described as the wind. He is not referred to in physical terms as a person but he can be experienced, as wind or as fire. People can see what he does. Thai people have another proverb that says when *Phra See Ahn* comes:

Man jah raahb bai ben muan nah kong fai

[All will be equal just as fire evens everything in its path]

I can translate all of this. This means that even if you are a wealthy millionaire living on the fifth floor of a tall building and you drive a Mercedes-Benz, or you are simply a poor farmer riding on the buffalo's back, one day all will be made equal because all who have Jesus will be equally saved. The way I translate it fits perfectly with the proverb. This is an explanation that really speaks to the heart of the poor! God says, "It is me! Come on in!" People listen carefully to all of this. When I speak with elderly people they especially become very interested.

All of this has to do with faith. People will look for and wait for the one who is to come all of their life and never find him if they don't understand the meaning. All of these older traditions have an origin and a purpose. Explaining the meaning is what I do when speaking with older people.

P: Should missionaries use this method with older Thai people?

K: I think using this with older people brings results because they have a background in Buddhism.

P: Would this be true of Buddhists from all parts of Thailand?

K: Yes. All older Thai people are familiar with this. They are still waiting for *Phra See Ahn* to arrive.

P: What about the younger generation? What do they know about *Phra See Ahn*?

K: The way to present the gospel to the younger generation is not simply to talk at them. We have to present the gospel in ways that young people can connect with personally. Those young people who have found God can now share what God has done for them in their lives. You can see results in their lives; they have gone very far already—as far as the sun! Their lives have changed radically through their experience of God. This experience with God is what convinces young people today that God is real. Young people are experiencing things all the time now especially through the media. They see things on television, they

see the President [of the United States], and they see many, many things that are relevant to their world today.

If we talk about heaven or hell to young people, it has no relevance to them because to them these things (if exist at all for them) are far off in the distance. I share about things that are related to today, the events that hit us in our daily lives. This is the method I use in sharing with young people because these things are easy to talk about. This doesn't make young people sleepy [or turn them off].

P: So you're saying you don't teach about *Phra See Ahn*.

K: No. This is not necessary. They don't know anything about it. There are songs that I lead them in singing and this builds interest. There are a number of popular tunes I frequently use as a way to build interest with young people.

P: Do you think this explanation of *Phra See Ahn* should be translated for other missionaries to understand?

K: That is up to you if you want to do it.

I once bought a book about *Phra See Ahn*. It explained some of the meanings that I have described but not in much detail. It said that when *Phra See Ahn* really comes he would be like Buddha. It said he would be born in a heavenly place and would live with all the thousands of female angelic beings. He would have a wife and would not be born into this world. The author of this book was not teaching the complete story.

If we look at this as followers of Jesus we can see the meanings in these Thai prophecies. There are three things in these prophecies and three in our beliefs. We have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For Buddhist they have three: The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. All religions have a basis of three that do not disagree with each other.

If I were to suggest studying Buddhism in order to compare how it conflicts with Christianity then you should get ready to run [i.e. people will respond violently]. This is because we need to respect Buddhism; it was here before we were. People have become deeply attached to their cultural beliefs. What Buddha taught was true. I ask people, "Do you know what Buddha taught?" [Another quote from the prophecy]:

Haak wah than mah tung leaw khon buah nai
[When he comes people will not accept him]

Buddha taught that when the one came people would not accept him and would not welcome him. If Jesus did not want people to follow him why did he come to die for everyone? I ask the person listening to me—is this true? Grandpa is listening to me and he says, "It's true!" I ask him, "Did Jesus come and tell you off? Has he done something to wrong you? If not, why do people hate him?"

"*Houay!*" he says, "I haven't got the faintest idea. All I know is that when I hear the name 'Jesus' I get furious." So I say to Grandpa, "Do you see that what the Buddha said is true?" He says, "Yes, I see that now."

When the Buddha said that the one to come would be rejected he spoke the truth. People who are listening are starting to pay serious attention at this point. What else did Buddha teach? He taught that those who go to heaven are like the horns of a cow but those who go to hell are like the hairs on the hide. So I ask Grandpa, "Which are more on the cow—the horns or the hairs? Most people say the horns are fewer. So I ask, "Grandpa, in your village how many people are following Jesus?" He says, "Not very many."

So I summarize by sharing that even Buddha himself taught that only a few would follow the one to come. I ask him, "Did Buddha lie to us?" No, he will say. Buddha did not lie. So I ask him, "If you don't believe yet, why don't you consider what you are saying?"

We are trying to encourage the use of the beliefs that people already have so that they can see that what they believe in is really the truth. I tried to write this up once but writing it out and speaking it in dialogue with people is very different. I must say that any specific method is not going to work in every situation. It is only a principle or a foundation from which to build. Actually putting these ideas into practice is a completely different story. In reality, all of this is the work of the Holy Spirit who is working in the heart of the person with whom we are speaking.

P: Thank you for sharing this with me.

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