

Buddhism: A Look at Thailand's Major Religion

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.

The Buddha

The founder of Buddhism is Siddharta Gautama. Archeological discoveries claim his historical character, but a lot is 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 "Visakhavucha Day" in May. Buddha died when he was 80 years old and he attained "Nirvana".

Buddhist Missions

Buddhism spread quickly over a large part of India and beyond. It reached its height during the reign of King Asoke (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.

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 coexist. 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 Ayuttaya, 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 (Dharma)

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".

The Four Noble Truths

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

The Eight Fold Path

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

The Buddhist Prohibitions/ Precepts

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 step. 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 are usually just kept by the monks (they actually memorize and observe 227 monastic rules!), however, on special occasions some "lay" people will keep these as well.

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 Circle of Life

The Mandala, or circle of life, is meant to illustrate the basic teachings of Buddhism.

Sometimes called the wheel of life as well, it visually depicts the cause of evil and its effects as well as how we can defeat it. At the center of the wheel is the "root of evil", the hub of life. Then, on either side you have the "dark path", which includes ignorance and greed, and the "light path", which will progress you away from the center of the wheel. Around the hub there are six worlds which depict various aspects of the world in which we live including the animal world and the spiritual world. On the outside of the wheel there are 12 cause and effect illustrations such as desire. The beast holding the wheel is called the "monster of impermanence" who symbolizes the transitory nature of all earthly phenomena. Lastly, on the upper left and upper right of the picture you have "the Bodhisattava" who is a sort of god and he is compassionate and weeps for all of us people stuck in the wheel (although he doesn't do anything for us) and then the Buddha who gives us an example to follow so we can reach Nirvana like he did. If you're interested in finding out more do a google search or go [here](#).

The Law of Karma

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

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

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.

The Monastic Order (Sangha)

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.

The Buddha, His Teaching and The Order form The "Three Gems"

When Buddhists worship, they pay respect 3 times by 'wailing' or prostrating themselves 3 times, lighting 3 joss sticks

and declaring that the Buddha, the Teaching and the Order are their refuge.

The Sacred Scriptures

Theravada Buddhism knows three groups of sacred writings called the Tripitaka, "The Three Baskets". They are written in Pali, the sacred Buddhist language. However, they have also been translated into Thai. The total volume is about 11 times larger than the Bible.

Animistic & Brahman Beliefs and Practices

As mentioned previously, Thai Buddhism is syncretistic. The substructure is animistic with belief in spirits and the supernatural.

There are different kinds of spirits, called "phi". Some main categories are as follows:

1. Ghosts of the dead. Most feared are those of people dying an unnatural death. These are malevolent and haunt people. Thais believe that the spirit is set free through cremation and prior to that time are greatly afraid.
2. Property spirits. They are the guardian spirits of property and need to be respected. People build the spirit house for them to dwell in. They believe the spirit will protect and provide help.
3. Guardian spirits. These have influence over a certain territory. Usually spirits of influential residents in the past, like the founder of a city, or a monk who performed miracles. They are worshipped at shrines.
4. Nature spirits. Spirits that live in trees, rivers, mountains, etc.

Supernatural Objects

Powerful Sacred Objects

- Images of the Buddha placed on a shelf in the house or shop for home worship.
- Small objects kept on the body, like Buddha images or sacred amulets.
- Other objects which people wear for protection, success, or for attraction of the opposite sex, etc.

Sacred Cloths

- Holy string, used to ward off spirits, used in wedding ceremonies to unite the couple, and used in funeral ceremonies to lead the spirit of the dead person to heaven, and in the blessing of a new house.
- Holy cloth having magical writings and drawings. These have been blessed by or chanted over by the priest. Used for protection in houses, cars, buses, etc.

Tattoos

Sacred tattooing done by priests is thought to transfer special power to a person to make him strong, invincible, and invulnerable.

Sacred Incantations

Short phrases chanted in Pali invoking supernatural power for healing.

Holy water

Made holy by a special practice and the chanting of the priest. It is used for healing and exorcism and in wedding and funeral ceremonies, as well as when moving into a new house.

Most of the above-mentioned practices have their origin in Brahman religion. Ceremonies concerning the life cycle also come from Brahmanism, since Buddhism did not have the appropriate ceremonies. Also several festival rituals, like Songkran and Loy Krathong, are Brahman in origin, but have been adopted by Buddhism.

Thais frequently visit astrologers to get guidance for important decisions. The astrologer, or Buddhist monk also provides the "auspicious date and time" for important occasions.

Also, Thais will get help from spirit doctors and shamans who attempt to control the spirit world by magical rites, charms and spells. In some cases they become oracles through spirit possession, or function as sorcerers. Most commonly they exorcise sick villagers or evil spirits. Some Buddhist monks fulfill these roles as well.

Religious History

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.

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.

Buddhism in the 21st Century

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.)