

Buddhism Examined in the Light of the Gospel

*(The Thai Buddhist World View From a Christian Perspective,
and Vice-versa)*



Theravada Buddhism: What Is It, and What Are Its Teachings?

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Thailand's State-ordained Socio-cultural
Religious System & Philosophical World View

Theravada Buddhism (*meaning orthodox or conservative*), is the centuries-old, officially-sanctioned, socio-cultural religious system of Thailand. As such, it is the central point of national identification, adhered to by over 94% of all Thai citizens, including 99% of all Isaan people.

Buddhism's Two Main Traditions:

After the passing of the Buddha (*actual name: Siddhattha Gotama*), his followers split into a number of factions, each with its own interpretations of the master's teachings. Buddhism spread rapidly throughout India and Asia during the rule of the missionary-minded King Asoka over the "Indian Empire" (*Buddhist Era circa 200, or circa 300 BC*). At Asoka's death, Buddhism split into two main

schools, one conservative and the other liberal:

1-The older tradition, known as the "Way of the Elders," is also called *Hinayana* or *Theravada* Buddhism. Referred to as the "*Lesser Vehicle*," Hinayana or Theravada is the more-conservative branch of Buddhism, practiced by approximately one-third of all Buddhists. This school is the closest to the Buddha's original teachings, and is adhered to in the countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma--essentially Southeast Asia--but with localized variations.

2-The younger tradition is called *Mahayana* Buddhism. Referred to as the "*Greater Vehicle*," Mahayana is the more-liberal school of Buddhism, adhered to approximately two-thirds of all Buddhists. It first arose in India and later spread to become the pan-Asiatic form of Buddhism, predominant in Nepal, China, Japan, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, as well as Tibet, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam--essentially throughout Central and Eastern Asia. Later, Mahayana Buddhism divided into six sub-schools: *Madhyamika*, *Yogacara*, *Avatamsaka*, *Pure Land*, *Tantrism*, and finally *Zen*, which is probably the most recognized name.

How does Thai (Theravada) Buddhism differ from Christianity? First and foremost, Buddhism, in whatever form, holds absolutely *no* relationship



or resemblance to Biblically-based Christianity whatsoever. Although some of Buddhism's concepts may sound similar on the surface, they are not to be construed with Biblical truths. Why not? In Theravada Buddhism, there is no God, Supreme Creator, Savior, or Righteous Judge who watches over all, including the affairs of men. Furthermore, Buddhist teachings and beliefs are essentially of human origin, based solely on personal effort and individual attainment, i.e., *works*, apart from grace. Whereas, salvation is from the Lord, and the Gospel is based on God's loving-kindness and grace, apart from human works.

What is Thai Buddhism's goal and theme of salvation? Despite its metaphysical (*abstract or intangible*) and supernatural overtones, Buddhism is essentially a humanistic, self-help philosophy. As such, practically speaking, Theravada Buddhism is a philosophical view of life where the adherent must practice a prescribed set of precepts -- essentially a series of dos and don'ts -- all the while relying on his or her own efforts to accomplish personal self-denial and detachment from the worldly passions, wants, and desires of this life as the only means of attaining salvation from the greatest enemy, i.e., reincarnation back into this life of suffering and pain, according to their Theravada Buddhist teachings.

What are popular misconceptions about Buddhism? Contrary to popular Western misconception, in Theravada Buddhism, the Lord Buddha, although highly venerated, is *not* thought of, or worshiped as *deity*. However, the Buddha (*Enlightened One*) is shown deep reverence and respect as the one who discovered and first trod the Eight-fold Middle Path to "salvation," i.e., the pathway to escape from suffering and reincarnation, providing entrance into the state of "*Nirvana*." Furthermore, contrary to another popular Western assumption, Nirvana is *not* a place of eternal bliss -- such as God's Heavenly Kingdom -- but a *state* of annihilation where one's own being ceases to exist, thus escaping from the endless cycle of reincarnation and earthly suffering. According to tradition, Buddha never encouraged his followers to worship or revere him, but taught them to seek and follow the path of enlightenment for themselves. (*Idolatry and other practices were added later through syncretism -- meaning the infusion and blending of differing systems of thought or belief.*)

What is the origin and general tenets of Buddhism? As a Prince who lived in Northern India over 2,500 years ago, *Siddhattha Gotama* became the "Enlightened One," or *Buddha* while seeking answers to life's dilemmas through meditation. Through this enlightenment, Siddhattha Gotama (*The Buddha*) is said to have discovered or understood the ***Four Noble Truths***, namely that: 1) Suffering is universal; 2) The origin (cause) of suffering is attachment to the passions and things of this life; 3) Cessation of suffering is attainable; 4) The Path to the cessation of suffering is detachment from the passions and things

of this life. Along with the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha is also said to have discovered or visualized the ***Eightfold Noble Path*** of escape (salvation), namely the practice of: 1) right understanding, 2) right thought, 3) right speech, 4) right action, 5) right livelihood, 6) right effort, 7) right mindfulness, and 8) right concentration.

What are Buddhism's roadblocks to understanding the Gospel? In the Buddhist philosophy of salvation God, mercy, love, or grace do not exist. The concept of redemption, forgiveness, and salvation by the Grace of God, apart from human works is totally foreign to Buddhist thinking. This one factor makes it practically impossible for the Thai to understand the Gospel... especially when it is presented through normal evangelistic shortcut methods, namely confronting the Thai with the "Four Spiritual Laws" or the "Romans Road Plan of Salvation." Then, asking them for a "decision for Christ" on the spot!

Why doesn't the normal witnessing approach work with the Thai, and why must be avoided? Mainly, because it confuses them, due to the fact that they do not have a Judeo-Christian world view, which forms an essential foundational basis for understanding the Gospel, and comprehending their own need for Christ, as we do. Yet, God gives wisdom to work around these seemingly insurmountable barriers. Creation-Evangelism, or fill in the blanks, starting from the beginning. More on this subject later.

What are popular expressions of Buddhist thought? The following are three oft-repeated Thai-Buddhist maxims that reveal the works-oriented heart

of Theravada Buddhist philosophy.

- 1) ***"Self is one's own source of dependence"*** (Hard to translate, it implies that: relying on one's own self-effort is the only means of gaining deliverance or salvation).
- 2) ***"Do good - receive good; do ill (evil) - receive ill in return."*** (This adage reflects Buddhism's Merit *versus* Karma principle.)
- 3) ***"All religions teach people to do good (deeds), not to do bad (deeds), therefore all religions are equally good (acceptable)."*** This is the great win-win, I'm-okay-you're-okay, end-all-further-discussion clincher. It is most often recited, with a smile, in the face of every missionary's well-intended attempt to share the Good News. The unspoken message behind that illusive smile? Our religion is better than Christianity, in that it is older. Also, it has more logic and reason behind it. So go home if you like, because your religion is confusing, and makes no sense to us whatsoever. Read on to learn more...

What is Buddhism's Merit/Karma principle? In the light of this, the Buddhist teaching of making **Merit** (*positive behavior, good deeds or actions*) *versus* **Karma** (*negative behavior, wrongful deeds or actions*), mixed with the Thais' natural superstitious bent, causes them to automatically view any good fortune that comes their way as being a direct result of some good deed they may have done, either in this present life-span, or in a past incarnation, which is now returning to reward them in kind. Conversely, if a calamity or misfortune befalls a person, it obviously means that he or she must have performed some bad deed during

this present life-span, or possibly lived an evil existence in a past incarnation. Thus, when the missionary states implicitly to a Thai person: *"Do you that Jesus died and shed His Blood to pay the redemptive price for your sins and mine on the Cross,"* they know better in the light of their Buddhist world view ...

How does Buddhism's Merit/Karma principle influence the Thais' perception of the Gospel message? According to the average Thai Buddhist, it's quite obvious that Jesus died for His own sins, not anyone else's sins, leastwise theirs. How so? Jesus, as "good" a person as He may have been during His earthly incarnation as the prophet and teacher who initiated Christianity, the Westerners' "Religion," Jesus surely must have done something terribly bad in one of His past incarnations... whereupon He became bound by the chains of Karma: "Do good, receive good--do bad, receive bad" (*or, You reap what you sow*). With that in mind, any good Thai Buddhist knows instinctively that the violent suffering and crucifixion Jesus underwent when He died that horrible death on the Cross was merely Karmic retribution for His own bad deeds or wrongful actions, which He must have committed in a former life.

Did you know the following facts about Thai Buddhism? Buddhism is a set of rules, based entirely on human effort. Its teachings have no concept of a personal soul, spirit world, Creator (*Intelligent Designer*), or Supreme Being to whom one may pray to, trust in and rely upon for strength, wisdom, grace and forgiveness -- or to whom one is ultimately accountable. Literally, it is an abstract view of life and reality where its adherents are taught that nothing real

is actually real. And, that everyone must depend on his or her own intuitive interpretation of things and self-effort to escape reincarnation's relentless cycle of birth, death and rebirth back into life, with its inherent pain and troubles.

What is the ultimate goal of Buddhism? The ultimate goal of Buddhism is not to try to gain "Heaven" (a temporary lesser place, as they perceive it), but to escape reincarnation's surly bonds forever by earning their own passage into "Nirvana," a state of annihilation where one ceases to exist--earned nothingness through good deeds and self denial. Why so? To attain the only perceived means of escape from the enemy. What enemy? Reincarnation, along with its endless cycle of rebirths back into this world's meagerly existence, with all of its inherent pain, sorrow, and suffering. In short, the goal of Thai Buddhism is eradication!

Is Thai Buddhism textbook pure? If not, why not? The general mode of thinking throughout Thailand is: "to be Thai is to be Buddhist," period, end of subject. Consequently, any Thai or Isan person who chooses to embrace Christ immediately becomes a social outcast or misfit, and is considered to have forfeited his or her Thai-Buddhist birthright for a lesser-valued *"foreigner's religion."* However, Thai Buddhism is not textbook pure, but is "spiced up" with a generous mixture of Brahmanism, Animism, and superstitious folk beliefs. This blending of various beliefs is called syncretism. Notwithstanding, the total belief-package forms a powerful socio-cultural point of identification that is not easily breached.

With that in view -- never-mind the Thais' favorite all-

inclusive adages about all religions being equal, and having good moral teachings -- the social rejection factor can be intense for those who dwell in a small town or village environment, where people live in a very tightly-knit, mutually-reliant, lock-step society. There, the pressure to conform is much greater, and the social rejection factor much higher if a person or family accepts Christ. It can almost be compared to a labor strike, where someone decides to "betray the mutual cause" by breaking through union picket lines to go back to work. Like the "Scab" that decides to walk past picket lines, intense hatred often occurs against the fellow-Thai citizen who deserts his or her Buddhist birthright and embraces Christ.

In these situations, retribution may occur in the form of property destruction, unjust treatment, and thinly-veiled threats, but hardly ever extreme physical violence unto death. Normally though, the intensity only lasts for a few months to a couple years, which can seem like a lifetime for those who are used to a tightly-knit societal lifestyle. However, once things have calmed down, others (*relatives, friends and neighbors*) often become interested in investigating the claims of the Gospel, having had a chance to observe the joy-filled changed lives, and the benefits of not having to live a fearful, toe-the-line existence to superstitious beliefs, or meet the ancestral spirits' incessant demands. Conversely, for the city-dweller who accepts Christ, any rejection is normally not nearly as intense, or impacting, since city life is less cohesive and thus much less demanding along these lines -- where one can more-easily become incognito and self-reliant, if need be.

What are the historical beginnings of Biblical Christianity in Thailand? Biblical Christianity is believed to have been first introduced into the Kingdom of Siam (*Thailand's former name*) nearly 200 years ago through the influence of the Baptist Missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson and his wife Ann (Nancy) Hasseltine Judson. The Judsons first arrived in Siam in 1813. They compiled the very first Siamese (Thai) dictionary, and translated the Gospel of Matthew into the Thai/Siamese language in 1819. Their first convert to Christianity, a Karen tribal man named *Ko Tha Byu*, was said to be like gold hidden under a thick layer of tarnish. After having lived a life of robbing and murdering, he was rescued from slavery by the Judsons, and later converted and was baptized in 1828. Eventually Ko Tha Byu went out to villages to preach. He helped convert a man named Quala, who became one of the most prominent Christian leaders in the 19th century. Later, in the 1860s, Presbyterian missionaries entered Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. Their first Thai convert to Christianity was martyred for his "strange" new beliefs.

Why are Thai Buddhists so resistant to embracing the Gospel message? Even though Biblically-based Christianity has been in Thailand since the early 1800s, it is still considered by most all Thai as being "the foreigner's religion." As such, it is presently adhered to by well-below 1% of the total population, and as low as .01% in many areas, like the Isan region. The Gospel of God's Grace is not readily understood or widely embraced by the Thai, not even to this day. Having been indoctrinated from birth into a works-based human philosophy, few Thai are

convicted by the preaching of the Gospel, since they view Christianity as being merely a system of good works, on a par with Buddhism, only of lesser value.

Buddhism, to the Thai, is not merely their beloved religious heritage, but a strong socio-cultural point of identification -- the cohesive "glue" that bonds them together as a people-group, and makes them "Thai." Thus, in their minds, as previously mentioned, to be a Thai automatically means to be a Buddhist, case closed. Almost every Thai or Isan person, if/when approached with the Gospel, will politely inform you, the "uninitiated," that Christianity is a good religion, since it teaches people to be "good," and in that sense, they readily accept what they mistakenly consider as its "good precepts and teachings," i.e., works, yet they matter-of-factly reject Christ as their sin-bearing Savior. Hence, in actuality they view Christianity in all its forms as being merely the foreigners religion (*which it is in many cases*), i.e., good for the foreigners, but not for them.

Pictured above in their bright saffron robes, young Thai-Isan boys between the age of eight to nineteen (8-19) have entered the monkhood as *nanes*, or novice apprentices. When they reach the age of twenty (20), they can be ordained into the priesthood as adult monks, as the monk below has done. Novices must adhere to a behavioral code of ten (10) prohibitive precepts, while adult monks must observe a regimen of two-hundred twenty-seven (227) precepts. These precepts are memorized by rote in the Pali language, an ancient language and script considered sacred to Thai Buddhism, as Latin is (*or was*) to Catholicism.



NEW Salvation Buddhist-style: the Eight-Fold Middle Path to Nirvana:

FOREWORD: Things to keep in mind...

- Note: The term "Middle Path" refers to avoiding practices that are on the one hand, extremely harsh or austere in nature (i.e., self-punishment or asceticism), while on the other hand, avoiding the benefits and pleasures of life.
- First, the uninitiated Westerner

(you and I) must understand that Buddhist teachings include absolutely NO concept of a Supreme Being to whom adherents are accountable, or a Creator God and His Creation. In fact, in the light of the success of Creation Evangelism techniques (*begin witnessing by starting with Creation and Origins*), Buddhist monks have recently begun to adamantly deny these Biblical facts as a countermeasure against the in-roads of Biblical Christianity. Consequently, the message of the Gospel is automatically interpreted by them as merely another set of behavioral-oriented philosophies or "Golden Rules" to be practiced (*religious works or self-effort*). This short-sighted view reduces the universal Messiahship and Deity of Jesus Christ to being just another religious Guru. (*In this case, the foreigner's religious prophet or teacher.*)

NOTE: Introductory corrective teaching needs to be focused on Creation and the Creator, His Character, the Temptation, the Fall, the Curse (of

death), and the promised Messiah. This provides a basis for right understanding and clears things up immensely in the minds of the hearers -- which means that any reference to Jesus' Name and the Gospel must be kept until later, until God's rightful place as Creator, Owner and Sustainer of all life is established in the minds of the hearer.

- Second, to understand the devoted Buddhist mindset and expressionless demeanor, one must have an understanding of Buddhism's "*Four Noble Truths*" and the "*Eight-fold Path*." Also, the *Buddhist concepts of non-self, impermanence, and personal denial.*
- Third, by adhering to the "*Path to Higher Consciousness*," (seen below) it is taught that one will transcend to a higher plane of intuitive wisdom, insight and knowledge. Thus, by shedding one's self of all ill will, negative thoughts and deeds, corrupt addictions and fleshly cravings, and by realizing one's true sense of "self-reality," one can pierce through the shell of earthly ignorance and delusion, and thus escape the Karmic cycle of reincarnation to enter the highest state, i.e., Nirvana.

NOTE: The state of Nirvana CANNOT be likened to God's Heaven (place of dwelling) as mentioned in the Bible where the Redeemed live eternally with God in a state of eternal, sinless bliss, but a state where one's personal entity, i.e., self, ceases to exist. This is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, to escape Reincarnation's cycle of re-births -- likened to a floating soap bubble that pops and disappears into thin air, never to return.

THE BUDDHIST MIDDLE-PATH TO HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS:

- *Point #1 Right Understanding:* i.e., Knowledge of the Four Noble Truths:
 - *Truth #1* All in existence is impermanent and as such is inherently ill (bad) and corrupt and detachable from one's true self or "*automa*";
 - *Truth #2* All that is ill and corrupt is delusional, based on ignorance and perpetuated by fleshly cravings;
 - *Truth #3* Cessation of all ill and corrupt cravings brings an end to all reincarnations, thus attaining Nirvana;
 - *Truth #4* Nirvana is the absolute, changeless, permanent state of perfection -- the attainment of self-realization and true wisdom.
- *Point #2 Right Aims:* Aspire to attain realization of Nirvana, i.e., perfect wisdom, the ultimate true permanent reality.
- *Point #3 Right Speech:* Abstain from all lying, falsehoods, evil, abusive and frivolous speech.
- *Point #4 Right Actions:* Abstain from all acts causing the cessation of life, from all stealing, from all sensual pleasure, from all evil acts, from all forms of intoxication.
- *Point #5 Right Living:* Abstain from all evil living and all manner of ill-gotten gain or means of livelihood.
- *Point #6 Right Effort:* Abstain from all evil states of mind; foster and maintain virtuous states of mind; compassion, pity, sympathy, calmness and tranquility
- *Point #7 Right Mindedness:* Regard everything as being impermanent, ill and corrupt: i.e., all feelings, perceptions, inclinations, consciousness, thoughts, mental

states, mental images and mental activities.

- **Point #8 Right Concentration:** Foster dispassion, detachment, and revulsion for the things of the world as being decaying and impermanent. Practice aloofness from evil states of mind, from the senses, and all sensations. Practice dwelling in solitude and seclusion, meditating and reflecting with singleness of mind.

CONCLUSION:

As one attains to these higher states of self-enlightenment of mind and consciousness, the illusory nature of one's transitory surroundings becomes clearly perceived, both intuitively and through one's own efforts, directed by the knowledge of the Four Noble

Truths. Consequently, the true state of self-reality unfolds and personal enlightenment is reached, the rite of passage into Nirvana's state of blissful perfection. This is all attained by one's own *bootstrap* efforts according to the roughly translated, oft-repeated Buddhist adage, "*Self reliance is one's own source of strength (refuge or salvation).*"

Nirvana (*or Ni-pah-na*), is not a metaphysical or spiritual place of refuge for the soul, but a state where one's person, spirit or soul ceases to exist as an entity. This is said to be attainable after passage



through a series of reincarnation cycles which provide the seeker with repeated opportunities to shed all manner of personal faults and selfish desires. This self cleansing and personal improvement is mandatory before being able to attain entrance into the cosmic pool known as Nirvana.

Thus, the sacred duty of every Thai Buddhist Monk, by definition, is to: keep the two-hundred twenty-eight mandatory rules all monks are required to observe (*as opposed to only five and/or eight for the laity*); study the Buddhist writings; recite the Buddhist precepts in Pali daily -- for themselves and the laity to hear and heed; offer chants of blessing at weddings, funerals and other auspicious occasions (*such as house warmings or opening new places of business, as well as cleansing and purifying ceremonies*); offer spiritual wisdom and advice (*and often hot tips for buying lottery numbers*); help collect funds for Buddhist charities -- usually used to build or improve temple facilities; receive alms from "*the faithful laity,*" who are seeking to build their own merit; groom and maintain the temple grounds; and sit in meditation, reciting their personal mantra.

This is "the path" that all devout Thai Buddhists must trod as they seek to build their own stockpile of merit, while trying to successfully deny their inner-most human passions and emotions, all to achieve personal *enlightenment*, and later escape into the non-existent state of *Nirvana*, never to be reincarnated again. This, following the teachings and example of their highly-revered Lord Buddha and his disciples who, after experiencing multiple reincarnations, it is said, have gone before them to . . . ***Nirvana?***

SIDE NOTE: Interestingly, Thai Buddhist Monks teach the existence of a literal hell (*Narok-Ahwajee*), the

Bottomless Pit (*Khum Narok* or *Haew Ahn Luek*), and the Lake of Fire (*Bueng Fai*). However, they proudly refuse to believe they have any chance of ending up there, since it's reserved for all the "sinner types" who disregard or reject the right living practices (or works righteousness) taught in Buddhism's eight-fold middle path and the Four Noble Truths. Some of their temple grounds or parks feature depictions of grotesque-looking demons and devils gleefully hacking up, spiking, burning, and sawing asunder the live, tormented bodies of fallen sinners, crying out in pain and suffering. Thai culture also teaches the existence of a type of Heaven, as being the dwelling place of the gods (small "G") and of higher angelic-type beings, as well as that of good Buddhists who are progressing on their way to Nirvana (short explanation), **BUT NO SUPREME BEING (ALMIGHTY GOD) ANYWHERE IN SIGHT WITHIN THEIR WORLD VIEW..** So, this is where missionaries need to concentrate in evangelism: Genesis 1:1 first, before mentioning John 3:16...