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(ACTI Research Paper, November 1999)

**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL TO THAI BUDDISTS**  
**BY UNDERSTANDING THAI BUDDHIST'S WORLD VIEW**

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## 1. Introduction

In doing our mission work the most important thing is to communicate to our host country people. If we missionaries do not communicate to people we cannot do anything for our mission. In our communication the most important thing is to understand each other. If we do not understand them or they do not understand us, we cannot actually communicate to them, and the gospel, which we share with them, cannot be accepted by them in real understanding. So misunderstanding may arise in our communication because of miscommunicating to each other, and we probably face difficulties to go on our mission work. We missionaries therefore must seek the way that we can effectively communicate the gospel to our host country people.

For effective communication to our host country, I think, first of all, we must understand the world view of the host country people. Especially when we try to reach a people group who have exactly opposite thinking from Christian world view, we must try to understand their world view. Unless we understand their world view and we approach them through their world view, we cannot make them to understand the gospel and also to be challenged to accept the gospel.

Even though there is freedom of religion and the government allows missionaries to come to serve in their country, Thailand has been known as one of the most difficult countries for missionaries to reach and communicate the gospel. Though 170 years mission history, since the first Protestant missionaries, Carl Gutzloff and Jacob Tomil

arrived in Thailand in 1828<sup>1</sup>, there are just less than 1% Christians in Thailand. A large percentage of Thai Christians are people who live in Northern Thailand - tribal people groups - who have an animistic background.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, actually a very low percentage of Christians live in Buddhist society.

Then, why are there so few Christians in Thai Buddhist society? Why do Thai reports of early Christian missions generally conclude with the appraisal, "They did not understand us."<sup>3</sup> Here, we meet the need to understand their world view. If we missionaries do not understand their world view and seek the entry point, we also might report that they do not understand us.

After two years mission experience (Aug. of 1995 - Jul. of 1997) in Thailand, I also have realized that when missionaries communicate the gospel to a host country people we must understand the world view of the host country people. Because through understanding their world view, we missionaries are able to have some cues for effective communication of the gospel to the host country people. If we do not understand the world view of the host country, however, it probably is easy to miscommunicate to each other and misunderstand each other.

In this research paper, therefore, I would like to consider the main points of Thai Buddhist world view and then the way of effective communication gospel to Thai Buddhists.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel I. Kim, *The Unfinished Mission in Thailand* (Seoul: East-West Center for Missions Research & Development, 1980), pp. 39ff.

<sup>2</sup> Refer the figure about Church growth and Ratio of Bhikkus to Population in *The Unfinished Mission in Thailand* (p. 47). See also pp. 50ff.

<sup>3</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, Frances E. Hudgins (trans. & ed.) (Bangkok;

## 2. Understanding World view

### 2-1. Defining World View

How can we define 'world view'? We can define a world view to be a systematic assumption (or belief) of reality, which constructs the foundation of understanding about our culture or society as well as the universe, rather than a theory or philosophy that is reasoned out.<sup>4</sup> And this world view, in many cases, is composed with traditional religious doctrines or concepts, which have dominated people of the culture or society. These religious doctrines or concepts influence "their special metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience --intellectual, emotional, moral - can be given meaningful form."<sup>5</sup> So we cannot really understand some cultures or behaviors of people, unless we understand their world view.

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Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> David Hesselgrave defines that world view is — "the way we see ourselves in relation to all else." Or, conversely, it is the way we see all else in relation to ourselves!" (David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 126) James Sire says, "--- A world view is a set of presuppositions (or assumption) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world." (James W Sire, *The universe next door: a guide to world views* (Leicester: IVP, 1976) p17) And Kraft says, "--- Worldview, the deep level of culture, is the culturally structured set of assumption (including value and commitments/ allegiances) underlying how people perceive and respond to reality." (Ralph D. Winter & Steven C. Hawthorne (ed.), *Perspectives on the world Christian movement* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), p. 385)

<sup>5</sup> Amara Pongsapich (ed.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View* (Bangkok: Chulalongkon University Press, 1998), pp. 31-32

## 2-2. Characterizing world view

What kind of things can we examine to characterize a world view? We can characterize a world view in terms of observing cultural subsystems - social subsystem, technology subsystem, economics subsystem, religion subsystem, language subsystem and etc.. In this paper, I have dealt with some basic and essential elements of Thai Buddhist world view - God (gods/ <sup>real</sup>supernature), nature, man, time (history) and heaven(nirvana)<sup>6</sup>. I then compare these elements of Thai Buddhist world view with Christian world view.

## Part I. Understanding Thai Buddhist World View

### 3. Thai Buddhist World View (1)

Thailand is known as a Theravada Buddhist country. Their main world view has been dominated by Buddhism. Buddhism is exactly opposite from Christianity. So it is not easy for missionaries to share the gospel with Thai Buddhist. For instance, they have no idea about a personal God who created this world and men and dominates this world with his power, righteousness and wisdom, but they think 'god' is Ignorance which is a cause of our suffering. So in this chapter, first of all, we concentrate on understanding some basic teaching, which is the basis of Thai Buddhist world view.

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<sup>6</sup> See, David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p.129. Sire says that a well rounded world view includes some basic answers about prime reality (God or gods), man, death (including heaven and hell), morality and history. (Sire, *The universe next door*, p18)

### 3-1. Suffering and Karma - essential foundation of Buddhism

From Buddhism, we can realize that there are two core ideas, with which they understand **god**, **man**, and **this world (time/ history)**; these are 'suffering' and 'karma'(cause and effect).

**3-1-1. Suffering:** The central idea of Buddhism was that **Siddharta** Gautama, who is known as Buddha, realized that the life was 'suffering'. Before he left his home for his awakening experience, Gautama made three journeys and saw the suffering of the world in three forms, in which he had never known: a failed old **man**, an invalid racked with pain and a funeral procession with weeping mourners. When he asked what all this meant, the answer was given that this was merely the common fate of all mankind. Then, on his fourth journey, he met a monk, contented and **joyful**, traveling around with a begging bowl. This journey was decisive; it showed him that all life's pleasures and attractions are vain and worthless. So Gautama left his home and family in the night while his wife and child were asleep. He longed to seek true **knowledge**.<sup>7</sup> Therefore suffering (dukkha) is a central and very important concept in Buddhism.

When Gautama was enlightened through meditation, he discovered the Four Noble Truths, which are the knowledge of suffering, the origin of suffering, the destruction of suffering and the way of removing **suffering**.<sup>8</sup> These are the core of Buddhist

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<sup>7</sup> About the life of Buddha, see A Lion Handbook, *The World Religion* (Herts: Lion Pub., 1982), pp. 222-224

<sup>8</sup> A Lion Handbook, *The World Religion*, pp.231-232.

\* The first truth is the knowledge of suffering. This states that all individual existence is miserable and painful. In the Buddha's own words as reported in early writings: 'Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, worry, misery, pain, distress and despair are suffering; not attaining what one desires is suffering.'

philosophy, and Buddhist world view is built on the basis of suffering.

Then what is suffering? In the Buddha's own words, suffering are birth, aging, illness, worry, misery, pain, distress and **despair**.<sup>9</sup> In Buddhist sense, our life itself (and all existence) is suffering. “**In short**”, as Chai Podhisita wrote, “**the** five aggregates of which life is made, namely, corporeality, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness which are the objects of attachment, are all suffering This is the Buddhist view of life or how life is.”<sup>10</sup> So the conception of life in Buddhism is essentially negative, and the central aim of Buddhism is to release eternally from suffering.

**3-1-2. Karma: ‘Karma’** (cause and effect) is very important doctrine of Buddhism. The word ‘**karma**’ means deed or action which is followed by consequence, or action and **reaction**.<sup>11</sup> Originally karma itself has a neutral meaning, so it refers to action in general without connotation of "good" or "bad". And the law of karma operates in both moral and physical dimension of **human**.<sup>12</sup>

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\* The second truth concerns the origin of suffering. Suffering and indeed all existence (since they are the same) has its source in desire and ignorance: 'But what, O monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is that desire (*tanha*) which results in rebirth, that desire bound up with longing and greed, which indulges itself now here, now there; the desire of the senses, the desire to be, the desire to destroy oneself.'

\* The third truth deals with the destruction of suffering. Suffering must be totally extinguished; there is to be no remainder. The central aim of Buddhism is to give eternal release from suffering. This means being freed from the endless cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) and entering the blessed state of nirvana.

\* The fourth truth indicates the way to this removal of suffering. This is by means of the Noble Eightfold Path, which formed Gautama's basic teaching on Buddhist life-style.

<sup>9</sup> See *The World Religion*, p. 232.

<sup>10</sup> Amara Pongsapich (ed.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, p. 33

<sup>11</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Chai Podhisita writes, “Karma refers to volitional action. According to Buddhism, action may be categorized as physical (*kaya kamma*), verbal (*vaci kamma*), and mental (*mano kamma*), according to the

Every Buddhist believes that every existence is born and extinguished according to the power of karma. So they think that they do not need to do anything with God, because the **principle** of karma will produce the **consequences**.<sup>13</sup> Petchsongkram wrote,

“--- karma — takes the place of God and, in Buddhist understanding, renders God unnecessary. We were born because karma sent us into the world. The **first** cause of rebirth is sin. The desire to sin arose in us, we did it, it set karma in motion. Whether much or little, it brings consequences of which there are three parts: sin (kilesa- ), karma ( ), consequences ( ). These three together form a circle ---.”<sup>14</sup>

So man, and also every existence, is under the cycle of rebirth because of **karma**, and their(Buddhists) ultimate purpose is to be free from karma and to enter nirvana.

### 3-2. Creator - Ignorance

Buddhism has no concept of the living and personal God like Christianity. Buddhists believe that if there is a god it probably is ‘**Ignorance**’ and this ‘**Ignorance**’ is creator of this **world**.<sup>15</sup> If there is God the creator who is a righteous and holy, they think, there should be no **suffering**, but there is suffering in the world. The Thai word for God, which Christians use in Thailand, is ‘**Phra Chao**’, and this name indicates that he is

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channel through which it is performed.” (Amara Pongsapich (ed.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, p. 35)

<sup>13</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, Frances E. Hudgins (trans. & ed.) (Bangkok: Thai Gospel Press, 1975), p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> “In Buddhism Ignorance is called the creator of the world. This conclusion is based on the premise that if an effect is bad then it comes from a cause that is bad. Ignorance, therefore, is considered the cause of creation. In the eleven links in the chain of cause, Ignorance is the first.” (Wan Petchsongkram, *How to Communicate the Christian Message to a Buddhist*, Central Thai language committee of OMF (ed.), Clues to Thai Culture and to Cross Cultural Adjustment, communication and Innovation (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1981), p. 55)

glorious, majestic and pure. But Thai Buddhists realize that the world he has created indicates the opposite. So, they conclude that the creator of this world is none other than 'Ignorance'.<sup>16</sup>

In another sense, karma is god. Because there is a being through the law of karma. Buddhists believe that karma is the cause of rebirth. So God is combination of ignorance and karma.<sup>17</sup> In the sense of creator, god is ignorance, and in the sense of providence, he is karma. Buddhism, therefore, teaches that this God should be conquered and destroyed. Buddhists do not worship god but want to be free from his power. Because, they believe, god (Ignorance and karma) gives them suffering and rebirth.<sup>18</sup>

### 3-3. Man and World - product of Ignorance

**3-3-1. Man:** Buddhists believe that 'Ignorance' is the cause of our body coming into being<sup>19</sup> and that man lives under the law of karma. Man is not a permanent being and struggles with suffering. Buddhists, therefore, believe that man has no value and no 'self'.<sup>20</sup> So Chai Podhisita wrote;

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<sup>16</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> "Buddhadasa has also said that God is the law of karma ( ) and that all being have karma in themselves; the god who punishes and rewards them is karma. Therefore, for Buddhadasa, God is a combination of nescience ( ) and karma." (Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, pp. 70-71.)

<sup>18</sup> See, Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, pp. 69-71

<sup>19</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *How to Communicate the Christian Message to a Buddhist*, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> About the meaning of man, Wan Petchsongkram wrote, " Buddhadasa has answered — Man has life in order to struggle, to wrest him- self free of the trap of suffering in which he is caught, by destroying the god who created him. His goal is to escape from the hand of his maker, or from the great heap of suffering

**salvation** to free himself from his attachment (desire) within this world. And they also believe that when they live according to the Buddhist teaching and are enlightened, they will go to Nirvana. So in Buddhism, salvation comes through wisdom (**enlightenment**)<sup>24</sup> which make people free from the law of karma.

**3-3-2. World:** This world, Buddhists believe, exists as a result of multiple causes and conditions. At the same time it is a contributing cause to its own effect and thus helps form its own future, There is no escape from this law of karma (cause and effect) short of nirvana. Nothing - neither man nor beast, neither mountain nor star - has its own separate and distinct existence. So time (history) is in the cycle, and every existence is linked with the law of karma.

Buddhism divides this world into two levels of reality. At one level is the empirical world of everyday experience, the phenomenal world. At another level is that world composed of and defined by moral qualities, the **karmically** conditioned level of reality. The phenomenal world is a world of '**Ignorance**'.<sup>25</sup> So Buddhists want to escape from this world of ignorance, which has been suffering and has cycled under the karma, to

<sup>24</sup> In third night of meditation under the Bo-tree, Gautama discovered that the origin of suffering was desire (**tanha**), which results in rebirth, - the desire of the senses, the desire to be and the desire to destroy oneself. And He discovered that man could remove suffering by means of the Eightfold Path, which formed Gautama's basic teaching on Buddhist life- style. This Eightfold Path deals with three main issues, namely morality (right speech, right action and right occupation), spiritual discipline (right effort, right mindfulness and right composure) and insight (right knowledge and right attitude). It is a middle way, avoiding both the extreme of self-motification or asceticism, and the extreme of sensuality, of giving oneself up to every impulse. This middle way offers a demanding life-style that is both practical and balanced. (See, A Lion Handbook, *The World Religion*, pp.231-233).

<sup>25</sup> See, A. Thomas Kirsch, *The Thai Buddhist Quest for Merit*; Central Thai language committee of OMF (ed.). Clues to Thai Culture and to Cross Cultural Adjustment, communication and Innovation (Bangkok:

Nirvana, where is no rebirth and no suffering.

### 3-4. Nirvana - the way of freedom from suffering

Chai Podhisita Writes, “Ideally, the aim of all Buddhists is to free themselves from suffering. The ultimate freedom from suffering is achieved only when one attains nirvana.”<sup>26</sup> Then what is ‘Nirvana’? Wan Petchsongkram says, “--- Nibbana ( นิบฺบาน ) is not described as a place, but as a state of being.”<sup>27</sup> And it can be

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characterized in five ways: “It is freedom from tanha ( ตัณหา ) ; freedom from anxiety, grasping, old age, and death; freedom from all physical distress; freedom from rebirth, correction, and avijja( อวิชชา ); freedom from raga ( ราคะ ), dosa ( โสกะ ), and moha ( มโหระ ).”<sup>29</sup> The Tripitaka, an early Buddhist scripture, describes it: ‘Nirvana is the area where there is no earth, water, fire and air; it is not the region of infinite space, nor that of infinite consciousness; it is not the region of nothing at all, nor the border between distinguishing and not distinguishing; not this world nor the other world; where there is neither sun nor moon. I will not call it coming and going, nor standing still, nor fading away nor beginning. It is without foundation, without continuation and without stopping.

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Kanok Bannasan, 1981), p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> Amara Pongsapich (ed.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 156.

<sup>28</sup> “Freedom from tanha( ตัณหา ) means that one has separated himself from all grasping or craving of which there are three major varieties: sexual desire ( ราคะ ), personal ambition ( โสกะ ), and hoplessness ( มโหระ ). To have conquered all three is to attain Nibbana ( นิบฺบาน ), for these three are the root cause of sin.” (Bo Tree, 155)

<sup>29</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 155.

‘Raga’ means ‘passion’, ‘dosa’ means ‘anger’ and ‘moha’ means ‘delusion’. These three fires are product of ignorance They must be extinguished, and when this has been done, one has attained nirvana (See, Bo

It is the end of suffering .<sup>30</sup> So it can only be defined by negatives.

Therefore in nirvana, as Buddhists believe, there is no rebirth, **re-creating**, no correction and there is no 'self', which is changing and no struggle with suffering. Attachment is terminated and suffering is also terminated. So "in Nibbana, it is said, the whole body will be at peace; there **will** be freedom **from all physical distress**."<sup>31</sup>

Then how can one attain nirvana? Buddhists believe that nirvana is reached only when one achieves a right understanding of the conditional world (including life) and, on the basis of that right **understanding**, disciplines **one's** behavior - physical, verbal and mental - following the path laid down by the Buddha known as the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhism emphasizes that one can attain nirvana or any level of achievement only through one's own effort. This aspect of Buddhism is unique. It has been emphasized by most of the writers and has been thought to have significant influence on Thai world view.<sup>32</sup>

### 3-5. Time (history) - endless cycle

Buddhists do not believe in God who created this world and will judge the universe at a specific time of the future, but believe in 'the law of **karma**' which is the cause of birth and rebirth and of endless circle of time (history). So they have no concept of linear life and history, and no concept of beginning and end in time and history.

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Tree, 158)

<sup>30</sup> A Lion Handbook, *The World Religion*, p.234.

<sup>31</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup> Amara Pongsapich (ed.), *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, pp. 34-35.

According to Buddhist doctrine, their ultimate goal is to escape from Ignorance or the law of karma which is the cause of rebirth. This means that their ultimate goal is to escape from the endless time (history). So to Buddhists time (history) is actually meaningless.

#### **4. Thai Buddhist World View (2)**

In this chapter, I will briefly research about two specific characteristics of Thai Buddhist world view, which are 'karmic Buddhism' and 'merit and demerit'.

##### **4-1. Karmic Buddhism<sup>33</sup>**

As we can see in the previous chapter, ideally, the aim of all Buddhists is to attain nirvana and achieve the ultimate freedom from suffering. Chai Podhisita, however, emphasizes that this is just one aspect of Buddhism, and he calls this aspect "nibbaic Buddhism". And then he refers to another aspect of Buddhism, "karmic Buddhism". This aspect is "largely concerned with existence in this world, that is, with worldly happiness and suffering, good and evil." Central to this aspect is the concepts of karma (kamma). Associated with it are the concepts of merit (punna; kusala, *bun*), and demerit (papa; akusala, *bap*).

The aim of karmic Buddhism is not to be permanently free from suffering, but to achieve a happy future both in this life and the next. The more merit one accumulates, the better future one can expect. The reverse is true in the case of demerit. Thai

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<sup>33</sup>Most of this section on 'karmic Buddhism and 'merit and demerit' I summarized from 'Traditional and Changing Thai World View' (Amara Pongsapich (ed.))

## Part II. Communicating the Gospel to Thai Buddhists

### 5. Difficulties - The Opposite Foundation

Buddhism has an exactly opposite and totally different world **view** from Christianity and there is no meeting point between these two world views. Even though we might have some historical and doctrinal **similarities**<sup>35</sup>, I think, these things do not make sense for understanding each other. Because Buddhism has essentially different **doctrines** and understanding about God, our origin and destinies, time (history) and hope from Christianity's, which are the very foundation of our assumptions (world **view/ belief**) to establish our life style, the way of thinking, attitudes, and **etc.**. So these differences make difficulties which missionaries face to communicate the gospel to the Buddhists.

#### 5-1. About God

We Christian believe in a personal God who created everything in this universe with His wisdom, and also reigns over them with His righteousness and love. Our God is not only *transcendent* as Creator, and as mighty and holy God, but also *immanent* as our father who shows His mercy and love, and as communicator through His revelation (the Bible), and as redeemer who sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for our redemption, and as Sovereign who reigns over the whole universe and also intervenes in our individual lives.

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<sup>35</sup> See Paul A. Eakin, *Buddhism and The Christian Approach to Buddhists in Thailand* (Bangkok: Rajadarnmp Printing Company, 1956), pp. 27-31.; *Christian Witness to Buddhists: Lausanne Occasional*

On the contrary, Buddhism has totally no idea of the God whom we Christians believe in. They have no idea of a God who is personal, who has relationship with people, who shows mercy and love, or who forgives people who confess their sins. They however believe in the law of karma. Their god is karma (or the law of karma), which is the fatal law. It is not personal god. It has no love, mercy and forgiveness. It cannot communicate to people. It cannot help people to attain heaven (nirvana).

On the other hand, Buddhists understand that god is 'Ignorance'.<sup>36</sup> They believe that it is the cause of all things that exist and also the cause of suffering. Because of this god (Ignorance) they exist in this world and struggle with many kinds of suffering. So in Buddhism there is no God who is worthy to receive worship, honor and glory from us, but instead Buddhism teaches that they should conquer and destroy this god (Ignorance).<sup>37</sup>

## 5-2. About **man's origin** and destiny

We Christians believe that God created man in the image of God (Gen 1 :26-27), and nominated him as a ruler over this world (Gen 1:28-30). In the beginning when God created man, man was good in the sight of God. However when the first men, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God's command and sinned against God, they were put under the wrath of God and death (Gen 3:1-19). In consequence of the fall of the first men, our relationship with God has been broken and we have had no right knowledge of God. God, however, showed sinful men His mercy and the way of salvation through his

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*paper, Thailand Report (No. 15) (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980), pp. 5-6.*

<sup>36</sup>Refer to chapter 2-2

covenant, revelation and Jesus Christ. So now when we confess our sin (1Jn 1:9) and believe in Jesus Christ we become the children of God (Jn 1:12), a new creation (2Cor 5:17), and people of the kingdom of God. In Jesus Christ, we are no longer to be in slavery to our destiny and sin, but we can live with new purpose of life: "to the praise of his glorious **grace**" (Eph 1:6).

In Buddhism, however, man is the product of Ignorance and in slavery to karma. They have no concept of man as '**an image of God**' who was created by God. Buddhism teaches that man has '**no-self**', but is just illusion.

Even though they believe that man has no-self and is illusion, Buddhism still teaches that man must depend on himself for his salvation, namely attaining nirvana. This doctrine, "**depend on yourself!**", seems good, but it is just a slogan. They cannot follow it.<sup>38</sup> This is the reason why the popular Buddhism in Thailand became '**karmic Buddhism**'. They have no hope to attain nirvana, and this makes them to seek for the better lives in this life and the next.

So they do not accept Jesus Christ who is the only way to lead us to salvation and also do not have assurance or hope to attain nirvana by themselves, but they still believe in the fatal law of karma and live under the karma, seeking better lives.

### **5-3. About time (history) and hope**

God created '**time**' in the beginning (Gen 1:1) and God will come to judge the universe at a certain time in the future (2Pet 3:10). So there is the beginning of time and

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<sup>37</sup> Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> See Wan Petchsongkram, *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, pp. 18-27

the end of it. In Jesus Christ we can have hope in the future. At that time, the kingdom of God will come to this world and we the believers will go into the kingdom of God. There **will** be no suffering and mourning, no old-age and death in the kingdom of God that will be established in the future. Believing in the name of Jesus Christ, we can live in this world with conviction of salvation. This conviction enables us to overcome our bad environments and destiny. Also to Christians time (history) is meaningful. Because through the process of time (history) the kingdom of God is exploring and growing in this world. So we must pray, "your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:10).

On the contrary, In Buddhism there is just a hopeless circle that is ruled by the law of karma. Their ultimate goal is to escape from karma or Ignorance to nirvana. This means that their goal is to escape from the endless cycle of time (history). So time (history) is meaningless to Buddhists. Buddhists do not want to have "eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

## **6. Entry-point - Clues to Communicating the Gospel**

Through this brief research about the Thai Buddhist world view- about God, man and world, nirvana, and time (history) and the contrast between Christianity and the Buddhist world view, we can see that the Buddhist world view is totally opposite from the Christian's. There is no meeting point between each of these world views. Then how do we missionaries communicate the gospel effectively to them?

## **6-1. Resource of missionaries themselves**

First of all, missionaries themselves who are the subjects of communication are very important. Especially when a missionary try to reach a people group (Thai Buddhists) who have an opposite world view from Christianity, the missionary must try to prove his message to be true through his/her life and attitudes. Through his attitudes, a missionary can stimulate Buddhists thinking (their world view) and give them a starting point to understand Christian faith.

**6-1-1. Importance of Credibility of Missionaries:** Credibility of a missionary is very important for the acceptance of his message as credible. Hesselgrave says, "My experiences with these people lead me to believe that they accept most Christian missionaries as people of *goodwill*. But more than goodwill is required. The additional prerequisites are *integrity* and *credibility*."<sup>39</sup> When I was learning Thai at 'Lopburi Learning Center' (OMF Thailand language Institution) in Lopburi, I also heard about the importance of credibility of missionaries. A missionary told me that Thai people did not believe our talk, but **our** attitudes (credibility). She said that a language teacher who had been a non Christian became a Christian after 10 years observation of missionaries' credibility. This means that through missionaries credibility they understand the gospel to be credible.

**6-1-2. Importance of Showing Love through Personal Relationship:** Through personal relationship with Thai Buddhists, we must show them a living God who loves us. Because of the wrong teaching of Buddhism - doctrine of attachment -about love, they have wrong thinking of love and a wrong practice of love. Usually Thai people

identify love with sexual **relationship**, and they think that that kind of love is sin (attachment). Also 'karma', which is the heart of their belief, cannot give Buddhists love or mercy, but just judge them.

They do not know true love that God shows us through the Bible and in our lives. This is, I believe, a reason why there are many broken families and wrong relationship between the family members in Thai society. So many Thai people are hungry for true love. So when we show true love through personal relationship, they might open their mind and heart and listen to the gospel. We must know that more than 90% of Thai Christians who used to be Buddhists were converted through relationship evangelism, and rarely through a big evangelism **campaign**.<sup>40</sup>

**6-1-3. Importance of Respecting and Listening to Them and Their Religion (Buddhism):** As one way of **pre-evangelism**, I would like to suggest, we must listen to them. We sometimes approach people and try to share our interests (the gospel) with them. And we try to persuade people and prove that our religion (Christianity) is true but their religion (Buddhism) is false. But, as I believe, before we say something about the gospel it is better for us to listen to them. We can **ask**: "What do you believe **in**?", "What kind of doctrine do you believe **in**?", "**What** kind of religious experiences have you **had**?", or "What kind of good teaching is there in your religion (Buddhism)?", etc.. And we should **listen** to them and show our **interest** in to **them**.

What kind of benefit can we have through listening to them and respecting them and their religion? First of all, we can build the relationship with them and also we

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<sup>39</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally*, p.167.

<sup>40</sup> See *Christian Witness to Buddhist*. Lausanne Occasional Papers, p. 13.

may have opportunity to share the gospel with **them**. Secondly, we can understand their thinking and **belief**, and we can prepare the suitable message for them. Thirdly, through our attitude, they may also be interested in us and listen to us and the gospel without being offended.

## **6-2. Preparing Answers to the Questions**

As Wan Petchsongkram suggests, we must have the answers to the questions from Buddhists. (1) For instance, when they ask us this question; “If God who is good and mighty created everything in this world, why is there **suffering** in this **world**?”, how can we give them a good answer? This question is very important to Buddhists. So we should prepare some answers to this kind of question. In this case, it **is** better to start our preaching or sharing from the first part of Genesis. Especially we should deal with Gen. Ch.2 in detail. So we must show that God is not the cause of our suffering, but the first human, Adam and Eve were the cause of suffering. When they disobeyed God (**God’s** command) the relationship between God and man was broken, and suffering came to rule over the human being. This means that after the relationship between God and man was broken, man had been overcome by ‘**Ignorance**’ too. So ‘**our disobedience**’ was the cause of suffering.

(2) We also should prepare to answer about ‘**our salvation**’. We must explain that karma cannot rule over one's destiny and be a cause of anyone's birth or rebirth.

When we say that we can be saved by believing **in** Jesus Christ, they do not understand it totally. It does not make sense to Buddhists. As we can see in previous chapters, Buddhists do not believe **in** God who save us, but believe in the doctrine of

message of Jesus' death on the cross. If they do not understand God's creation and the fall of man, they will never understand the message of the cross. But they might think that Jesus died like that because of the bad karma (bap: sin) of his **last** life. So we need time for progress of their understanding.

If when we present the gospel to the Buddhists we use John 3:16, they do not understand the meaning of that verse. They just think that the Christian God is lower than Buddha and he sinned. They regard that Christian God become '**attached**' to this world because he '**loved**' this world, so they think that God '**sinned**' in the sight of Buddhism. Therefore they might not be impressed by this verse.

When we call God's name in Thai language, normally we use '**Phra Chao**'. But when they call their king, the monks, or sacred things Thai people use the word '**Phra**'. So when Christians call God's name '**Phra Chao**', they do not think of God who is creator, almighty, holy, etc. So, Wan Petchsongkram suggests, "The word "the Lord" should be used (พว: ๙๙๙๙๙๙) which means "the One who owns" instead of the word "God" (พว: ๙๙๙๙๙๙)." <sup>41</sup>

Therefore we need to understand Thai Buddhist teachings(doctrines), thinking and world view. And when we share the gospel with Thai Buddhists, we should explain to them the meaning of the message or terms to be understood.

#### **6-4. Making the gospel to be higher teaching**

When we share the gospel or preach it we should try to make the gospel to be higher teaching than Buddhism. Because when they feel that the gospel or Christianity

## 7. Conclusion

How can we effectively complete ‘the unfinished mission in Thailand’? ‘How can we effectively communicate the gospel to Thai Buddhists?’ One of the important things to communicate the gospel to Thai Buddhists is to understand their world view, which is exactly opposite from Christianity's. As we can see above, if we do not understand their world view we cannot really communicate the gospel to them. If we do not understand their world view and explain the Biblical terms in the way that they can understand in their world view, they understand our message or Biblical terms with very different ideas or opposite thinking. Therefore we should learn their religion (Theravada Buddhism) and their world view, which is based on their religious doctrine. Before we share the gospel, I think, we should be ‘teachable’ not only to learn their language, but also to learn their world view. This is not just the matter of knowledge, but of one of the ways to do spiritual warfare.

Secondly, for communicating the gospel to Thai Buddhists, we should stimulate their world view. When we reach people who have opposite world view from Christianity's, it is very effective to show our message through our attitudes. And, for this, we should also build up personal relationships honestly with them. This is an effective way to make them interested the contents of our belief and to open the door for sharing the gospel.

Thirdly we should be wise to prepare messages for sharing with Thai Buddhists and be well prepared to explain to them the contents of message. Here, I'd like to emphasize again that we must understand their world view and seriously prepare the

messages or answers anticipated to be asked.

Finally we must pray for the Holy Spirit to work in their minds and hearts. Even though we are well prepared **missionaries**, if the Holy Spirit does not work in their mind through our attitudes or messages, we probably have no results and nobody will come back to the Lord. We should pray that there is spiritual revival - including a change of world view - through the word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in Thailand.

*This is a good paper. You  
have done useful research  
and will be able to build  
on this if you want to write  
a book one day.  
Well done!*

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