

Buddhist Monks and Their Role in Today's World

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Just as there are different forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there are different forms of Buddhism. Generally, in any of my talks, I will tell about Theravada Buddhism. This is the form common to Southeast Asia. It is very conservative, and its teachings are limited to the Buddha's original words in Pali (the ancient Buddhist language) and follow the earliest written scriptures. It is called "The Way of the Elders" because of its great age—approximately 2400 years. It is also called "The Lower Vehicle".

Mayayana is the form common to Central Asia—China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam. It probably developed in India a mere 1900 years ago. It is called "The Higher Vehicle" because it is built on earlier teachings, expanding the doctrine in a way that supposedly better responds to the needs of the people.

Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Cambodia, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) are all predominantly Theravadan Buddhist. However, only in Thailand is the government openly supportive of religion and makes information readily available. Ninety-four percent of Thais are Buddhist. At any given period of time, between five and eight percent of all adult Thai men are monks. In Thailand, there are about half a million monks and about 32,000 monasteries.

The Sangha is the holy order of Buddhism, organized on a line similar to that of the State. The Supreme Patriarch, the highest dignitary of the Kingdom, is chosen by the King in consultation with the government. Under him are various boards and councils. The Ministerial Council, in consultation with local people, appoints an abbot for each monastery. Religious appointments in Thailand are based on scholarly achievements, seniority, personal conduct, popularity, and contacts.

The result, as in many other religions – Catholicism, Hassidic Judaism, Mormons – where the leaders are chosen in these ways—the leaders are usually conservative old men, not in tune with younger theologians nor with their lay people. They are satisfied with the status quo.

Tourists' lasting impression of Thailand is of (1) Buddhist temples with their multi-tiered roofs and (2) of its yellow-clad monks seen everywhere—"The Saffron Robes"—Andy called them.

The Wat is the total grounds of the temple, monastery, and other buildings. The Wat generally will contain (1) a Bot (temple), (2) Viharn, assembly halls with the principal Buddha image, which resemble the temple, (3) Chedi or chedis, which are monuments that hold relics of the Buddha and hold the ashes of kings and important monks, (4) Sala, an open-walled structure, a community center, and the monks' dining room, and (5) Kutis, the monks' quarters.

The Wat is the most important institution in rural life in any of the Buddhist countries. Social life revolves around it. It serves as a recreation center, dispensary, school, community center, news agency, and information center. In the country, there are small temples, standing alone, isolated, and seemingly in the middle of nowhere. When we visited one temple in a rural area of Northern Thailand, we noticed women arriving, then sitting down in a group. Some had their needlework, some had their lunch, some had small children. This obviously was their social and news-gathering place. However, large Wats in Bangkok have numerous buildings and as many as six hundred resident monks.

In Christianity or Judaism, becoming a minister or a rabbi requires dedication, ambition, and college and theological studies. There is no special training, preparation, or prerequisite to becoming a monk. Becoming a monk is not a lifelong commitment; a man or boy can wear the robes for months or even years, then return to a non-monastic life.

The Buddhist monkhood welcomes Westerners, quite a few of whom have gone to Buddhist countries to be ordained. A farang (foreigner) who becomes a monk usually commits to a study of Buddhism and much soul-searching. For him, it is a big decision to abandon secular life for a monastic one. Most Western monks are intellectually oriented, well educated, and knowledgeable about Buddhism before being ordained; they are generally sincere, dedicated, and devoted to spiritual cultivation. A Westerner who decides to wear the robes has given it much thought, is strongly and properly motivated and prepared to enjoy the spiritual nourishments and rewards. In turn, his ordination strengthens Buddhism and the monastic order.

In Theravadan Buddhist countries, like Thailand, a man is considered “unfinished” if he has not served, however briefly, as a monk. Therefore, most young men will be ordained, for at least three months, after they complete school and before they marry, in other words, aged 16-25. This period is to prepare a young man for life as a good citizen, a husband, a householder, and family head. He also should experience what the ideal life would be. During this period, he lives under the same conditions as a long-term monk. He leads an austere life, meditates, chants, studies Buddhist teachings, and obeys all the monastic precepts.

Think, for a moment, about young men in the Western world. We see the crimes committed by teenagers in the U.S. In Israel and Palestine, they are stoning each other; in Britain, we see soccer hooligans. In France, the favored pastime of young men is “torching” cars, which, in turn, leads to spreading fires and burning buildings.

What do we hear of young people in Buddhist countries? Very little. In Southeast Asia, the slums are even more depressing, run-down, and dirty than in the West; alcoholism is rampant. Jobs are even more scarce. So why aren't they rioting and looting?

We usually attribute this to strong family structure, tradition, culture, etc. But Buddhism is the backbone of the culture and the family. This is easy to see in comparing the Buddhist youth and the Muslim youth living side-by-side in similar situations in Malaysia and Burma. So, just imagine what would happen in the United States if all young men, after leaving school, were to spend several months away from peer pressure, in spiritual meditation, gaining moral strength?

Back to the monks. Some monks continue in the monastic life; others return to it at other periods of their lives. My daughter-in-law's uncle, despondent over the tragic death of his wife in a motorcycle accident, joined a monastic order and was a monk for many years. I met him last year while he was a monk, visiting his mother. This year, he resigned from his order and returned to secular life in order to care for his aging mother (my daughter-in-law's grandmother) and to resume his secular life.

It is the renunciate monks who will concern us. Such monks fall into two categories: (1) those who live in a monastic community on temple grounds in a town or village, and who are characterized by a practice known as “bariyat” or “thorough learning”. They participate in ceremonies and festivals and counsel and teach members of the local community, and (2) those few monks who live in a solitary, hermitic state removed from society, the “forest” monks, who practice “batibat”, leading highly disciplined lives with a large emphasis on individual meditation.

The renunciate monk is a man of extraordinary character and virtue. He has detached himself from family, from career, from all secular affairs, from the pursuit of money, even the retention of money. He is chaste, he is poor, he has few possessions; only his robes, his alms bowl, his needles and thread, his water strainer. He is a mendicant, dependent almost totally on the beneficence of the lay community.

Temple monks live in austere housing in dormitories on the temple grounds. Monks rise at an early hour, when the temple gongs are sounded—4 or 5 a.m. After attending to their personal toilet, they meditate until it is time—“light enough to see clearly the palm of your hand”—to make their alms rounds. When a monk goes on his rounds, he accepts whatever foods are placed in his alms bowl. He never asks for anything, merely accepts what is offered, standing silently, with eyes lowered, until after the offering is made, when he may chant a brief blessing for the donor. He doesn’t thank those who give him food or show either pleasure or disappointment at what is given, because the food itself is of no concern other than for nourishment. It is the act of giving and allowing to give that is important.

After making their alms rounds, the monks return to their quarters for their morning meal; some will have a second meal, starting shortly after 11 a.m., so that it will be completed before noon. The rest of the day is devoted to meditation, reading, studying, perhaps an afternoon nap, and attendance at twilight ceremonial chantings. His is an austere, ascetic life, in which he has renounced the secular, for the opportunity of a monastic life of contemplation and pursuit of the path. It is usually a life of meditation, chanting, teaching, and study. He shaves his head and eyebrows, symbolic of his rejection of ego and vanity.

Serenity, gentility, and compassion characterize the renunciate monk. He constantly trains himself to detach from anger, to detach from greed, to detach from delusion. He cultivates ethical conduct to a degree seldom attained by laypersons. He regards as practical, meaningful, and mandatory the Buddha’s advice for leading the good life. He cultivates mental discipline. Unlike the layperson who may devote twenty minutes daily to meditation, the monk devotes most of his waking hours to the practice. Meditation is, after all, the essential element of his monastic seclusion.

In addition to renunciate monks, novices live in dormitories of the larger temples. Novices are monks under the age of twenty. Most are sent by their parents because of strong religious beliefs; some are sent by poor parents to improve their lives. These parents know their sons will be fed and cared for and have a unique opportunity to better themselves. Temple education consists of acquiring knowledge of chants, preaching, and general religious instruction. The novices learn to behave like monks; they learn the rules, participate in ceremonies, etc.

I met a young man, now thirty-six years old, who had been a novice from age eleven to age eighteen. He left the monastery at that time because he decided not to lead a celibate, isolated life. He is still a religious man, but he is married, has children, a home, and a good job. He told me that his schooling in the monastery was completely religious and philosophical. The novices were taught to read, write, and speak Pali, the ancient religious language of India, in order to study the Buddha’s teaching in its earliest written forms. He said that he learned no history, science, math, or any other practical subjects. However, this practice is now changing in the temples.

Most monks live lives of quiet meditation. Unlike Christian ministers and priests, they are not activists and generally do not interest themselves in social concerns. They do not read secular literature or newspapers; of course, they have no televisions or radios. Their concerns are entirely spiritual.

What effect does this have on the world? It seems to me that many Christian ministers and priests are so involved with social concerns that they are neglecting the spiritual needs of their parishioners. Could there be a happy medium? Could other religions learn something from the monks? Might a greater influence on spiritual well-being help their congregations become better people, and, thus, improve the state of the world?

The larger Wats contain schools on their grounds. In past times, these schools were especially important in rural areas that did not yet have good public school systems. Nowadays, monastery schools are coming back into favor, as children see and are influenced by violence in their computer games. (Thai television does not show sex, crime, or violence.) Many parents are looking to the monasteries to give their sons a more moral and spiritual education.

The monks, also, are seeing the need for a spiritual education linked to a practical one. The schools are teaching science and modern languages to better equip their students for the modern world. The monastic orders are also realizing that the monks need a broader education in order to be of better service in the cause of Buddhism. Most novices now take formal religious education combined with the regular curriculum of government schools.

In recent years, some monasteries have become much more modern in their thinking. In important temples in provincial capitals, the novice can now study through the high school level. And, if they are successful students, they may be able to attend a Buddhist university in Bangkok. In Chiang Mai, where I was, novices at Wat Sun Dok who are excellent students are allowed to enroll at Chiang Mai University while living in the Wat; these are the students that I met who are trying to improve their English.

However, I must say that most long-standing monks appear to find satisfaction in their present way of life. In terms of career, a long-time monk usually enjoys prestige and respect. His life is not necessarily uncomfortable, and his forsaking many of the pleasures of the world also protects him from much of its suffering and sorrow.

All religions are welcome in Thailand and are given complete freedom of worship. Although Thailand is officially a Buddhist country, citizens are not required to practice or contribute.

The Thai constitution requires that the King be Buddhist. The Royal family serves as an example for the people. The King, as a young man, was ordained for three months after his education, as are all other Thai men. At various points in his life, including this past year, he retreated as a monk for a period of several weeks. Government employees are given three months' leave to serve as monks and are encouraged to do so.

Some government financial support is given for important temples, but almost the entire burden for support of the monks and temples is by private donations. The land and construction of new temples are donated by royalty, wealthy individuals, and the general public. However, all temples and monasteries are State property.

In reality, the religious hierarchy is used as an instrument of the State, serving the interests of national integration and development. Government programs to reach non-Buddhist Hilltribe peoples have been attempted in order to draw them into the mainstream of Thai life through Buddhism. Another program was aimed at remote Thai populations to strengthen their national alliance and to fight communism.

Some monks have been trained for community development activities and sent up-country to promote the welfare of the village populations. These programs have been somewhat successful in Thailand, and many monks, especially the younger, more progressive ones, have embraced these programs. However, identifying monks with political goals and as instruments of the state jeopardizes the unifying element of national religious expression and communality. The identification of some members of the Buddhist hierarchy with the political right and some younger common monks with the left is clearly dangerous to the function of Buddhism as a shared institution. The situation in Burma is different. The monks in Burma refuse to change. Their attitude seems to be "in opposition to what may be termed modernity".

So what of the future for the monks? What reformers and critics want is a revitalized and essential Buddhism replete with messages relevant to modern times. They want to free the monkhood of its political functions and identification with the establishment, especially in the higher ranks, and they want the Sangha to be independent. They would like to rewrite the Buddhist curricula in the schools and to bring Buddhism to life by instilling its timeless message. Moreover, they would like to see the active involvement of monks in the physical welfare of the population. They want community development activities inspired by Buddhist teachings rather than for the sake of the state. In short, dissenters want to reform and reorient the ancient religious heritage.

Critics say that Thai society has lost its direction. They say it has too readily abandoned its old, deeply rooted values and institutions to ape the West. Modern Thai society has developed a fascination with materialism and outward goals of modernization. The critics correlate the supposedly growing weakness of the monkhood with that of society. They feel that Thai society must be saved from its indirection and the excesses of modernization by a return to the pristine values and truths of Buddhism.

A monk is thought to be elevated, set apart from the normal world. The title "Pra" that a monk is given means holy and exalted. When people bow before a monk, it is simply a show of respect; it is thanking the monk for helping to carry on the teachings of the Buddha. Such teachings can make the world better, even if some people choose not to be involved in them. The common people want their monks to remain their religious leaders, their teachers and their moral consciences. They want them to be religious and traditional.

We do know that, in the current social evolution, the importance of moral behavior and meditation must be reconciled with intellectual development, religious reform and social reconstruction. There will be a role for the monkhood in the future.