

Spheres of Transaction in Thai Buddhism

By Timothy D. Hoare

Author's Note: The author is familiar with the Royal Institute System of Thai romanization into English. For the overall benefit of his readers, however, he has opted to employ a more literal transliteration of his own that provides, in the author's opinion, a more accessible pronunciation for the non-speaker. He apologizes for any initial confusion that this might cause the Thai speaker who reads this article.

If the diversity of religious experience and expression share anything, it is that they are both transactional: one offers something in order to receive something. Actions of sacrifice, prayer, devotional study, and even service are ultimately seeking a balance of some kind between self and other. But, while transaction in itself is universal, the *manner* in which transactions are carried out is particular, in that it is necessarily determined by a cultural context. Each one shapes the other: *where* it is determines *how* it is. There is simply no such thing as a pure or "essential" religion. "Doctrine" is abstract when juxtaposed with how it is lived out in a particular culture. Consider the difference between the study of a foreign language in the classroom and the immediacy of learning it "on the street." The classroom is indeed essential for learning the mechanics, but once in-country, one is oftentimes surprised to discover that no one actually talks like that. Such is the case with religion: the culture shapes the manner in which it "talks." Nowhere is this dynamic played out more compellingly than in Buddhist practices in Thailand. What is Thai Buddhism? What makes it "Thai"? It would be far easier to say what Thai Buddhism is *not*, for it *is* so many things—animism, Hinduism, the Monarchy, the monastic community, popular and/or local practices . . . and, of course, Buddhism. As interrelated facets of the Thai cultural landscape, each one contributes to Thai Buddhism's unique identity.

How did this melding of seemingly discrete traditions come about? Indeed, Buddhism alone embodies diverse paths with no "essential" form. I often tell my students that when a founding religious figure passes away (such as the Buddha) and has neglected "to leave a note on the refrigerator" to instruct his/her followers what to do next, disagreements are inevitable. Likewise, Buddhism is no stranger to factionalism. In fourth century BCE India, Buddhism's first internal dispute resulted in the creation of a conservative monastic-centered sect known as the *Sthaviravada* (Sanskrit, "The Way of the Elders"). This faction came to be known by its more familiar Pali name: *Theravada* (pronounced "ter-ra-*vah*-dah").¹ The Buddhism of Thailand is Theravada.²

No visual portfolio of Thailand would be complete without an image or two of a queue of saffron-robed Buddhist monks walking silently down a remote country road or busy city street with their begging bowls. Formally speaking, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand centers on the exemplary lifestyle and discipline of the *Sangha*, or the monastic community. As one who has achieved the highest levels of concentration and wisdom as taught by the Buddha, the monk is afforded the greatest respect of any member of Thai society. Practically speaking, however, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is concerned with the multifaceted and often surprisingly nuanced transactional relationships of that monastic community with the monarchy and the laity, including the latter's diverse ritual practices, both formal and popular. The three entities—Sangha, monarchy, and laity—can be thought of as interactive spheres of transaction in which each is directly or indirectly dependent on the other two.

Thai Buddhism and the Monarchy

By the middle of the third century BCE, Buddhism was well established in India, becoming even more influential when embraced as the state religion by Asoka Maurya, the revered king of India's first true empire, the Maurya dynasty (322–185 BCE). During his reign (273–237 BCE), Asoka authorized the expansion of the Buddhist mission beyond India's borders; for the purposes of our topic, the most notable of these initial destinations was Sri Lanka, where Buddhism was accepted around 200 BCE. By the mid twelfth century CE, the Theravada became the dominant sect in Sri Lanka. Through monastic contacts with Sri Lanka, Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the early Thai kingdom of Sukhothai in the late thirteenth century CE.³ Royal patronage was

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granted to Theravada monks, thereby establishing a unique transactional relationship between religion and state in which each supported the other under the authority of the monarchy. While the monastic communities of many Buddhist sects have historically dissociated themselves from the restrictions of secular and/or political influence, the Theravada developed and grew *through* its relationship with the monarchy.

The monarchic relationship with the Sangha was strengthened by a fundamental concept of Theravada Buddhist doctrine: the political monarch as *Dhammaraja*. *Dhamma* (or the more familiar Sanskrit *dharma*) is the wisdom or teachings of the Buddha, while *raja* (royal) refers to the person of the monarch. The *Dhammaraja* is the morally superior king who rules by Buddhist wisdom and righteousness, as evidenced by his virtuous practice of the *dhamma*. The ultimate image behind the *Dhammaraja*, short of the Buddha himself, was Asoka Maurya, the exemplary Buddhist king. The emulation of Asoka legitimized a ruler as a *Dhammaraja*.⁴ At Sukhothai, Ramkhamhaeng (r. 1275–1317) was the first Thai king to adopt the Asoka-inspired model of the *Dhammaraja*.

Existing prior to and concurrently with Buddhism was another major religious element of the overall "Indianization" of medieval Southeast Asia that must not be overlooked, i.e., Hinduism, which was embraced primarily by the powerful Khmer Empire (Cambodia; c. eighth to fifteenth centuries CE). In contrast to the Buddhist *Dhammaraja*, the Khmer identified with the traditional Hindu concept of the *Devaraja*, or the "god-king" (Sanskrit *deva*, "god," the source of the English "divine"). As an incarnation of powerful Hindu deities such as Vishnu or Shiva, the *Devaraja* was lord of heaven and earth. Surrounded by Brahman ritual protocol, he was isolated from his mortal subjects who rarely if ever saw him in person, although his likeness or other symbolic references to his power pervaded the art and architecture of the region. Even after the rise of Sukhothai, the Khmer influence in monarchy, religion, and visual arts remained strong, particularly in south central Thailand, adjacent to Cambodia.

In the subsequent Thai kingdoms—Ayutthaya (1350–1767), Thonburi (1767–1782), and finally the modern nation-state centered in Bangkok (1782–present)—the concepts of both *Dhammaraja* and *Devaraja* were preserved in varying degrees in that the authority of the Thai monarchy was defined through a peculiar conflation of the two. Virtuous rule (through disciplined practice of the *dhamma*) was indicative of an individual of extraordinary circumstances. But due to the violent fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767, any dynastic "blood lineage" had been broken. The spiritually transcendent quality of the monarchy of the new Bangkok Period thus came to be seen as the result of neither blood nor literal divinity, but of countless previous lives of accumulated merit, as only such an individual could be capable of such virtue. The monarch was not unlike a *bodhisatta* who has achieved the enlightenment of the Buddha, but has willingly forgone *nibbana* (nirvana) in order to continue to serve

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Figure 1. Applying gold leaf to Buddha images at a temple in Ayutthaya. (Photo: Timothy D. Hoare)

with virtue and compassion. His continued practice of the dhamma as the basis of monarchic authority—through the conspicuous support of the Sangha, the commissioning and financing of new temples and Buddha images, etc.—served only to increase the quality of personal charisma that continued to give rise to that authority.⁵

It was through the reforms initiated by King Mongkut (r. 1851–1868) that this identity matured. Immortalized (for good or for ill) in the nineteenth-century literary conceptions of Anna Leonowens and the twentieth-century musical and screenplay “The King and I,” Mongkut was a Buddhist monk for almost thirty years prior to his reign as Rama IV of the current Chakri dynasty. During his monastic years, Mongkut studied the original Pali scriptures and sought to recover a “pure” Buddhism that had, by his assessment, been weakened over the centuries by complacency and compromise. By the time Mongkut became king in 1851, he had instituted a new Buddhist Sangha known as “Those who adhere strictly to the Dhamma” (*Dhammayutinikaya*). This sect served as the impetus for a reformation of the overall Thai Buddhist Sangha during the reign of Mongkut’s son, Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910). By 1902, King Chulalongkorn and his brother, Prince Vajirayan, brought all of the monks of Thailand into a unified Sangha that was governed by a supreme patriarch (*Sangharat*) appointed by the king, as well as Sangha leadership on the provincial level.⁶ Along with leadership, educational curriculum and ordination rules became standardized. Such a hierarchy had never before existed in the Thai Sangha; it was, in effect, a facet of the overall hierarchical structure of the modern nation-state that Chulalongkorn created. When one speaks of the three pillars of Thai nationalism, represented by the three colors of the Thai flag—people/nation (red), Buddhism (white), and monarchy (blue)—it is the Buddhism of the state-recognized Sangha that is indicated. It is the responsibility of the monarch to support the Sangha that, in turn, supports him as the Dhammaraja. Likewise, both monk and monarch serve as examples of dhamma-virtue for the laity.

Thai Buddhism and the Laity

We have looked at the vital relationship between monarchy and Sangha, but what of the laity? As the third of these transactional spheres, what does the typical Thai Buddhist do? Suppose that one were to approach a Thai on the street in Chiang Mai and ask him/her to share some thoughts on Buddhism’s *Four Noble Truths*. It is quite possible that his/her response would be something like, “The Four Noble Truths? You need to ask the monks about that. But let me ask you something—have you made an offering at the temple lately?”

The first thing that a Thai child learns how to do on the path to becoming a responsible Buddhist is to give. Known as *dana* (in Thai, *tahn* ทาน), charitable giving is the most fundamental means of overcoming desire, of letting go. In the *Jataka* (popular traditional tales of the previous lives of the Buddha), we find the story of Vessantara, a prince who, having suffered exile from his kingdom due to a questionable act of charity, continued to give away everything he had—even his wife and children—for the sake of others. He is thus regarded by Theravada Buddhists as the perfected exemplar of *dana*.

But again, religion is a transactional affair: as charitable as it is, the act of giving is also a means of receiving (even Vessantara is ultimately rewarded for his selfless charity). Buddhism teaches that birth, death, and rebirth—even “self”—are but vibrations, or causes and effects, of one another. But even if causal vibrations are themselves insubstantial, they are nonetheless ongoing. In reference to one’s positive or negative volitional actions, this causal continuity is known as *karma* (Thai, *gahn* กรรม). Literally meaning “action” or “doing,” karma affects the disposition of one’s rebirth. It is like a natural law that dwells behind all that we are, have been, and will be. Therefore, “giving” becomes a transactional and volitional vehicle of karma, which results in merit, popularly referred to as “good karma.” In order to achieve it, the primary recipient of lay giving is the Sangha, the essential sphere of transactional merit for the laity. In turn, the monks provide teaching, guidance, and ritual services for the laity. But most importantly, the monk embodies the exemplary discipline of one who has achieved the highest levels of concentration and wisdom as taught by the Buddha. Therefore, in giving to the Sangha, the laity is able to “meritoriously participate” in this energy, so to speak. One could go so far as to say that the essential purpose of the Buddhist monk is simply to “be there” as this energy-field of merit for the laity.

The simplest means of giving to the Sangha is to let the recipient come to the giver. In a daily early-morning ritual known in Thai as *dtahk baht* (ตักบาตร), a group of several monks from a given temple will make the rounds in the village or neighborhood in which their temple is located. Carrying their alms bowls, they will walk from home to home and receive food from the residents, who have usually been preparing it since before dawn. The monks will take these food offerings back to the temple to share with their colleagues for their daily meal. (Theravada monks traditionally eat their main meal of the day before noon.)

The other way to carry out this merit-making transaction is for the giver to go to the recipient, i.e., to travel to the temple, local or otherwise, to make an offering. If it is a long distance, even the effort behind such a journey becomes a meritorious action. Known in Thai as *tahn boon* (ทำบุญ), this on-site offering can take any number of forms, such as the donation of food on an auspicious day or purchasing a small square of gold leaf to apply to one of the temple’s Buddha images (Figure 1). Ideally, merit-making is a private affair; nevertheless, human nature tends to behave otherwise. In the case of gold leaf, there is a famous Thai saying: *Bit tawng lahng pra* (ปิดทองหลังพระ), which means, “Attach the gold to the back of the Buddha.” In other words, give selflessly, but there is no need to make a show of it.

Buddhist festivals and holy days are auspicious occasions for giving and meritorious actions. The three-month Rain Retreat runs from July to October, which is also Thailand’s rainy season. The term is to be taken seriously, for it brings not scattered showers but daily deluges. For this reason, the monks cannot go out each morning with their alms bowls—they must go “into retreat,” or *vassa* (Thai, *pahnseh* พรรษา), and remain in the monastery. The full moon of



Figure 2. A set of pra kreuang, or sacred amulets. (Photo: Timothy D. Hoare)

July is *Wan Kao Pahnsah* (วันเข้าพรรษา), or “the day of entering into retreat,” while the full moon of October is *Wan Awk Pahnsah* (วันออกพรรษา), or “the day of coming out of retreat.” This is followed by the festival known as *Gahtin* (กฐิน), in which the monks receive new robes. As one would expect, it is the responsibility of the laity, as well as a karmic imperative, to make monetary and practical offerings, first in order to see them through their period of seclusion and then to welcome them back into the community.

It is not unusual for new ordinations to take place during the rainy season. In traditional Thai society, an adolescent boy will become a novice monk for at least three months, if not longer. In a rice-planting culture, the rainy season is the initial growing period, during which nothing can be done until both the rain and the growth are completed, so it is quite practical to enter the monastery during this time—in itself another very important meritorious act.

Thai Buddhism and Popular Religiosity

In Thailand, both monarchy and Sangha have wisely remained open to pre-existing local practices that were essential to the popular religiosity of the laity. Herein lies the genius of the Buddhist mission overall: in virtually every venue of its mission, Buddhism never sought to disparage or replace existing beliefs or practices, but to shape itself to the pre-existing context. As expressed in the introduction, it learned “to talk the talk” of its various host cultures, including Thailand.

The Tai who settled in the region of Southeast Asia that is now Thailand were concerned with spiritual forces known as *pee* (ผี), or “ghosts,” whose capacities range from merely mischievous to truly dangerous.⁷ In addition, most living things also embodied spiritual energies or “souls” known as *kwahn* (ขวัญ), whose dispositions were particularly sensitive, especially in transitional states (e.g., illness or life-into-death) when the *kwahn* was unstable.⁸ Transactional rituals ensured the stability and balance between these various interactive worlds. It was into this cultural milieu that both Hinduism and Buddhism made their initial appearances in Southeast Asia. Both of these new religions introduced the idea that one’s immediate experience of assorted spirits and/or souls fell under the umbrella of a larger cosmology. But in contrast to the Hindu notion of an eternal essence (*Brahman*) that pervades the universe, Theravada Buddhism teaches that this universe, as well as one’s immediate experience of it, are mutable and ever-changing, i.e., impermanent. It is therefore natural that the salvation offered by Theravada Buddhism should come to serve as a kind of spiritual foothold, alongside and around a world that is anything but certain. As such, indigenous popular practices were never abandoned but simply secured by a Buddhist anchor.⁹

In Thailand, the informal practices of popular religiosity are so intertwined with those of Theravada Buddhism that it is difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins. Consider, for example, the use of *pra kreuang* (พระเครื่อง), or sacred talismanic amulets (Figure 2). Made of ceramic or metal, an amulet may depict an image of the Buddha, or more often, that of a well-known and revered monk (perhaps an *arhant*) who has passed on but is

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Figure 3. A sahnprapoom, or spirit house, in Chiang Rai. (Photo: Timothy D. Hoare)

believed to have had special qualities or powers.¹⁰ As a form of contagious magic, the amulets are believed to give protection to the owner.¹¹ Some people have only one, while others buy, sell, and trade them, maintaining vast collections.¹²

One of the most intriguing aspects of popular religiosity in Thailand is the reverence for the *jao tee* (เจ้าที่), or “resident spirit.” Widespread throughout Thailand, but particularly in the north and northeast regions, it involves the belief that certain places—rocks, trees, even one’s own backyard—embody animating spiritual forces that require daily care.¹³ It is especially prevalent in agricultural areas where land and environment are vitally important to life and livelihood.

The particular location is usually identified in some visual manner. There might also be a small shrine-like structure within its boundaries, known as a *sahnprapoom* (ศาลพระภูมิ), or a “spirit house,” in which the spirit may comfortably reside (Figure 3). Offerings such as rice, fresh fruit, or even liquor are usually placed on the “porch” of the house daily, along with lighted candles or incense. The sahnprapoom may have any number or variety of small physical images in residence, including Hindu deities such as *Ganesh*, and even a popular media character or two.



Figure 4. Offerings to local jao tee, or spirits of place, in Chiang Rai. (Photo: Timothy D. Hoare)



Figure 5. Offerings to local jao tee—final exam week! (Photo: Timothy D. Hoare)

In the summer and fall of 2008, I spent my sabbatical teaching classes at Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai. Each day on my walk home, I would pass one of these sites. Adjacent to a student dormitory, this particular site is centered on a massive tree that had obviously been there long before the university grew up around it. As shown in the photograph, there is considerable evidence that various offerings have been made to the spirit(s) that resides at this place. Judging by its proximity to the dorm and the array of soft drink bottles gathered at the base of the tree, it is likely that over the years many students have deemed it an important spot to make offerings or prayers for good exam grades and so forth (Figure 4). But note the photograph of the very same place some three months later. It can be clearly seen that the site has undergone some radical landscaping, obviously by the loving hands of some conscientious (or worried?)


students. The remodeling took place just before the two-week period of final exams, and the array of offerings grew and varied as the exam days passed (Figure 5). Even perfect study habits do not rule out alternative modes of assistance.

It would never be presumed that a Thai who makes daily or weekly offerings at such a site is anything less than a good Buddhist. Culturally speaking, Thais are very practical people. Formal or mainstream practices are irrelevant (or at least insufficient) when it comes down to doing what simply needs to be done on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, in a developing culture that over the past quarter-century has fallen prey to the environmental consequences that industrialized countries have come to endure—water pollution, air pollution, land misuse—the jao tee is an ancient reminder that the living forces of land, place, and home are still sacred; and they deserve a heartfelt offering of gratitude now and again.

The list of laity traditional customs could go on—protective yantric tattoos (*sahk yan* สักยันต์), fortune-tellers (*maw doo* หมอดูดุ), spirit doctors who perform exorcisms (*maw riak kwahn* หมอเรียกขวัญ)—all of which are available through many Thai Buddhist temples. And while idealistic monks will encourage the laity to forsake “pointless superstition,” there are just as many monks who will, with the best of intentions, support and even perform such practices as the transactional expressions that lend dimension and vitality to what might otherwise degenerate into a lifeless abstraction or a mere white color on a flag. After all, such services would elicit an offering to the temple in return, thus maintaining the vital transactional relationship between laity and Sangha.

And So . . . Thai Buddhism . . . What Is It?

In the introduction to this article, it was suggested that all religions are transactional in some way and that all religions are shaped by their cultural contexts. What I have sought to demonstrate is that, whatever definitive conclusions we might hope to reach about the nature of Thai Buddhism, there simply is no “textual” or “essential” definition. By no means is this a retreat from the question. At the end of the day, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is *Thai* Buddhism, which is to say that it is a Buddhism shaped by a strong consciousness of transactional balance and merit-making, achieved through the interdependent relationship of the Sangha, the monarchy, and the laity, as well as the latter’s day-to-day interaction with any number of spiritual forces that pervade one’s immediate surroundings. Put another way, *before a Thai is a Buddhist, he/she is a Thai*. And while this “Thai-ness” is something of a homogenous and romanticized cultural construct, one must also remember that it reflects a wide spectrum of ethnicities, popular practices, and transactional spheres, all of which have given Thai Buddhism its particularly fascinating character. ■

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NOTES

1. Pali is the ancient northern Indian language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures.
2. The Theravada, it should be noted, is quite distinct from the more widespread Mahayana, or “larger vehicle,” the more laity-oriented group of sects that became prevalent in China, Korea, and Japan. The most widespread subset of the Mahayana is the Pure Land tradition. The scriptural language of Theravada is Pali, while Sanskrit is the language of the Mahayana tradition.
3. For a more detailed overview of the development of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its migration into Southeast Asia, see Bradley Hawkins, *Introduction to Asian Religions* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 156–61.
4. See Donald Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 64ff.
5. For more in-depth historical analyses of the *Dhammaraja-Devaraja* conflation, see Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles* (Yale University Press, 2006), 17–25, and Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19–21, 31–32.
6. King Chulalongkorn’s Sangha Act of 1902; see *A History of Thailand*, 66–67.
7. “Tai” refers to the ethnicity of the group that migrated into the region from southern China; “Thai” is a purely political construct, associated with Thailand, a modern nation-state that embodies many ethnicities.
8. As something vital to life, even rice has a *kwahn*; note, e.g., the Chinese character for *qi* (*ch’i*), which depicts a sheaf of rice with steam rising from it (its life-force or “breath”).
9. See Charles Keyes, *Thailand, Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 33–35.
10. In the Theravada tradition, an arhant is a monk who has achieved a state of enlightenment within his own lifetime that is the equivalent of nibbana (nirvana) itself. Ever so rare, the state of arhantship is more idealized than realized.
11. “Contagious Magic” is a technical term for any form of “magic” that places one in direct contact with a thing or substance that is believed to contain power.
12. Sacret talismanic amulets became particularly popular, but for all the wrong reasons, dur-

ing the economic crisis of the late 1990s. Tragically, schemes and scams abounded that attempted to sell quick fixes to those who had lost fortunes. See Donald Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 235ff.

13. In contrast to pee, jao are usually not regarded as malevolent or dangerous, as they are simply natural elements of the environment.

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Walking with the Buddha. MaryKnoll Studios. 1996. DVD/VHS, 30 minutes. This film provides an introductory examination of some Thai Buddhist practices and viewpoints. It is available through Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

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