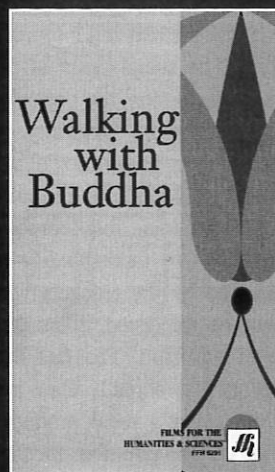


FILM REVIEWS

Walking with Buddha

A MARYKNOLL
PRESENTATION
FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND SCIENCES
BOX 2053
PRINCETON, NJ 08543-2053
800-257-5126
1996. 29 MINUTES



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Walking with Buddha, another film in the Maryknoll series on Asian religions, presents a brief overview of Buddhism in modern-day Thailand. Like the similar film on Buddhism in Japan, *Buddhism and Black Belts*, this film seeks to promote interreligious understanding and mutual respect by highlighting what is most distinctive and most admirable in the Buddhism of a particular culture.

The host, Father Bill Grimm, explains to viewers that Buddhism, like other world religions, functions on two levels: the formal level of theology with its "real teachings" (such as the Four Noble Truths and the doctrine of rebirth) and the popular level, the level of popular religiosity, with its colorful paintings, statues, and folk practices borrowed from non-Buddhist sources. Both levels of Thai Buddhism are explored in this video through Father Grimm's relaxed but thoughtful narration interspersed with statements from lay practitioners, scholars and monks.

Accompanying the narrative is a rich collage of scenes showing aspects of the public religious life of monks and lay people—along with colorful travelogue footage filmed in and around Bangkok. We see an ordination of young monks, a procession of monks receiving their daily food offerings from lay people, and monks chanting, meditating, giving comfort to the sick, and teaching children the alphabet. We see quiet temples beautifully illuminated at night, crowded streets during

the day, brightly painted murals in a neighborhood temple depicting the life of the Buddha, a woman being trained to give therapeutic message, lay people making donations at a temple, a funeral ceremony and the following cremation, the selling of amulets at street stalls, people paying money to set birds free, and scenes of lay people praying and lighting incense in front of miniature roadside "spirit houses."

The film opens by showing various statues of the Buddha. Father Grimm compares this diversity in art to the diversity of Buddhism itself with its three major schools: Mahayana in East Asia, "the Lamaism of Tibet," and Theravada in Southeast Asia. (Vajrayana is not mentioned, an omission I will discuss near the end of the review.) However, according to Grimm, "what is important in a religion is not the art or architecture, or even its teaching, but the way people live their religion."

Father Grimm then explains that in Thailand the Wats, or monasteries, dominate the whole religious, cultural, and social life of the nation. We are invited to visit the monks of Wat Prok in Bangkok, to look in on their daily lives. We are shown some of the common monastic activities mentioned above, such as going for alms, meditating, chanting the sutras, and so on. The scenes of young men preparing for ordination are particularly engaging. Several men in their early twenties are shown throwing coins into a court-

yard where children gleefully vie with one another to pick them up. We next see the young men having their heads shaved and being dressed in new white cloth for the ordination ceremony. We then get to watch part of the ordination ceremony itself, along with their families seated behind them, and we see them receiving their monastic robes and alms bowls as new monks. We are told that most men in Thailand and in other Theravada countries become monks for at least a short period of time while in their twenties.

The religious life of lay people is described briefly, primarily in terms of their support of the monks. By donating food, money, and robes to maintain the monasteries, lay people gain merit which will affect their future births. The offerings help maintain the Wat and its community of monks, who in turn teach the precepts of Buddhism to the laity, and offer them guidance and counseling.

Then the scene shifts to a neighborhood temple, where the life of the Buddha is narrated briefly, illustrated by the brightly colored murals around the temple's walls. The Buddha's teaching is summarized in terms of the Four Noble Truths, "that all life is suffering, that the source of suffering is our selfish desires, and that selfish desires can be eliminated thus ending suffering. The Buddha's fourth noble truth was a way of life that emphasizes compassion, meditation and peacefulness, freeing us from desires, illusions, and selfishness."

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Popular practices of Thai Buddhism are dealt with next. Helen Jandamit, a Western woman associated with the World Federation of Buddhists, explains that such practices as prayers and offerings made at the decorative, miniature spirit houses one sees along the streets in Thailand are tolerated in Buddhism if they make people content and happy, with a positive attitude toward their lives. But in fact, she admits, these spirit houses are not Buddhist at all. The same is true of the use of amulets that have supposedly been given by monks renowned for their compassion or loving kindness. We are told that these practices are related to the animism and Hinduism, or Brahmanism, that predate Buddhism in Thailand. The monk Phra Maha Pittoon, of the Buddhist University, then explains that people should be led gradually to understand that these are "useless practices" and then they should be encouraged to practice the "right path of the Buddha."

Next, Chatsuman Kabilsingh, of the Department of Religion, Tammasat University, explains that "Thai Buddhism is Buddhism, animism, and Brahmanism together, intertwined. So much so, that you have difficulty separating the real Buddhism." If indeed there is a "real" Buddhism. Since, as she explains, once textual Buddhism is put into practice it becomes Thai Buddhism, or Japanese Buddhism, or one of the many schools or sects within Japanese Buddhism.

Ms. Kabilsingh then discusses characteristic attitudes

and practices within Thai Buddhism: the role of prayer and chanting, the status of the Buddha "as a teacher or father" and not as a god, belief in the importance of gaining merit and in the sharing of merit, the positive attitude of Thai Buddhism toward the human body, and the Thai Buddhist belief in rebirth as opposed to the Tibetan Buddhist belief in reincarnation.

The topic then turns to meditation, and Helen Jandamit is again allowed to explain. "Many people misunderstand what meditation is. In Buddhist terms meditation means being here in this moment with awareness." She then cautions that very few people really practice meditation seriously. Despite the widespread popular, often superficial, interest in meditation among young Western people these days, "the number of serious people remains about the same, or the same [small] percentage of the population."

The importance in Buddhist practice of cultivating compassion is then discussed briefly by Kabilsingh, along with the need to help others. "How can you lift yourself alone, when the whole world outside you is sinking?" she asks.

Father Grimm concludes the narration by stressing how Thai Buddhism differs from the theistic religions of the West—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—with their concern for a relationship with a personal God. Yet he affirms that there are things that Westerners can learn from Buddhism, such as its commitment to compassionate action based in contemplation, and its commit-

ment to letting religion influence every aspect of daily life. In keeping with the ideals of Maryknoll missionaries, he feels this should be "a reminder that our own religious traditions do have a contemplative element, an element that should shape and inspire action on behalf of others."

The film's strengths are clear. It portrays with sensitivity and in the words of Thai Buddhists themselves the way formal Buddhist teachings and popular Buddhist practices mingle in the daily lives of Thai Buddhists, both monks and lay people. It presents Buddhism not as a set of abstract doctrines, but as lived experience, and as lived experience Buddhism is shown to take on the unique form of the culture in which it is practiced. By watching the film, the viewer gains an appreciation for Thai culture and its distinctive form of Buddhism.

The film's weaknesses stem from its attempt to cover too much in 29 minutes. It is of necessity rather superficial. It tries to give a basic overview of Buddhism in general as well as of Thai Buddhism in particular. For example, the three vehicles of Buddhism are mentioned, but Vajrayana is referred to simply as "Tibetan Lamaism," thus wrongly implying that this vehicle is identified solely with Tibet. In the brief discussion of meditation, the practice of *vipassana* is not mentioned, and no distinction is made between mindfulness and concentration. "Formal walking meditation" is mentioned, but it is not explained, and we are not shown how it is practiced. The

Noble Eightfold Path is mentioned only indirectly as the fourth noble truth, and is characterized as "compassion, meditation, and peacefulness" rather than in the traditional terms of "wisdom, morality, and meditation."

Although there are many striking scenes in this beautiful film, so much is going on visually that one is distracted from the narration, and sometimes the connection with the narration is unclear. This is partly a matter of personal preference, but I found the slower visual pace of the Hartley Foundation film *I Am a Monk*, about a young American's life in a monastery in Bangkok, more in keeping with the tranquil mood of the Buddhist monastic life and the ideal of mindfulness.

The film is an approachable, well-balanced introduction to Thai Buddhism and is suitable for showing in middle school through college classrooms. It could be shown along with the Maryknoll film on Japanese Buddhism, or with other films on Asian Buddhism, to illustrate the diversity within Buddhism, and its adaptation to local cultures. ■

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