

DECONSTRUCT AND RECALIBRATE

MARIE BAUER

Marie spent over a decade among Buddhist peoples in southeast Asia, wrestling with the barriers that keep people from Christ and seeking to answer the question: What is it going to take to see a movement to Christ? Living among Shan people in villages on the Thai-Burma border changed her perspective forever. Currently her role at the USCWM focuses on research and coaching for Buddhist and Hindu peoples.

Contact:
marie.bauer@
uscwm.org

When I first began my missionary journey in Asia, I was taught Thai Christian vocabulary and was told it would enable me to do ministry in Thailand. I went to church every Sunday as part of my language learning, and built relationships with many wonderful Thai Christians. Some Sundays, older women would get up and dance in traditional Thai style in the aisles during worship. Despite the intense heat and struggle to stay awake for a three-hour service that I did not understand, these dancing ladies gave me a burst of joy.

As the years went on and I continued to live in the Christian bubble, I realized how little I understood of the Buddhist worldview. By this time I was living in an ethnically Shan village on the Thai-Burma border. My interactions with Shan Buddhists seemed to be either very shallow “have you eaten yet?” or debating some aspect of religion, feeling that somehow I needed to prove I was right and they were wrong. I wanted to participate in festivals so that I could learn more about Shan culture and worldview, but the Shan Christians told me I should not go, that it was all about evil spirits. Not wanting to jeopardize my relationship with them, I did not go. I began to realize that most of my training was based on the apologetic approach, i.e. that we need to debate and convince Buddhists of the “truth.” Insight and hope came from two notable exceptions: “Poles Apart,” by John Davis¹ and *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, by Wan Petchsongkram.² These authors’ humble, learning approach resonated with me.

I watched newer Shan Christians struggle; when they became desperate due to family illness or mishap, they often turned to spirit doctors and superstition for help. When a Buddhist family member died, they did not participate in important aspects of the funeral, or if they did, they were made to feel ashamed by the church members. They were forced to make a choice between their family and traditions, and the

church. I felt this was unreasonable and that there must be another way, where family and village could feel honored and reinforced, so that the lifestyle and love of the believer would be an open invitation to follow Christ. I did not have an answer.

I finally realized that these common issues were based on missionaries’ fundamentally faulty assumptions, which needed to be deconstructed. I needed to take a step back and ask the Lord, “How do you want to reach these people whom you created?”

I hope you find a similar challenge here, the first Buddhist-focused issue *Mission Frontiers* has ever published. My hope is that it will spark reflection and fundamental changes in the way we as believers approach Buddhists and how we think of their religion and worldview. Much of what we do is based on assumptions of which we are not even aware, including that we are right and “they” must be wrong, our job then being to correct the wrong. Many missionaries suffer from a hero complex, and I believe this is due to the way we train our missionaries.³ We must remember that God created these people and their culture and that no one culture is “right.” All cultures have aspects that need redemption and aspects that are beautiful preparations and illustrations of who God is. We need to approach others with humility, realizing that we are on a journey together, that we all have a contribution to make. We need each other to help make that contribution as we seek to understand who God is. No one person or group has been given all the light.⁴

There are many types of Buddhist beliefs and practices. This issue focuses on people we identify as Theravada folk Buddhists, even though the people would identify themselves simply as Buddhists. Though Buddha himself taught that there was no supernatural, today’s Theravada folk Buddhists see no conflict between their Buddhist belief and practice, and animism, the belief in spirits. The supernatural

is understood as a reality that affects every aspect of life. I hope that last sentence is true also of us Christians, as it is biblical and helps us bring the gospel to Buddhists.⁵


This issue is not a comprehensive instruction on how to reach

Buddhists to Himself. Then Jay Judson reports on a movement taking place in Myanmar, describing how movement leaders share the good news and do church. Next we have a wonderful infographic from Global Mapping International, giving an overview of the Buddhist

Christian to a movement leader. She describes the movement and how God is reaching Thai Buddhists. This article was also originally written in Thai.

Then we have a wonderful depiction of how to communicate the gospel through traditional Thai art. Sawai Chinnawong is a gifted illustrator and has taken the gospel out of its typical Western presentation and made it Thai.

I hope this issue will challenge you, bless you, and spur you on toward further seeking and action. Many names have been concealed or changed in order to protect those involved in these movements.

Also please check out our online edition for further footnotes and an additional article about patron-client relationships and their impact on how we lead, teach, and work with southeast Asians. 

GOD IS DOING AMAZING THINGS IN THE BUDDHIST WORLD, AND WE NEED TO PAY ATTENTION.

Buddhists, but rather a launching pad for further exploration. There are writers representing three different movements in the Buddhist world, four of them from Theravada Buddhist nations. They are average people who asked themselves the question, “What is it going to take to see large numbers of Buddhists turn to Christ?” They describe how the Lord answered this seeking in their lives. God is doing amazing things in the Buddhist world, and we need to pay attention.

What I love is that God often uses seemingly insignificant, unknown people to start these movements. In these movements, we conclude that it is not more missionaries we need, but rather a few humble people who are open and seeking God passionately for His approach, His way to reach people. One person can start a movement. But it needs to be the person God has called and gifted for the task, and the person who is willing to pay the price to do so. These are the types of missionaries we need today. A few who are ready to give up their own culture, step into another worldview, and radically and fully enter into the lives of others, on a search for where God is already at work.

In the lead article, Chris Bauer takes us on a journey through basic Buddhist concepts and how we can see God at work in them, pointing

world. This is the beginning of a series of infographics that will help clarify and simplify important ideas in future issues.

Message contextualization is next, with an intriguing exploration of how important it is to use terminology that Buddhists understand when communicating the good news. Then in *Old Wineskins?* I tell about my time as a church planter, focusing on the relationship between new believers and the established church. The principles described in this article can also be applied more broadly, to reaching Asian Buddhists here in the Western world, as we consider what it will take for those who come to Christ here to start movements in their home countries. How will this impact how we lead them to Christ and disciple them?

David Stuart then gives some essential practical guidelines for interacting with Theravada Buddhists. Next we hear from another movement leader who articulates some of the theology behind the movement, addressing identity issues. This article was originally written in Thai and has been greatly condensed to fit our format. If you are interested in seeing the full version, write to me.

Jiraphon Serithai’s article gives me goosebumps; she takes us on her journey from being a typical Thai

¹ www.thaicrc.com/collect/MIS/index/assoc/D5672.dir/5672.pdf

² www.herbswanson.com/post/_docs/Bo_Tree.pdf

³ For a good book on this subject, read *We Are Not the Hero* by Jean Johnson.

⁴ www.icc.ac.uk/files/uploads/RMacKenzie-Karl_Ludwig_Reichelt.pdf An example of an historic missionary who used this approach was Karl Reichelt. “What I have experienced through these many years in the sacred hours of conversation with these people has given me the profound conviction that Christ has been working everywhere through all the ages. We should, therefore, gratefully and joyfully use the material which He Himself has prepared for the coming of His Kingdom. That the result is genuinely right is also clear. For Christ Himself has given us the criterion ‘Ye shall know them by their fruits’ (Matt.7:16): a circle of people who through faith in the Lord have been set free from sin, fear and bondage and are now enthusiastically giving up their lives in service for Him.”

⁵ For an overview of the different schools of thought in Buddhism and where they are practiced, see buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/schools1.htm