

The New Buddhists

HOW BUDDHISTS CAN FOLLOW CHRIST

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THE WORD CHRISTIAN: BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

It is inevitable. As soon as a person has converted and believes in Jesus Christ, he or she will be labeled a Christian. This person has suddenly embraced Christianity. Yet we see the word Christian appears only a few times in the New Testament. It was an insult from non-believers. Within the community of faith the believers referred to themselves as saints¹ or children of God.² Only later did they refer to themselves and other followers as Christians. When the term was first adopted by believers they interpreted the meaning to be those belonging to Jesus Christ but when people from other languages and cultures started adopting this term the meaning continued to change.

THE WORD CHRISTIAN: MULTIPLE MEANINGS IN THAILAND

When the Roman Catholics arrived in what is now Thailand, they were called *Khittang*. Later, Protestants were called *Khris-tee-yen*, understood to be different from *Khittang*. Both terms referred to what the foreigners called Christian. Regardless of the term applied, *Khris-tee-yen* or *Khittang*, if they follow only the outward forms, they are merely following cultural expressions of the Western church. For example, someone who attends church each Sunday and doesn't depend upon the grace of God isn't really a child of God.

KHRIS-TEE-YEN (CHRISTIAN): NEGATIVE MEANINGS IN THAILAND

In Thailand today, particularly in the northeastern region, *Khris-tee-yen* brings the following meanings to the hearts and minds of Thai people:

1. A person who follows a foreign religion
2. A person who works for foreigners
3. A person who has sold out his or her nationality to foreigners (Thai people like to say, "Our religion is fine. Why do you need to follow the ways of foreigners?" When we follow another religion it is felt that we have sold out our nationality to others.)
4. A person who has leprosy (The first Thai people who came to believe in Jesus were lepers. Protestant missionaries in those days had projects to help lepers, who then responded to Jesus and entered into Christianity.)
5. A person who has descended from evil spirits (They were expelled from their villages and established new villages later to become Christians.)
6. A person who did not get a proper funeral attended by Buddhist monk (To a Buddhist this means there was no honor given to the deceased and that they would

not be able to go to heaven.³ This perception about the death of Christians prevents many Buddhists from becoming Christians.)

REMOVING CULTURAL BARRIERS

Because the word *Khris-tee-yen* is a barrier that keeps many Thai people from believing in God, some believers in Isaan (Eastern Thailand) no longer use the term. They remove cultural barriers by using one of two alternatives: *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God) and *Puttasasanikachon mai* (New Buddhist).

1. *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God)

We have a model of the term *Luk Phra Chao* (child of God) in the actions of God himself when he allowed his Son Jesus to be incarnated as human flesh in the Jewish culture. He did not bring a new religion as a set of new external forms from outside.⁴ Instead, God brought the Word (Logos, see John 1:1) into the world born as a Jew, using the cultural forms and rituals of the Jews that were in accordance with scripture. The cultural forms and rituals the Jewish religious leaders (Pharisees) and their ancestors created that were not in accordance with the Word of God Jesus objected to completely and denied

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the use. This can be a model for keeping what is in accordance with the word of God within Buddhism.

Following God's approach, when the apostle Paul began his mission to the Gentiles he did not bring the culture of the Jews with him in his message to the Gentiles.⁵ He did not force Gentiles to be circumcised. The ritual of circumcision had nothing to do with salvation from sin and therefore was not required of the Gentiles. Thai people believe they are born as followers of the Buddhist religion. They are Buddhists, as were their ancestors, a view that mirrors the way Jews saw themselves as Jewish along with their ancestors.

However, only a few Thai people truly follow the heart of Buddha's teachings. Buddhists in Thailand actually follow an amalgamation of beliefs, including animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, which blend together into one set of beliefs. None of the three are denied. When Christianity enters into society, Thais attempt to add it to the other three. Rev. Dr. Nantachai Mejudhon has illustrated it like this:

But Christianity, with its roots in Western culture and rituals, cannot be added on top of other Thai beliefs because Thais revere their own traditions and see it as a foreign religion. They believe their own religion is fine. To change is to insult one's ancestors and society.

2. *Puttasasanikachon mai* (a New Buddhist)

The way Thai people can be freed from their sins through Jesus — without building barriers — depends on making a change in the way evangelism is done. Instead of presenting the externals of Christianity (Western church forms), the presenter should follow what is suggested in scripture and allow the Word (Logos) to be the main focus. The message of the gospel must be reborn or re-packaged in the best forms from Thai culture that are in accordance with the gospel. Thai people will believe in Jesus without a need to change religions or without believing in Christianity (the external forms). They can still be Thai Buddhists as before, and follow the traditions of their people that are in accordance with the gospel. Thai people who follow Jesus in this way can be called New Buddhists, not *Khris-tee-yen*.

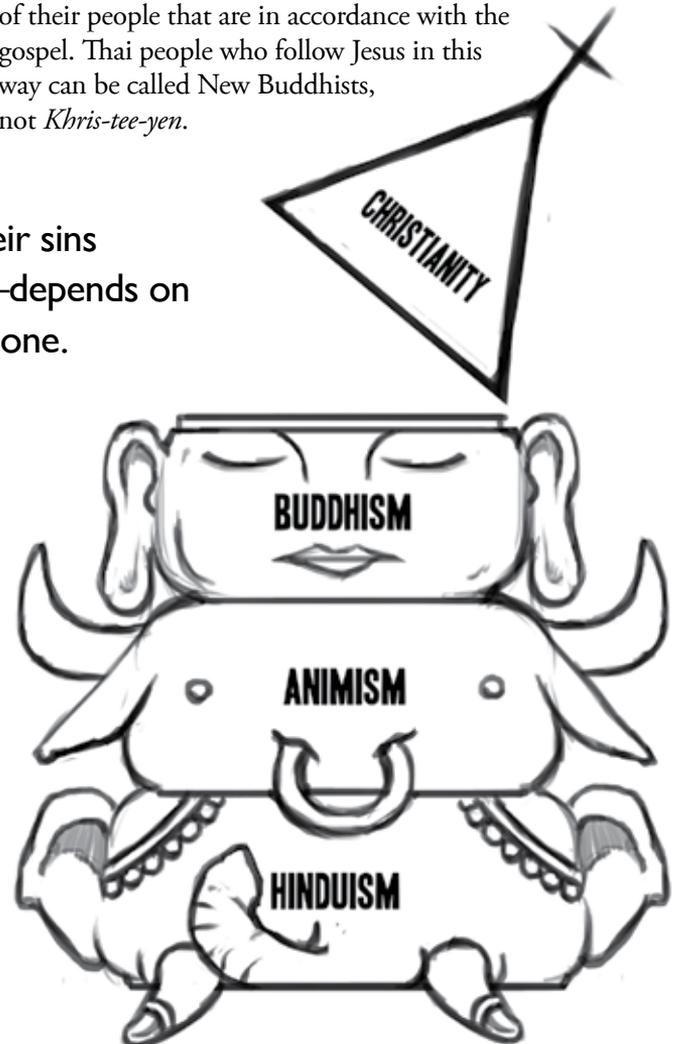


Illustration 29.1

There are two reasons for using the term New Buddhist:

1. Buddhism is incomplete:
 - Those who are followers of Buddhism have not received salvation from their sins.
 - Buddhism teaches that we must depend upon ourselves for everything and that life is suffering.
 - The only way to be released from suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.⁶
2. Buddhists know they cannot keep the teachings of Buddha.

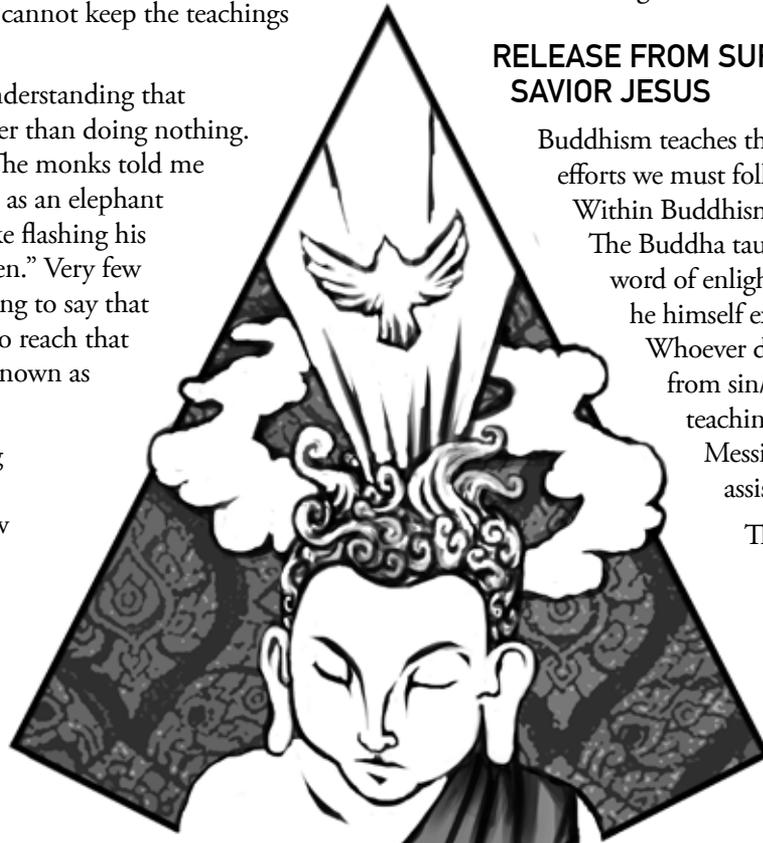
They attempt to do it, understanding that attempting a little is better than doing nothing. My mother once said, “The monks told me that if I did as little good as an elephant wiggling his ear or a snake flashing his tongue, I will go to heaven.” Very few Buddhists would be willing to say that they have done enough to reach that stage of enlightenment known as *nibbana*.⁷

The certainty of attaining *nibbana* is missing in Buddhism, but for a New Buddhist Jesus brought *nibbana* to them.

CHRIST IN THE HEART OF BUDDHISTS

When we understand this issue we can bring the heart message of the gospel to Buddhists. The Bible teaches that all have sinned and Buddhism teaches that all life is suffering. Both have a common origin, the desire for possession (in Genesis 3 the possession of the knowledge of good and evil). A Thai proverb warns that “What is mine is mine, the source of suffering.” This means that the desire for possession is where suffering comes from. It is important to release all desires for possession, which will allow a person to be released from suffering. The problem with people is that in their own power they are unable to disconnect. The root of sin is to cling to everything mine.

The Bible does not teach that just doing wrong is sin but that doing wrong is the result of the sinful nature. Buddhists are not willing to accept that we are born with a sinful nature. However, if we give reasons and examples, we can show that humans are sinful from birth. There is an in-born tendency towards sin because people are inherently self-centric and desire to be great. This is why humans are the enemy of God and ultimately encounter death. Death, therefore, is suffering, as in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.



Thai people who believe in Jesus in cultural forms known as
NEW BUDDHISM

RELEASE FROM SUFFERING AND SIN: SAVIOR JESUS

Buddhism teaches that through our own efforts we must follow and obey the teachings. Within Buddhism there is no Messiah figure. The Buddha taught that he brought the word of enlightenment to others because he himself experienced enlightenment. Whoever desired to be released from sin/suffering must follow his teachings personally. Unlike the Messiah, the Buddha cannot assist anyone in the process.

The problem is, no person has the individual potential to do enough to escape death and suffering. Therefore, humans must rely on God to assist us since we are unable to do it ourselves. Jesus died and paid the debt of sin and suffering to God because “...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ

Jesus.” (Rom. 6:23, NIV) Jesus was victorious over death in the place of all humans. Anyone who believes in this will be released from sin and suffering. There is no need to change the external forms or religions. This completes what is unfulfilled in Buddhism. These believers are still Thai people according to rituals and customs as they were before.

Teachings of the Buddha that are incomplete must be replaced with Scripture. For example: the teaching of the dependence upon self in order to reach *nibbana* will

be replaced with the scriptural teaching that says that humans are not able to depend upon themselves; humans are sinful and therefore human life is suffering. Effort for doing good is insufficient for *nibbana*. To use Christian terms, the good deeds of humans are insufficient to reach God. Therefore it is necessary to find a new way. The new way to reach *nibbana* or God himself is Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

CHRIST, NOT A CULTURAL FORM, SAVES THAI BELIEVERS

Therefore, those who believe in Jesus in Eastern societies, particularly Thai society, do not need to change the external forms of their religion or replace them with Western external religious forms. Christianity in and of itself cannot save. Jesus is the only one who can do this. He is the way. He can be in any cultural form or expression because all cultural forms come from the Creator.

THE GOOD NEWS REBORN IN EASTERN EXPRESSION

For Eastern people, to understand and accept the true heart of the gospel without any barriers, we must allow the good news, or the *thamma*,⁸ to be reborn in the forms and cultural expressions of Eastern people. In the Thai Buddhist context, we can easily explain the meaning of the release from sin and suffering using the teachings of Buddha himself. This is another reason why these followers of Christ can be called New Buddhists.

I have never told someone who did not know beforehand that I was a Christian or that I followed Christianity. Instead, I have told people that I am a New Buddhist. I do this because if I were to say to people that I am a Christian, people would have no further interest in pursuing a friendship with me or spending time with me. Opportunities to share what it means to be released from the result of sin and suffering would no longer be available. However, if I say that I am a New Buddhist people ask, “How does this differ from the old Buddhism?” I then have an opportunity to explain what the difference is between the old and the New Buddhism. In the old Buddhism I had to depend completely upon myself. New Buddhism means complete dependence upon God and his grace as expressed through his Son Jesus Christ. If we depend upon the grace of God, we will receive salvation from our sins. We will be released from our suffering to reach *nibbana* which is equivalent to being with God in Christian terms.

Therefore, the person who is a New Buddhist is a person who knows that the source of life is God Himself and that she will see God in the end, free from suffering. Aside from this, the person is awakened and conscious of what is happening to him. The person being awakened refers to one who does not fool himself with any animistic practices. Blind belief or belief without any foundation of reason is an animistic form of belief which was also rejected by Buddha himself.⁹

The term Enlightened One means the one who is pleased to gain this knowledge, not one who receives it as a burden. The person is happy, joyful, even if life is full of difficulties. There is still a happiness from inside because of the knowledge that the person is no longer in debt to their sin. He is released from suffering. When this life is over that individual knows that he will go and be with God (*nibbana*).^{MF}

¹ See Acts 9:13, KJV and Rev.19:8, KJV as examples. The term saint in the Thai Bible refers to the followers of the truth and referred to all believers. It was not limited only to those of special merit as in the definition from the Roman Catholic Church.

² The phrase children of God appears 13 times from Matt. 5:9, NIV to I John 5:19, NIV.

³ Many Buddhists believe in many heavens and even hells.

⁴ John 1:14-18, NIV

⁵ Acts 15:1-21, NIV

⁶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path

⁷ *nibbana* is a Pali term used by Buddhists (nirvana is the Sanskrit equivalent used in Hindu tradition, the meanings are not the same but have similarities). In a nutshell, *nibbana* is the goal of Buddhism, a cessation of suffering and death. It is not a place or a thing, neither is it nothingness. It is attained through enlightenment. Literally it means roughly “blowing out”.

⁸ *thamma* is the truth taught by Buddha. In its meaning *thamma* comes very close to Logos. Because *thamma* is understood in a sense of ultimate truth, truth that leads to *nibbana*, some use it in the sense of the word of truth. The apostle John used Logos (John 1:1, NIV) in a way it was never used before, basically meaning Christ, in the same manner some are using *thamma*. As much as Jesus is the good news, *thamma* is the good news.

⁹ Kalama Sutta AN 3.65, www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html