

What Do We Need to Learn from

Thai Folk Buddhists

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The following excerpt is taken from *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World* (David Lin and Steve Spaulding, Editors, William Carey Library Publishers, 2003).

Many well-intentioned missionaries go overseas with the idea of being the conveyors of the gospel message. In part, this is true. However, should we not acknowledge that God is already working within the Thai Folk Buddhist context before we as missionaries ever arrive? Do we not come as fellow seekers ourselves? How, therefore, can we, as fellow seekers, learn to be more

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sensitive and receptive to those areas where God is already present in the lives of Thai people? How can we communicate Christ in a society which says that, "to be Thai is to be Buddhist?"

Understanding Thai

Folk Buddhism and its cultural context is an important starting place. There are several studies on contextualization from which we can learn much. But what can be learned from Thai Folk Buddhists themselves? Four areas are suggested: 1) the need for a wholistic approach, 2) communication must involve all major signal systems, 3) a recognition that the major barriers to allowing Christ to fully enter into a culture are primarily social and not religious, and 4) an honest awareness of the realities of the spirit world. Each of these areas will be discussed further.

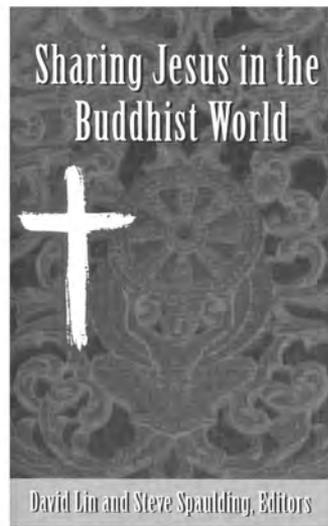
The Need for a Wholistic Approach

Animists see themselves and their beliefs as part of the whole of life. The monistic worldview of the Thai Folk Buddhist sees no

dichotomy between the community of the living, natural world and the supernatural spirit world. They do not compartmentalize their lives as would Western, linear-thinking cultures. They would ask questions such as, How does Christ relate to the rest of life? Does he care about our rice crop? Will he be able to act on our behalf in a way that we now ask the spirits to do? Communication of the gospel with Folk Buddhists must integrate the physical, spiritual, and social aspects of life within the community, and not be done individually as is often done in evangelical approaches

Communication Involves All Signal Systems

Every culture uses signal systems to communicate. The twelve basic systems used are described by Donald Smith as verbal, written, numeric, pictorial, audio, artifactual, kinesic, optical, tactile, spatial, temporal, and olfactory. These are in order of decreasing consciousness of use and increasing degree of believability. Eighty-three percent of the information we receive comes through seeing; eleven percent we receive through hearing; 1.5 percent from touch (tactile), one percent from taste



and 3.5 percent from smell (Smith 1992, 162-3). The sensory systems — seeing, hearing (including speaking and music), touch, and olfactory — are discussed, as well as two more important signal systems often overlooked by Western cross-cultural workers: the spatial and the temporal signal systems. These general categories can be reviewed in terms of evaluatory questions for any specific Thai Folk Buddhist context when seeking improved communication and understanding

Most Barriers Are Social, Not Religious

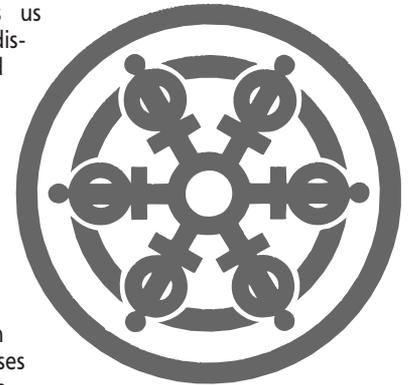
Along with employing a wholistic approach, and using all the signal systems in communication, there is an urgent need to recognize that for most Thai Folk Buddhists the strongest barriers to Christ they experience are not religious but social. The so-called “religious tenets” of their faith are relative! If cultural barriers do not exist or can be minimized, then social barriers must next be examined. As mentioned above, are the methods of communicating Jesus Christ to Thai Folk Buddhists encouraging the bringing of people together into social community (a high cultural value in Thailand), or are they pulling people away from a sense of community towards a more westernized individualism? Often evangelical witness focuses on individual conversion. This is problematic when working in the Thai Folk Buddhist context in which, even today, many major decisions are decided in a group.

Recognizing the Reality of Power in the Spirit World

Perhaps what Thai Folk Buddhism can best teach cross-cultural workers, who seek to follow and communicate Christ, is the recognition of the reality of the power found in the spirit world. 1 Corinthians 4:20 says, “For the kingdom of God is not just a matter of fancy talk; it is living by God’s power” (NLT). It was because of a need for power that many sought out animistic practices in the first place. What is the attitude of the cross-cultural worker to be?

It is easy to go to either extreme. Many westerners come from a perspective that the realities of the spirit world are trivial, and either deny their existence or rationalize them away. Others focus on them too much. The Scripture gives guidelines that these realities should not be ignored.

Ephesians 6:10-20 warns us that we must be alert to discern spiritual reality behind human facades. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood (human beings), but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Verses 18-20 identify one of the most effective weapons to use in spiritual warfare: intercessory prayer.



Buddhism

Studying these passages leads to an important principle regarding spiritual warfare: *Physical situations may well be caused, controlled, or instigated by spiritual beings.*

You can see that discernment is necessary in spiritual warfare, and that one must avoid the twofold spiritual warfare problem. Maintaining dynamic balance between the two extremes takes discernment. A leader must heed two cautions concerning the spiritual warfare process item. Don't *underestimate* and don't *overestimate* the spiritual warfare behind every situation. God will give the necessary discernment as the leader is open to learn (NIV, Clinton 1998, 112).

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There are many excellent resources in this area, which can be read and reviewed, but none will compare to a personal understanding that God has empowered each of his servants to the task to which he calls him or her. This includes not only natural abilities and acquired skills but also spiritual gifts, including word gifts, gifts demonstrating love, and gifts demonstrating power (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 40). We are unfaithful to his calling if any of these areas are ignored. There are many folk religionists who remain enslaved to spirit powers, even within churches all throughout the world, because issues of power have never been fully addressed. 🌐

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