

## CHAPTER 3

# LIFE AS A BUDDHIST MONK

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**I**n Thailand every young man is expected to serve in a Buddhist monastery as a monk for three months. Monks act as disciples of Buddha (พระสงฆ์). A typical age for doing this is age eighteen, though boys as young as twelve can do so. Any monk who has not yet arrived at the age of twenty is known as a novice. Some young men serve for less than three months, while others may serve for the rest of their lives. The Thai people hold all monks in high esteem. The people look up to them because of the self mastery which they are practicing.

The expectation of serving as a monk is not unlike that for young men in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where at age nineteen, they are expected to serve for two years as missionaries. Young men with disabilities may not serve as monks while within the LDS faith they may be able to do other tasks that are not as demanding as serving a traditional full-time mission. Young men who have been convicted of certain crimes are prevented from serving in both cases. Sins of moral turpitude may also disqualify young men from serving as LDS missionaries, but such sins do not disqualify a young man from serving as a monk.

For me it was fairly easy to move on. I did not have any friends at this time, nor did have any outstanding commitments to do anything else.

To enter monkhood there is an initiation ceremony at the Wat<sup>5</sup> (or Buddhist temple). I became a monk at Wat Bangka (วัดบางกา)

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<sup>5</sup> A "Wat" (pronounced "what") in Thailand is a Buddhist temple. In most Wats monks live in nearby quarters and spend their day in meditation and learning the Buddhist religion. Followers of Buddha come to the Wat to remember Buddha and commit themselves to the principles of Buddhism. They often pay respect to Buddha by burning incense or applying some gold leaf to objects inside the temple as a part of their worship process. Since Buddha fulfilled his earthy mission; his life was extinguished as he reached Nirvana. Since Buddha no longer lives; Buddhist's don't actually pray to him, but they revere him as the first one who was "enlightened" as to the purpose of life and achieve it.

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in our village. In preparation for doing so, I spent two weeks with the monks at the Wat. During this time it was my responsibility to learn my part of the initiation ceremony in the Pali language. I also observed the monks, so that I would know how I should act once I became a member of their group.

When a young man becomes a monk, it is generally an important event for his family and friends. On the appointed day my family and friends arrived at our home at about eight o'clock in the morning. First my mother began to shave my head bald. Fortunately for me, she only started the process and a professional barber who was experienced at this sort of thing finished it. Next I dressed in a white shirt and pants with a white robe on top. The white robe symbolizes my purity for entering monkhood. At this point my mother cried for



*Photo 6- Every Thai Wat will have inside it a central statue of the Buddha. This Buddha is located in the Marble Temple in Bangkok.*

joy as she realized that she had raised a son worthy to become a monk. This is not unlike the reaction of an LDS mother who sees her son or daughter depart on a mission.

After sharing a meal together we proceeded to walk to the Wat. Strong men, taking turns, carried me on their shoulders all the way to the Wat. The initiation ceremony takes about twenty minutes.

Upon arrival, I was set down before the head monk. At this time I announced to him, "I am clean, and will comply with the rules and perform my duties as a monk."

Following this I changed my clothes from white to the orange ones worn by the monks. The outfit consisted of underwear, pants and

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*Photo 7 - A young man is carried on to the grounds of a Wat for his initiation as a monk.*

lastly and most important the orange robe. Returning back to the group, the monks of the Wat chanted and welcomed me to their group. Since I was not yet twenty years old, I became a novice monk. My family and friends then returned home and I remained at the Wat with the other monks.

### **Buddhist Nirvana**

As a monk you are told that you **must** leave all your worldly pleasures behind and endure a serious transformation of habits. The main focus of your effort is to develop self mastery. You are to strictly follow the teachings of Buddha in becoming a perfect man. Buddhism teaches that one's life does not begin with birth and end with death, but is a link in a chain of lives, each conditioned by volitional acts committed in previous existences. This concept, the law of cause and effect, suggests that selfishness and craving result in suffering. The faith instills in your mind that compassion and love are what bring happiness and well-being to the soul. Therefore, only by eliminating our desires can one find peace. The highest Buddhist

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objective is to attain perfection through Nirvana (ปรินิพพาน) an inexpressible, indisputable state absent all wants and distress. In such a state a person becomes one with his surroundings.

While the behavioral aspects of following Buddha are clear, some aspects of Buddhist doctrine are somewhat flexible and their application to the individual may be unique. This framework allows a person to seek and approach his own salvation. Living in the monastery certainly was a change of life for me.

### **A Monk's Routine**

A typical day started at 5:30 a.m. with the Wat's bells ringing. This was something that I had a hard time getting use to. Unfortunately, it was the least of my challenges. I didn't complain to anybody, but it was hard getting up so early in the morning. We were to get dressed and prepare ourselves for the morning chant each day at that exact time. This was then followed by group meditation where we listened to the bells and practiced attaining a deep connection with our inner-self. After meditating, we all went out and collected alms.<sup>6</sup>

I had the same route each day. On my route there was an elderly woman that I would see each day. She was like that person cheering you on to keep you going as you run a marathon. As I would accept her alms, she would regularly counsel me to continue on my journey as a monk. She didn't want me to quit. She told me that I could be a great Sompan (leader) of the other monks of the monastery in my own village someday. I would be an example to the youth and adults. Females are restricted from any contact with the monks. However, if they wanted to put some food in our collections bowls they could drop it in. If they had something else to give to a monk they would have to leave it on a napkin, from which we could pick it up.

After noon monks are able to set their own schedule for the rest of the day. If there are educational opportunities in the area, a monk

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<sup>6</sup> Alms consisted of food and other personal care items which the Thai citizens provide each morning for the local monks.

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may attend class. When doing so Monks would generally sit on the back row to ensure that there would be no contact with females.

In order to become the leader, you have to devote your whole life to service as a monk. I wasn't sure if this was what I wanted to do for my entire life. My mother told me that I could leave the monkhood as I pleased, but she really wanted me to do it for my entire life as well. I just didn't see that being a possibility for me. I felt that serving as a monk was something I needed to do now at this point in my life. I felt that there was more to my life than being a monk, but this time was to prepare me for it. My future was still unclear, but I knew that there was something else that I needed to do.

Being a monk takes a lot of effort and discipline, but when my first three months were complete, I decided to continue on. It is a great honor to be a monk. It showed great respect to my family, my country and it especially pleased my mother. Most Thai men return home after being a monk and continue on with their lives while getting a job and doing other things. They would often follow their father's profession, whatever that may be. However, I tried not to think about that too much. I knew that I didn't want to be a farmer.

On a designated day each month, the monks at each Wat throughout Thailand will shave each others' hair so that they are bald. Thus during the month, all the monks seem to have about the same amount of hair.

### **Moving to a Wat Srigrasorn**

A year after entering the monastery, I traveled to Bangkok, where I had been accepted to live at Wat Srigrasorn (วัดสีหไกรสร). This Wat was located in Thonburi, just across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok. Here in Thonburi, I was able to enroll myself in the Buddhist scripture school. The first day of class was difficult for me. As they say, we went straight into the books. In order to learn the Buddhist scripture, one must learn the Pali language. This language was very difficult to learn and understand. For some reason, I just

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couldn't grasp onto it. I felt that it wasn't going to be something that I could do. When the longest day of school finally ended, I went straight back to the monastery.

The walk home to the Wat, gave me some time to think about other things. I did love to learn, but I wasn't sure that the Pali language was the thing for me. I just wasn't grasping it. But I couldn't give up. I needed to give it more time.

Each day got progressively worse. I wasn't catching on to the Pali language like the other monks were. I kept on with my other studies, but I was getting very far behind with the Pali language. This made me wonder even more if this study was worth it.

I finally quit the Pali language school and enrolled in business classes. Here, I would be allowed to sit in the back of the classroom. My classes now were typing (both Thai and English), and basic English conversation. I did not want to waste my time. If learning would help me to progress in life, then I would do it.

A few months later, I reached the age of twenty and I became a regular monk. The color of a monk's robes indicates their rank. Generally, the higher the rank of a monk, the darker the color of the robe which he wears. Thus, as a regular monk, I began to wear robes of a darker orange color. Having achieved this status, I was deserving of some time off, so I decided to visit my home village of Bangka, back in the south of Thailand. Monks are required to live at the Wat and cannot live at home. Therefore, I returned to Wat Bangka during my home visit.

One night, while I was sleeping, I had another dream. I dreamt that there was a new purpose for me and that I was to search for it. I was to find my real purpose and find the true pathway to live my life. Since all of my brothers had left home and had their own families, I thought that perhaps I should do the same. If I was to leave the monkhood, my mother wanted me to become a school teacher. I was thinking that perhaps I would do so. I would quit monkhood, go back to school, and continue my college program to obtain my

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teaching certificate. Then I would return back to my village and become a teacher there. Next I would marry a young girl and have my own family. These were my short and long term goals.

### **My First Encounter with the LDS Church**

In my third year as a monk it was my opportunity to visit the royal temples in central Bangkok such as Wat Phra Kaew<sup>7</sup> (the Wat associated with the Grand Palace where the Kings of Thailand once lived). Here I could find many tourists as it is one of the most visited places in all of Thailand. My purpose in going there was to teach tourists the Buddhist faith and to exchange with them information about my religious beliefs and the culture of Thailand. They would often ask me how serious I was about devoting my life to the monkhood. I would make such visits at least once a week. I enjoyed meeting these tourists, working on my English language skills and sharing with them the history and culture of Thailand, as well as our religious beliefs.



*Photo 8 - Grounds of Wat Phra Kaew  
Bangkok Thailand.*

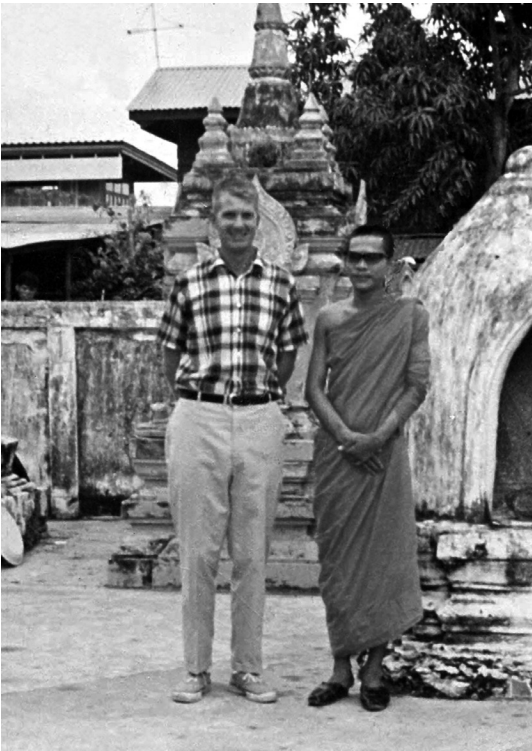
One day a male American who was large in stature approached me at Wat Phra Kaew. He asked me about my religion. I hesitated as he made his best effort to speak Thai. I could tell he had been practicing and wished to demonstrate what he had learned. He asked if I could show him around the grounds and perhaps visit some other Wats in the area. As we began our tour he asked me about

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<sup>7</sup> Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) is the home to a sacred Buddha statue made of jade. This Buddha is highly revered throughout Thailand. This Wat belonged to the King until a constitutional monarchy was imposed by the people in 1932.



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*Photo 9 - Mani as a monk at Wat Srigrasorn sharing ideas on religion with an LDS serviceman.*

my Buddhist faith. He seemed to have a sincere interest in finding out what we believed and why we believed it. I asked if he knew anything about Buddhist monks. He said that he did and that he was an army officer who had spent time in the war in Vietnam. He indicated that he had met monks in Vietnam, but that they seemed to be different from the monks in Thailand. As we moved on to visit other Wats, he indicated that his service in the war was

now complete and that after a few days in Bangkok he would be returning home to the United States.

Before our time together ended, we had returned to my home at Wat Srigrasorn. He then spoke of his faith and asked, "Have you ever heard of Christianity"? I responded that I had not. He then told me that he was a "Latter-day Saint" and that he believed in God. He added that there was a plan for the salvation of mankind and that we were all here on earth for a reason. My impression of him was not what I would have expected from an American who had just been at war in Vietnam. Rather, I felt that he was a generous and sincere man and that like me, he was willing to share



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his personal beliefs and the feelings of his heart. Overall his open and friendly disposition made me curious. As we continued to view the grounds of the Wat, he asked me, “Have you ever seen young men about twenty years old dressed in white shirts and ties walking around the streets of Bangkok”? I said that I had not seen such people. He explained that his church sent out such young men as missionaries to share their Christian beliefs, but admitted he was not sure that any had yet been sent to work in Bangkok.<sup>8</sup> As we concluded our tour, he said goodbye and shared his testimony regarding that which he believed. As a Buddhist monk, I smiled and said thank you for a pleasant conversation.

### **Yet another Decision to Make**

For two years, I studied Buddhism in the Wats in Bangkok. I learned sacred techniques towards self-mastery. I was taught to gain control over every thought, action and feeling that I ever encountered. This was a good thing for me. I gained a deeper love and appreciation for my role as a monk. As a monk, I was to teach self-mastery and show by example what true happiness was.

However, despite the deep love that I had for the Thai people and Thai culture, I was daunted with feelings that there was still something missing in my life. This feeling came to me more clearly and with greater impact day by day. I earnestly tried to stay focused and talk to the Thai people about the teachings of Buddha. As I worked to get rid of these feelings or exchange them for more positive ones, the urges for new and different ideas continued to arouse my curiosity. As a monk, this wasn't good. I wasn't doing what I was being taught. I wasn't controlling my feelings or thoughts. I was very concerned. However, as always, I kept those feelings to myself.

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<sup>8</sup> The approximate year of this event was 1968. The first LDS missionaries (since 1854) arrived in Bangkok on February 2, 1968.

