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# The Influence of Hinduism on Thai Buddhism

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## Abstract

This paper explores the profound influence of Hinduism on Thai Buddhism. There are a large number of physical manifestations of Hinduism in Thailand and Hindu religious rites are widely practiced by the Thai people, including the royal family. The philosophy of Buddhism has actually evolved from Hinduism and draws many of its concepts from it. In Thailand, Hinduism and Buddhism are so closely intertwined that they are said to be syncretized and this paper explores the anatomy of that syncretization.

## The Physical Manifestations of Hinduism in Bangkok

With the emphasis on Buddhist temples and monuments in most tourist guides, the Hindu shrines and statues in Bangkok can be overlooked or perhaps thought to be Buddhist. Visitors to Bangkok are usually guided to visit *Wat Pra Kaew* (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), *Wat Po* (the Po Temple), which contains a gigantic reclining Buddha, and many other gilded Buddhist temples and monuments throughout the city. People taking a water taxi or going on a river cruise are presented with the famous and magnificent spectacle of *Wat Arun*, the Temple of the Dawn, on the bank of the *Chao Phraya* River which runs through Bangkok. *Wat Arun* is one of the most notable temples in Bangkok due not only to its beauty but to its being the site at which Thai kings, starting with Rama II, ritually presented gifts to Buddhist monks each year after traveling there by royal barge from the royal palace complex at *Sanam Luang*. These Buddhist temples and statues are featured as the main attractions in Bangkok sight-seeing guides, but there are, perhaps unnoticed by the average tourist, a large number of Hindu temples, shrines and statues of Hindu deities located throughout the city revealing the pervasive influence of Hindu Brahmanism.

Bangkok's one Brahman temple complex, the *Deva Sathan*, is located opposite the famous *Sao Ching Cha*, a giant swing which is a Brahman religious object, and adjacent to *Wat Suthat*, a Buddhist temple. In it can be found a temple to *Ganesh*, a temple to *Shiva* and a temple to *Vishnu*. It serves as the spiritual home for the ten *Brahman* priests who

are attached to the royal household and whose all-white robes distinguish them from the Buddhists with their saffron-colored robes.

Near the Rachaprasong intersection of Rachadamri and Rama I Roads, right in the commercial heart of the city, there are at least six Hindu statues and shrines. Perhaps the most prominent is the Erawan Shrine to *Brahma*, who is called *Pra Phrom* in Thai; it stands right at the intersection of these two roads. It was built in three stages during the construction of the Erawan Hotel in the 1950's on the site of a spirit house that seemingly failed to propitiate the gods since the construction of the hotel was interrupted by many accidents. Following the construction of successively larger spirit houses which were ineffective, the shrine was built and opened on November 9, 1956. All accidents stopped thereafter. *Brahma*, the genderless Erawan god, is perceived to be a god full of kindness, mercy, sympathy and impartiality. His four faces represent each of these virtues. The likeness of the Erawan *Brahma* was adopted as the logo of the hotel which it protects, now known as the Grand Hyatt Erawan Bangkok.

It seems that all of the major enterprises close to the intersection at which the hotel is located subsequently saw the need to erect their own Hindu shrines, although to different deities. All of the shrines constructed in the locality are within walking distance of the Erawan Shrine. A shrine to *Indra*, shown riding an elephant and clutching a thunderbolt and an arrow, is located in front of the Amarin Shopping Complex. In early Hinduism, *Indra* was known as the king of the gods and represented war, storms and rainfall. He was so important that King *Khun Bang Klang Thao*, (the Lord Who Rules the Sky), the founder of the Sukkothai Kingdom in 1279 A.D., took the name of *Intraditya*: The Sun King with the Power of *Indra*. The Amarin *Indra*, however, in the popular perception is believed to mainly have the ability to bestow happiness. Attesting to *Indra*'s importance, various buildings in Bangkok bear his name, including the Indra Regent Hotel, where the author happily stayed during the 1980s and 90s and which is not far from the Amarin Shopping Complex on Rajapraphrop Road.

Across the street from the *Indra* Shrine stands a statue of *Narayana* standing on *Garuda* which was installed to protect the Intercontinental Hotel. *Garuda* is the steed of the gods and *Narayana* is the Sanskrit name for *Vishnu*, a god of equal stature to *Indra*. He enabled one group of Hindu gods to defeat the group to which *Indra* belongs. Within Hinduism battles between gods resulted in some gods ascending in importance over time while others lost importance.

This change in importance is perhaps reflected by the more recent establishment of a shrine to *Trimurti* whose importance rose while *Indra*'s fell. The shrine was built only a short distance away from the Erawan Shrine on Rachadamri Road in front of the Central World Shopping Center which has been more recently constructed than the Erawan Hotel. *Trimurti* represents the "Hindu Trinity," composed of *Brahma*, the creator, *Vishnu*, the preserver and *Shiva*, the destroyer. These three gods are represented by three faces on

the head of the *Trimurti* statue.

A separate shrine to *Ganesh* was later also constructed in front of Central World. *Ganesh* is the son of *Shiva* and *Parvati* and is considered to be a master of intellect and wisdom. *Ganesh* is a big-bellied composite figure attended by a mouse. Besides his one-tusked elephant head, he is made up of both human (many arms) and serpent components.

The least noticeable of all the Hindu statues in the area is that of *Lakshmi*. It is in a hard-to-find location on the fourth floor of the Gaysorn Plaza, a shopping complex on the corner across Rama I Road from the Erawan Shrine and across Rachadamri Road from the shrine to *Ganesh*. Thai people turn to *Lakshmi* to pray for wealth and, perhaps not coincidentally, her statue is located in the plaza that holds the most expensive stores in Bangkok such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Prada.

Worshippers pray at each of these shrines with different objectives in mind but, in general, the Hindu shrines are thought to have a protective function. If a shrine is erected in front of a nearby building to repel evil spirits (*phi*), then it is a good idea to construct your own shrine to keep the evil spirits from descending on you. Each of the shrines established later than the Erawan was constructed for just such a purpose.

### The Formation of Thai Culture

The Thai culture has been influenced strongly by the mixture of Hinduism and Buddhism that prevailed among the Cholas of south India from the ninth to the twelfth century A.D. Similar in geography and climate, the Chao Phraya Delta of Thailand and the Kavery Delta of India developed in tandem. According to Deivanayagam, (n.d.), "Although differed in physiological forms as Dravidian and Mongoloid, the behavioral pattern of both the Tamils and Thais are identical. Their foodstuffs, preparations, manners and customs, ceremonies and rituals, culture and psychology are analogous" (p. 1).

Abundant evidence of the Cholas' strong influence on Thailand (in those days known as Siam) has been found. Among the many that Deivanayagam (n.d.) cites are the twenty-one distinct similarities between the Indian *Ramayana* (the Cholas' *Kamba Ramayanam*) and the Thai *Ramakian* indicating that one was derived from the other. Another is the appearance of the image of *Garudantika*, the flying kite man who carries *Vishnu* on his shoulder which is found in many shrines and temples in Thailand including the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and the Pimay Buddhist Temple. Further evidence of the Cholas' influence is the "Great Swings" seen in Thai Brahmin temples and the Swing festivals (*Login Wor*) which are of South Indian tradition. The list goes on and on (p. 2-3).

Brahminism, the precursor of Hinduism, is inextricably intertwined with the Buddhist faith in Thailand although Buddhism and Hinduism have two completely different viewpoints concerning the self. The Hindu viewpoint is that one has an immutable, transmigrating self, the *Atta*, and the Buddhist viewpoint is that of non-self, *Anatta* (Thai Brahminism,

n.d., p. 1). In actual fact, Buddhism does not espouse either of these views, rather the idea that only when one has detached oneself from any particular viewpoint, whether of *Atta* or *Anatta*, will one be able to become enlightened and see reality, *Wicha*, for what it really is. Despite this difference, Brahminism and Brahmin ceremonial tradition are deeply ingrained in Thailand's Buddhist Culture. Various royal ceremonies are performed by the ten remaining Brahmin priests. According to Hoskins (n.d.),

...there are seven major annual Royal ceremonies at which Brahmins officiate; the Ploughing [sic] Ceremony (held in May and the best opportunity for visitors to see Brahmins in their official capacity), the anniversaries of His Majesty the King's birthday and coronation, the three ritual occasions on which the monarch changes the seasonal attire of the Emerald Buddha at Wat Phra Keo, and the celebration of the god Siva's annual visitation to earth.

The First Plowing Ceremony (*Phuet Monkon*) is described in an article on Encyclopedia.com:

"The Ploughing [sic] Ceremony takes place during May, the sixth lunar month. After the king touches the sacred red and gold plough for good luck, the plough is drawn by garlanded bulls in a circular furrow on the Phra Mane Grounds, site of the weekend market. Brahmin priests chant as the animals are offered seven varieties of crops. The yield of the next year's harvest supposedly depends on which crops the bulls choose" (*Thailand*, n.d., p. 1).

Thai Kings have predicated their uniqueness on Brahman principles. In her speech to members of the community at Mumbai, Mrs. Wanna Sudjit, Cultural Attache to the Thai consulate at Mumbai (2003) explained the influence of Brahmanism.

The concepts of divine kingship and royal ceremonies are clear examples of the influence of Brahmanism. The ceremonies of Coronation of Thai kings are practiced more or less in its [sic] original form even up to the present reign. **The Thai idea that the king is a reincarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu was adopted from Indian tradition.** Though this belief no longer exists today, the tradition to call each Thai king of the present Chakri dynasty Rama (Rama is a reincarnation of Vishnu) with an ordinal number, such as Rama I, Rama II, etc. is still in practice (p. 3). (Bold typeface in the original.)

The closeness of Hinduism and Buddhism and the popularity of Hindu gods were noted by a reporter for *Hinduism Today*, Rajiv Malik (n.d.), during his visit to Thailand to observe the ways in which Hindu gods and goddesses are worshiped in Thailand. Hurditya Deva, a Thai convert to Hinduism, was his guide and translator.

What boggled my mind was the Thai population's devotion to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, which was no less than I've witnessed among Hindus anywhere. When I visited the Sri Mariamman temple on a typical Wednesday afternoon and evening, 95 percent of the devotees present were Thai Buddhists. Their devotion

was in no way less than their Hindu countrymen and women. He [Hurditya] said that what we were seeing at the Mariamman temple is typical. "Hinduism and Buddhism are considered to be so close that not many people differentiate between the two. Hindu and Buddhist rituals are conducted simultaneously. The Thai people think that it is almost the same. Some even think that Hinduism is just a ritual and not really a religion, or they think Hinduism is an off-shoot of Buddhism. They happily participate in the Hindu rituals, and seek direct communion with the Gods and Goddesses in meditation" (p. 1).

### Thai Buddhism

Thai Buddhism is considered to be a distinct form of Buddhism in the paradigm of "little tradition" as compared to the Theravada Buddhism "great tradition." Nations conforming to the "great tradition" of Theravada Buddhism are Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, while each of these nations is considered to have its own distinct form of Buddhism from the "little tradition" perspective. "... Thai Buddhism is a religious complexity composed of many elements, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements. Although to many western religious scholars these components of Thai religion are contradictory, Thai religious believers do not find contradiction in their belief system or practice" (Puntarigvivat, n.d., p. 153).

An informal interview of various taxi drivers and pedestrians concerning their attitudes toward the Hindu shrines in downtown Bangkok revealed a unanimity of opinion that the function of the shrines was to provide "protection." One might well wonder what can account for the constant throngs presenting offerings and praying in front of the Hindu shrines in Bangkok and what the shrines offer "protection" from. The answer seems to come the third element of the syncretized Thai Buddhism: animism. Various harmful spirits are considered to exist and it is necessary to have protection from them. "The term 'animism' in Thai religion refers to the belief and practice relating to 'spirits' (*phi*)" (Puntarigvivat, n.d., p. 155). It is thought that the belief in these spirits might actually strengthen the practice of Buddhism. "Animism might be viewed as providing a 'symbolic opposition' to Buddhist conceptions of order. The spirits provide an image of chaos and disorder which might exist if a Buddhist order did not prevail." (Puntarigvivat, n.d., p. 155). Of course, the Hindu gods and goddesses are not, strictly speaking, a part of Buddhism, but, to the perception of the average Thai, there is no separation. Especially in the villages, the influence of animism is strong.

Folk religion—attempts to propitiate and attract the favor of local spirits known as *phi*—forms the third major influence on Thai Buddhism. While Western observers (as well as urbane and Western-educated Thais) have often drawn a clear line between Thai Buddhism and folk religious practices, this distinction is

rarely observed in more rural locales. Spiritual power derived from the observance of Buddhist precepts and rituals is employed in attempting to appease local nature spirits. Many restrictions observed by rural Buddhist monks are derived not from the orthodox *Vinaya*, but from taboos derived from the practice of folk magic. Astrology, numerology, and the creation of talismans and charms also play a prominent role in Buddhism as practiced by the average Thai—topics that are, if not proscribed, at least marginalized in Buddhist texts (Wikipedia, n.d., p. 2-3).

*Similarities between Thai Buddhism and Brahmanism*

John Hoskins (2002) in his article on Thai Brahmins explains various similarities between Brahmanism and Thai Buddhism.

The five precepts of Buddhism and its four Divine States of Mind (*Phromvihara Si*—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity) are concepts held equally by Brahmins and in part originated from that earlier religion. Indeed Buddhism has adopted much from Brahman practice. Most obviously, the custom of holding candlelit processions around temples on major Buddhist festivals (*prataksin*) is a Brahman practice, the belief being that anything within the circle of candlelight will be blessed. The Brahman usage of this is commonly seen at the pre-ordination ceremony of Buddhist monks when, in the home of the novice, a Brahman priest will carry a lighted ceremonial candle around the celebrant and his family.

Hoskins points out that Buddhism's focus on the transcendence of worldly concerns fails to address the people's existential problems on a daily basis and that this perceived lack is filled with beliefs and rituals that answer their needs. People turn to the Erawan *Brahma* as a source of good fortune. Although Buddhism does not specifically forbid praying to Brahma and the other Hindu gods, their worship does seem to place importance on things such as wealth and position in society that Buddhism avers are not important at all. There is no dissonance for Brahmins, however, since the Buddha is actually a Hindu religious figure. According to Hoskins, "For their part, Brahmins hold that Lord Buddha was the ninth of 10 manifestations of the god Vishnu on earth. The Buddha is further respected for his attainment of enlightenment." (p. 2). Another reason that Thais perceive no dissonance between Brahmanism and Buddhism is because some aspects of Brahmanism have been dropped.

Although there is a strong Brahman lineage in Thailand, it nevertheless exists in a Buddhist society and thus the caste system is only a traditional one and is no longer strictly regarded in the same light as the Indian caste divisions (Brahman, warrior, merchant and laborer). However, the system whereby only a blood offspring may succeed as a Brahman priest still exists (p. 3).

### Buddha Born a Hindu

The Buddha was, of course, born a Hindu and became a Hindu ascetic for a considerable period of time before he formulated his own religious philosophy. Many of the philosophies found in Buddhism can be found in Hinduism. The important notion that suffering is caused by one's reaction to the world rather than the world itself can be found in a poem from around 500 B.C. on a Tamil (Hindu) website:

To us all towns are one, all men our kin.  
Life's good comes not from others' gift, nor ill  
Man's pains and pains' relief are from within.  
Thus have we seen in visions of the wise!  
(Tamilnation.org, n.d., p. 1).

### Conclusion

It is perhaps an understatement to say that Hinduism has had a strong influence on Thai Buddhism. Buddhism and Hinduism are so intertwined in the Thai conception of Buddhism as to be inseparable. Hindu Brahmanism indeed plays a crucial role in counterbalancing the deleterious effects of the animist evil spirits and allows for the practice of rituals of propitiation that Thai Buddhists find essential.

### Indications for Further Study

The knowledge that all suffering is self-inflicted forms the core of Buddhist belief. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the derivation from Hinduism of various important Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, Nirvana, enlightenment, karma and others, these will be dealt with in detail in a future work. The distinction between the folk-Buddhist and the formal Buddhist traditions in Thailand will also be examined to bring about a more thorough understanding of the full role of Buddhism in Thai culture and daily life.

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