

## **Buddhist Cultural Exchange Programs in Thailand: A Model for ASEAN Interreligious Dialogue**

*Brooke Schedneck  
Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs  
Chiangmai University*

Buddhist travel and spiritual vacations has become a significant portion of the tourism industry in Thailand, and increasingly in other Theravāda Buddhist countries. Thailand received over 24.78 million tourists in 2014<sup>1</sup>, evidence that a large percentage of Thailand and ASEAN economic industry is tourism. Additionally, according to the latest figures from ASEAN, tourism numbers continue to grow. About 17% of the groups coming to ASEAN are from English-speaking countries. Because of this a variety and diversity of programs in Buddhist temples meant to engage and inform curious travelers have emerged. These programs are designed for targeted groups of international travelers, such as those seeking to volunteer, become ordained, or learn the basics of Buddhist teachings. Using the Buddhist travel opportunities available to international travelers in Northern Thailand as a case study, I interrogate the presentation of Buddhism for this audience as a model for ASEAN interreligious engagement and dialogue. Buddhist cultural exchange programs in Thailand are designed to expose the international visitor to the culture of this region and the Buddhist tradition. These cultural experiences are considered educational opportunities, where one can learn about Buddhism as part of a larger pluralist effort of mutual understanding.

Cultural heritage is an important facet of ASEAN, which can also be an asset for economic development. Theravāda Buddhist traditions, as a form of cultural heritage, can be used to communicate identity and values in an era of rapid change. Cultural tourism can help holders of this heritage, such as monastics and teachers, to identify and characterize these values for curious travelers and help to safeguard, enhance and transmit their main principles. The Buddhist cultural exchange programs I will highlight, in addition to opening up an arena for cultural tourism, contribute to the social responsibility and people-oriented approach of ASEAN. The openness that Theravāda Buddhists and others show curious English-speakers has the potential to be a model for interreligious cooperation and building peace in the ASEAN region. These Buddhist cultural exchange programs mirror the people-oriented vision of ASEAN and the creation of inclusive and harmonious communities. Therefore these programs could help to bolster the third community blueprint for the 2009-2015 ASEAN Roadmap for an ASEAN Community, that of the Socio-Cultural.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhist cultural exchange programs in Northern Thailand bring together monks from various locations in the Theravāda Buddhist world receiving an education as novice or fully-ordained monks and tourists and travelers from all over the world.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See specific numbers, in: <http://www.tourism.go.th/home/listcontent/11/221/276> - accessed on 24 March 2015; or as found here: <http://www.thaiwebsites.com/tourism.asp> - accessed on 24 March 2015

<sup>2</sup> The primary goal of The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is “to contribute to realizing the people-centered and socially responsible ASEAN Community by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society (xiii).” For more information on the ASCC see “Our People Our Future Together: Mid-Term Review of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint (2009-2015).” <http://www.asean.org/resources/item/mid-term-review-of-the-asean-socio-cultural-community-blueprint-2009-2015>. Accessed 30/1/2015.

<sup>3</sup> Participants in Buddhist cultural exchange programs, according to their statistics, are predominantly from English-speaking countries and Europe with a minority from East Asian countries.

In the context of Buddhist travel in Thailand, currently there are two types of offerings: cultural exchange and Buddhist practice. For Buddhist practice, foreign travelers go to meditation centers to attend retreats for varying lengths of time. These centers often downplay any cultural experience or learning about Buddhism outside of meditation. A retreat involves many hours of meditation time and this leaves little chance to chant, attend rituals, or ask questions about the Buddhist tradition besides meditation.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, cultural exchange programs, that are the focus of this presentation, offer these opportunities for learning and experiencing life in a Buddhist temple. During periods of fieldwork from June-September 2010 and ongoing fieldwork since May 2013<sup>5</sup> I investigated these programs that facilitate cultural and religious encounters between international travelers and Buddhist novices and monks. My data draws from interviews of facilitators and participants in the programs and participant-observation.

In analyzing these cultural exchange programs as a model for ASEAN interreligious engagement and dialogue, we can see that they highlight the ways Theravāda Buddhists have created avenues for curious non-Buddhists to participate in dialogue and help them understand the life and worldview of Buddhism. Within these cultural and religious encounters we see the characteristics of openness and engagement within Theravāda Buddhism, in dialogue with cultural and religious others who are curious about Buddhist teachings, practices, and the monastic life. I analyze these programs in contrast to recent Buddhist-Muslim tension and violence in Thailand and Myanmar. These conflicts do not represent or communicate the same values as cultural exchange programs nor do they promote socially responsible ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community that projects a peaceful and stable region.<sup>6</sup> Secondly I argue that tourism is not altering Buddhism in this exchange but instead Theravāda Buddhists are creatively engaging this new audience. It is tempting to look cynically at Buddhism presented to tourists but I will demonstrate how international encounters illuminate how Theravāda Buddhism and modern religions adapt and reach out to new communities.

### **Buddhist Cultural Exchange Programs in Northern Thailand**

The context of the Buddhist cultural exchange programs I highlight is Northern Thailand. Thailand, with tourism being a large part of the economy, is an ideal location to find case studies for transnational Theravāda Buddhist settings. There is a large tourist infrastructure in Chiangmai, the second largest city in Thailand. Hundreds of temples dot the city, making most tourists curious about the Buddhist religion. Within the city there are also two Buddhist universities representing the two sects of Thai Buddhism. Middle and high schools for novice monks are also abundant. Further north on the border between Thailand and Myanmar we find members of ethnic minority groups in Thailand such as the Shan, Karen, Palaung, and others who take advantage of the education ordaining as a novice monk affords. Because of this there are many Thai, ethnic minority, and international monks receiving education in English who are eager to practice in conversation with international visitors. In this way Thailand is host to a diverse population of Theravāda Buddhists. Monks undertake college education in

---

<sup>4</sup> During my previous research, I found that this was the experience of international meditators. They were not able to understand the life of Thai Buddhism while focusing on meditation practice. See Schedneck, Brooke, *Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Commodification of Global Religious Practices*. (New York & London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> I have lived, conducted research, and worked in Chiangmai, Thailand, since 2009 and have had ongoing opportunities to participate and observe these programs. Instead of intense periods of fieldwork, I interviewed participants, monks, and mediators of these programs on an ongoing basis. I also gave lectures on Buddhism to new volunteer participants in addition to interviews and observations.

<sup>6</sup> "Our People Our Future Together: Mid-Term Review of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint (2009-2015)," p. xxi.

Chiangmai in order to develop their skills for future employment in the secular world. Because of this monks are able to take advantage of the opportunities available in a cosmopolitan, tourist domain. Developing skills in English therefore has a dual purpose of individually aiding disadvantaged young men as well as supporting the spread of Buddhism. Therefore an important part of their mission is not only to satisfy the curiosity of tourists, but also to spread the dhamma.

The Buddhist cultural exchange programs I highlight include those focused on learning about the monastic life and Buddhism through programs providing informal conversations with monks, volunteer English teaching opportunities in temple schools, and a Temple Stay and Retreat program, where one lives within a Buddhist temple with the possibility of ordaining. These programs facilitate encounters between international visitors and monks within short, immersive experiences ranging from an hour to several months. The Monk Chat Program of the Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Buddhist University (MCU) at Wat Suan Dok, Chiangmai, Northern Thailand<sup>7</sup> is available for tourists interested in learning about Buddhism from monks who are college students. This program began in 2000 for the purpose of giving monks a chance to practice their English. These monks usually come from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh, Vietnam, among others to study in Thailand as monks for the low cost of education. Explaining to tourists about Buddhism and the monk's life is a significant added bonus for this program. Therefore instead of being negatively affected by tourism, the Monk Chat program takes advantage of international visitors' curiosity. The conditions of tourism within the city of Chiangmai, international interest in Buddhism, and Buddhist university with monks obtaining their bachelor's degrees in English all facilitate and create conditions for cultural exchange and learning on both sides.

There are numerous opportunities to teach novice monks in temple schools in Northern Thailand. These programs can offer the opportunity to live in the temple, so they are not intended for those interested in nightlife or participating in other activities but those who wish to focus on learning about Buddhism and the life of a monk. Volunteers stay for varying lengths of time in temple accommodation, teaching English and even helping with temple building projects. Their motivations normally include gaining teaching experience, making a contribution, and pursuing an interest in Buddhism.

The most immersive program, the Temple Stay and Retreat Program, is located within Wat Sri Boen Ruang in Fang, Chiangmai Province.<sup>8</sup> Because this temple is not within a tourist area, this program brings interested travelers to Fang, three hours outside of Chiangmai city. To this end, this program is offered year-round with space for about four or five guests at any time. Wat Sri Boen Ruang has about 50 novices in residence and about 100 novices that attend the school on the monastery grounds, but only a handful of fully ordained monks. Abbot of this temple, Phra Ajahn Dr. Abhisit<sup>9</sup> estimates that 70% of novices at Wat Sri Boen Ruang are poor or have family problems. Most of the novices are Shan and born in Fang. The rest of the novices are a mix of Palaung and local Thai people. The ethnic diversity of this temple led to this unique opportunity for international visitors. There are five main objectives the program hopes

---

<sup>7</sup> There are other Monk Chats in the city of Chiangmai that have emerged, modeled on this first program at Wat Suan Dok. Other locations include Wat Chedi Luang, Wat Srisuphan, among others. See Monk Chat Program Website. <http://monkchat.net>. Accessed 8/26/2014.

<sup>8</sup> Temple Stay and Retreat Website. <http://www.templeretreatthailand.com>. Accessed 8/26/2014. I have conducted interviews at Wat Sri Boen Ruang on 11/10/2009, 3/2/2010, 10/17/2013, and conducted participant-observation of the program and further interviews for an extended stay from 9/24/2014-9/28/2014.

<sup>9</sup> Phra Dr. Abhisit grew up in this community of downtown Fang and returned to take the position of abbot upon the death of his teacher, the former abbot. I interviewed him at Wat Sri Boen Ruang on 10/17/2013.

to offer to its participants: 1) the opportunity to live in a temple, 2) learn the basics of Buddhist beliefs and practices, 3) participate in a meditation retreat nearby the temple, 4) interact with the novice monks and help them become comfortable with the basics of English, 5) ordain as a novice monk. This program is offered by donations that go toward the maintenance of the facilities as well as Phra Ajahn Dr. Abhisit's development projects for the local Fang community.<sup>10</sup>

The main appeal of all of these programs derives from the religious and cultural exchange, and perceived difference of both groups of participants, monastics and foreign travelers. The international visitors can experience interaction with monks while, in some cases, experiencing life at the temple. Monks and novice monks can also become comfortable conversing in English and speaking with international visitors.

### **Religious Tensions within Theravāda Buddhism**

There is an openness to those interested in participating in these cultural exchange programs, but this is in contrast to those of other religions living in the same nation-state, who some Buddhist leaders may feel are a threat or danger to the dhamma. In this case, as can be seen in recent events in Thailand and Myanmar,<sup>11</sup> Theravāda Buddhists exhibit an exclusivist stance rather than inclusivist or accommodating. Elizabeth Harris, in an important article about Buddhism and religious others, articulates five attitudes of Buddhists throughout the tradition's history toward religious others: "hospitality and courtesy, a willingness to engage in dialogue about religion and cooperate if mutual benefit was possible; a polite acceptance and tolerance that could mask distrust or even contempt; the wish for reasoned and structured debates to prove the superiority of Buddhism, direct confrontation and opposition."<sup>12</sup> She argues that all five were present throughout Buddhist history but the first three were more dominant as missionaries were first present and the last two as they remained. When the first missionaries arrived most Buddhists sought cooperation "if mutual interests could be served, a model similar to Buddhism's relationship with Islam in Central Asia."<sup>13</sup> Once missionaries or members of other religions became a threat to the dhamma, increasing the number of churches and schools, Buddhists then became defensive. In contrast, the first two characterize, for the most part, the Buddhist cultural exchange programs I am discussing. There is not just willingness to engage in dialogue but a value of openness and engagement to curious travelers that could be a model for ASEAN interreligious dialogue.

However, hostility to the religious other remains within parts of Thailand and Myanmar. Because both countries have a majority Theravāda Buddhist population, encounters with minority religious populations have led to strong moments of affirming Buddhism as a religion connected to the nation-state. Myanmar is such a situation with Buddhist monks leading violent attacks on the Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine State.

---

<sup>10</sup> Phra Ajahn Dr. Abhisit's Best Together Foundation (<http://www.bcdcfang.org>) has a number of projects to aid the people of Fang including a health center, park, and scholarships for local children.

<sup>11</sup> There has been an upsurge in violent Buddhist-Muslim interactions in Myanmar. For a review of recent events see Schober, Juliane, "Social Difference and the Buddhist Discourse of Violence in Myanmar," Presentation at the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. University of Vienna, Austria, 2014; Leider, Jacques, "Rohingya: the name, the movement, and the quest for identity," *Nation Building in Myanmar*. (Myanmar Egress and the Myanmar Peace Centre, 2014) pp. 204-255; Walton, Matthew, J. & Susan Hayward, "Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism and Communal Violence in Myanmar," *Policy Studies*, 71, (Honolulu: Hawaii: East-West Center, 2014). Tensions within the south of Thailand have experienced a resurgence since 2004. For a review of the events and an ethnographic account see Jerryson, Michael, K., *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Elizabeth, 2013. "Buddhism and the Religious Other" in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 101.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.

Movements 969 and MaBaTha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) both affirm a Burmese Buddhist national identity and the need to protect Theravāda Buddhism within Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> Michael Jerryson, in his ethnographic account, describes the situation in Southern Thailand where the reification of Thai Buddhist identity with the Thai state has caused alienation of Malay Muslims. Martial law in the three southern most provinces (Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani) since 2004 and several violent attacks ending in deaths of both Buddhists and Muslims. Muslim populations in Thailand and Myanmar, do not have the cache of a religious or cultural other but are distinguished and displaced from the majority population through their non-Buddhist identities.

In contrast to this violence against Muslim populations in Thailand, and Myanmar, monks and coordinators of Buddhist cultural exchange programs are making strategic decisions to enhance the understanding and spread of Buddhism to tourists. They are taking advantage of the curiosity of tourists and the popular and positive image of Buddhism internationally. Because tourists are not forming separate groups and structures dedicated to other religions, Buddhists are not threatened by their presence as non-Buddhist others.<sup>15</sup> As well these particular religious and cultural others represent the modern as they bring with them the ability to practice the global language of English.<sup>16</sup> Volunteer teaching English to Buddhist Monks programs demonstrates the openness and engagement of Theravāda Buddhism through abbots who agree to host these guests and take advantage of the benefits they will bring to novice monks while being able to spread and teach the dhamma. At the Temple Stay and Retreat participants have identified as Muslim and as Christians wanting to learn more about Buddhism. Therefore Buddhist cultural exchange programs illustrate one side of the public face of Buddhism, that of monks explaining Buddhism to curious non-Buddhists and letting them experience life in a temple or as an ordained person. These programs not only promote cultural tourism, they also promote the values of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

### Religious Encounters

Buddhist cultural exchange programs illustrate that contemporary Theravāda Buddhism is not completely shaped by tourist needs but instead utilizes the importance of English in a globalized world. Rather than tourism changing Buddhism into a spectacle, religious encounters between English-speaking participants and monastics is beneficial for both groups. Temple schools, abbots, novices, volunteers, program coordinators, and foreign participants all create the circumstances for religious and cultural exchange beneficial for both groups. This section discusses the goals of these programs for international visitors and monastic participants.

---

<sup>14</sup> Time Magazine named leader of the Buddhist 969 Movement Ashin Wirathu, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.” This group foments anti-Muslim sentiments through rhetoric that Buddhism is being threatened by Muslim presence in Myanmar. MaBaTha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) was founded at a monastic conference in January 2014 in Mandalay, Walton & Hayward, “Contesting Buddhist Narratives,” p. x.

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to tourists, interactions with religious others living in the same nation-state carries with it sources of tension including religious and national identity and political and economic competition for resources. Because of this Buddhism becomes something to defend that creates distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ in stark terms.

<sup>16</sup> This relationship between Thailand and the West has been noted by Harrison & Jackson in their edited volume titled *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*. In the preface Chakrabarty states that the *farang* or white foreigner, was the most significant Other to which the modern person evaluated himself. See Chakrabarty, Dipesh, “Foreword,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, ed. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), p. ix.



### **Goal of Programs for International Visitors:**

Working with monks is one of the most popular options for volunteer work in Thailand because it allows volunteers to work directly with the people who are perceived to represent the essence of Thai culture. The ability to experience Buddhist temple life with its ceremonies and robed monks embodies this difference especially for interested English-speaking travelers from the Global North. Indeed international visitors' most memorable moments engage multiple senses: seeing the sunrise and orange robes of monks, the glittering golden Buddha statues, hearing the Pāli chanting of the monks and bells chiming in the morning and evening. These sensory moments match the experience of visitors hoping for difference. Buddhist monks allow tourists to experience this difference through Buddhist cultural exchange programs. However, international participants in Buddhist cultural exchange programs are able to reach a deeper level of understanding. Their comprehension of the monastic figure becomes more than simply a representation of the cultural and religious other.

Sandy, a recent college graduate from America stayed over two months as a volunteer English teacher with the novice monks at Wat Phra Non Pa Ketthi. Participating in the daily schedule of the temple met her sensory expectations of the difference of Buddhism. Sandy writes in a blog about her experiences, "Before lunch there's always a chanting of thanks, which completely moved me to my very soul the first time I heard it. It was all overwhelmingly beautiful, the temple, the kindness, the peace and serenity of it all, I shall never forget those first feelings." Being able to be a part of the temple community creates authentic experiences that volunteers highlight. This is part of the goals for international participants in the programs, that they can experience these aesthetic Buddhist moments.

Chandan, a middle-aged man from America, lived at Wat Doi Saket for two months because of his interest in Buddhism, calling himself a Buddhist. Chandan was curious about the monastic life and admitted that he had little idea about how monks lived, not even knowing that the category of novice monk existed. He had the more idealistic view that men decide to give up their worldly belongings and move to a monastery to begin meditation practice, and never look back. Surprisingly for Chandan, he found that monks are not all perfect beings who dedicate their lives to silent contemplation. Chandan was also surprised at the commerce at the temple, the massage and coffee shops as well as stores inside the temple for monks to buy necessary items. He tried to accept that monks would need to have money in order to buy their necessities and that some are supported by their families. This familiarity instead of difference was unexpected for Chandan. However, now he sees monks as people and describes himself as a transformed person, intellectually and emotionally.

Buddhist traditions lose their difference for international participants when monks act in ways typical and similar to the visitors' home countries, instead of like the imagined lone solitary figure. Beyond the superficial aesthetic differences, the monastic life is more similar to 'modern Western' lifestyles than imagined. The novice and monk become humanized through the interactions with international participants so they are not imagined as isolated, hermit-like figures but become real people with real motivations and identities. However, in circumstances where programs are not in place to facilitate understanding and interaction between monks and travelers, imaginaries of difference and expectations of authenticity can open up Buddhist practice for critique. John Holt describes how the government of Laos commodified the culture and religion of Laos beginning in the early 1990s, especially Luang Phrabang

as a place of “romanticism and royal mystique.”<sup>17</sup> Because of this French and other Euro-American tourists sometimes critique Luang Phrabang’s novices because of their particular Western imaginaries of Buddhism and the contrasting behaviors of ordained Buddhists.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of this Romanticism, when novices and monks do not act as perfect mindful embodiments of Buddhist ideals, tourists’ imaginaries of difference are not realized. However, travelers who participate in Buddhist cultural exchange programs receive a more realistic view of the monastic life. They gain a sense of empathy that goes beyond superficial aesthetic engagement.

Monks who participate in Monk Chat understand the assumptions and impressions of Buddhism of the international participants. They stated that some of the tourists are interested in Buddhism, and have questions about Buddhist books they had read, wanting to know about meditation or how to train their minds. They have specific questions about aspects of Buddhist teachings and doctrine. But this is the minority. Most are interested in the daily life of monks and are curious about what they see around them. The monks I interviewed agreed that the most popular question they receive is why they have different colored robes. After this tourists are interested in why they decided to be monks, what they learn in school, and if there are any female monks. Talking to the monks, even for this short while, challenges the perspectives of tourists and debunks some of the popular cultural myths about the monastic life. The cultural encounter with a monastic serves to humanize this figure. The monk becomes not a representative of the culture but rather a unique individual. These aims are related to the goals for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. This deeper understanding of the religious other is not a stated goal of these programs but an inevitable consequence of these interactions. The cosmopolitan ideal of understanding and empathizing with the other becomes a significant component of these programs for both groups. Through engaging tourists in conversation, teaching them about Buddhism and the monastic life, difference decreases.

### **Goal of Programs for Monks**

The first priority and reason all of these programs exist is because of the importance of English and the need to educate novices and monks from disadvantaged backgrounds. The novice monks may not learn a large amount of English given the limited time frame and continuous change of international participants; however, the constant exposure to foreigners helps novices to feel more comfortable conversing in English. It must be acknowledged that there is still a neo-imperialist presence within these programs as English is the language that must be learned to communicate with any kind of impact or power. However, in this section I argue that monks are agents over their cultural exchange programs. These programs demonstrate Theravāda Buddhist actors as taking full advantage of tourism and the positive image of Buddhism internationally. Monks are in control of these programs as we can see that Theravāda Buddhism is not being displaced by the desires of tourists.

This agency is seen through the creators and leaders of Buddhist cultural exchange programs, who have rules in place so that foreigners can participate only if they are sincere and genuinely interested. Therefore they are open to tourists but not totally accommodating all of their wishes. Scholars of Theravāda Buddhism such as Anne Hansen, Justin McDaniel, and Thomas Borchert illustrate the agency of local monks to shape their communities.<sup>19</sup> Instead of resistance or totally accommodating

---

<sup>17</sup> Holt, John, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Holt, *Spirits of the Place*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> Borchert, Thomas, “Worry for the Dai Nation: Sipsongpanna, Chinese Modernity, and the Problems of Buddhist

reactions to tourism or other outside forces such as colonialism or globalization, these programs are another example of how Buddhists engage modernity on their own terms.<sup>20</sup>

In the Temple Stay and Retreat Program, foreign participants are allowed the opportunity to ordain if they demonstrate sincerity and respect. Foreign ordinations have a history in Thailand since British man Richard Randall ordained in 1954 at Wat Paknam, Bangkok.<sup>21</sup> This was followed by another ordination of three more British monks two years later. The abbot of Wat Paknam at this time, Luang Por Sot (Phra Mongkoltepmuni), sought to spread his teaching, even sending a monk to London to make contact with interested individuals and groups.<sup>22</sup> Bangkok temples were at the forefront of foreign ordination because of their history and proximity to the capital where most Buddhist travelers arrive. The Thai Forest Tradition is especially appealing to foreigners, however, for those seeking temporary ordination to experience monasticism, there were few options after the early 1980s.

Foreign monks began to be screened and their motivations checked more closely when Western monks at Wat Bowonniwet, who used to conduct meditation classes in English, allowed backpackers began to behave inappropriately, even sleeping on the temple grounds. As well it was found that some Western monks were in the robes solely in order to obtain a visa or to steal valuable Buddhist objects.<sup>23</sup> At this time Wat Bowonniwet made a rule that foreigners would be expected to make a long-term commitment to the monastic life and would prove this by living as a novice for at least a year.<sup>24</sup> This is the case at Wat Pah Nanachat, an international forest monastery, where foreign monks must demonstrate their commitment through a probationary period of adjustment to monastic life before being allowed to ordain as a monk.<sup>25</sup> This makes ordination more difficult for international visitors but at the same time puts the Thai Buddhists in control of how their religion is enacted and tries to ensure the proper maintenance of the sangha. The Temple Stay and Retreat Program gives the option of temporary ordination but at the same time controls the process. For those guests seeking ordination, program coordinators state that participants first must show that they are sincere and not just ticking off wearing monastic robes off of their list as an experience to brag about. Instead through discussion and participation in temple life for at least 21 days, foreign participants who would like to ordain as a novice must demonstrate respect for the Buddhist tradition. Throughout this period, the program coordinators evaluate the candidates' genuineness through their motivations, behavior, and speech.

---

Modernism", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, 1 (2008): 107–42; Hansen, Anne, *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); McDaniel, Justin, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Braun, "Local and Translocal in the Study of Theravada Buddhism and Modernity, p. 843.

<sup>21</sup> For a history of Western monks' engagement with Thai Buddhism see Schedneck, Brooke, "Constructions of Buddhism: autobiographical moments of Western monks' experiences of Thai monastic life", *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12, 2 (2011): 327-346.

<sup>22</sup> Skilton, Andrew, "Elective affinities: the reconstruction of a forgotten episode in the shared history of Thai and Buddhist Buddhism – Kapilavaddho and Wat Paknam." *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, 1 (2013): 150.

<sup>23</sup> In *Phra Farang*, Peter Robinson (Pannapadipo, Phra Peter, *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*. (London: Arrow Books, 2005), p. 301) discusses the case of a foreign monk who, as soon as he had received his new visa as a monastic, left his robes on the floor and left as a layman without the proper ceremony for disrobing. This is considered very disrespectful from the Theravada Buddhist perspective.

<sup>24</sup> Cummings, Joe, *The Meditation Temples of Thailand: A Guide* (Woodacre, CA: Spirit Rock Centre, 1991) p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> The Wat Pah Nanachat Website ([www.watpahnachat.org](http://www.watpahnachat.org)) states that in order to ordain as a monk, one typically first spends one month as an eight-precept layperson, then a period of four-six months as a white-robed *anagarika*, who has made a commitment to maintaining the eight precepts. After this a period of about one year as a novice monk is preparation for becoming a fully-ordained monastic in this community.



Temple school abbots seeking to host volunteer English teachers affiliate with outside agencies that act as mediators to promote and run programs to attract participants, screen potential volunteers, and help to acclimate them. It is important to note that temple abbots remain in charge of allowing volunteers to stay. If the volunteers are behaving disrespectfully then the volunteer will be asked to leave. With abbots' busy schedules, it is easier for them to affiliate with these professional organizations to run background checks and inform volunteers how to behave in the temple environment. Volunteer organizations and staff are also necessary to encourage and promote the interaction of both the novices and foreign visitors.

Along with controlling the level of participation of international participants, the main way these programs demonstrate monastic agency is through their goal of benefiting novices. When first encountering international participants, novices are usually shy but learn how to try to engage these strangers. For the novices at Wat Sri Boen Ruang, the second is natural now as they are familiar with how to converse in English with foreigners. Along with introducing Buddhism to international visitors, from a Theravāda Buddhist perspective, the programs help to spread the teachings of Buddhism.

Phra Maha Saung, a co-coordinator of the novice and volunteer exchange for one of the volunteer teaching programs for novice monks, states that spreading the dhamma is an important secondary goal. In speaking with the volunteers Phra Maha Saung has found that they typically have no religion or they used to be Christian. Most are interested in Buddhism and monastic life and want to teach in this environment because it is different from their home countries. The volunteers have opportunities to learn about Buddhism but not directly (*mai drong*). This is because the first goal of the program is language acquisition for the novices (*chai phasaa ben*). However, an important part of this language learning is that if the novices learn English then they can teach the Dhamma to more people. The same is true for the Monk Chat program. The monks I spoke with concluded that Monk Chat is a significant way to spread the Dhamma to people from non-Buddhist countries. They find that most people who come are interested in Buddhism and those who are members of other religions benefit from being able to compare their tradition with Buddhism. In this way introducing people to the values of Buddhism is important in order to make the ideas and teachings of the religion available to non-Buddhist populations.

In this way, Buddhist cultural exchange programs are able to benefit both Buddhists as well as international participants. The novices and monks feel comfortable conversing in English and potentially spread the Dhamma while the international guests experience and learn about Buddhism. This demonstrates how Theravāda Buddhism is not influenced by tourism but instead utilizes the importance of English in a globalized world to bring tourists to Buddhist temples to interact with novices and monks. These Buddhist cultural exchange programs support the cultural heritage of Thailand while promoting cultural tourism. The open engagement that Theravāda Buddhists show curious English-speakers is an example of interreligious dialogue for the ASEAN region. Through this we can see how these programs could serve as a model for ASEAN peace building and dialogue and contribute to the ASEAN goals of creating inclusive, harmonious communities.

## **Conclusion**

Buddhist cultural exchange programs in Northern Thailand offer opportunities for international visitors as well as monastic participants. They demonstrate values of openness and engagement as a way to preserve the cultural heritage of part of the ASEAN region, that of Theravāda Buddhist mainland Southeast Asia. In contrast to

religious tensions and violence in parts of Myanmar and Thailand, Buddhist cultural exchange programs in Northern Thailand help to facilitate dialogue and peace among religious and cultural others. Through international religious encounters and exchanges, monastics and international visitors come to understand and imagine the life of the other as well as learn English and about Buddhism, respectively. Young novice monks lose some of their fear of engagement with foreigners and become confident conversing in English. International participants humanize the monastic figure and encounter difference in the aesthetics of the temple environment.

The 2009-2015 Roadmap for an ASEAN Community emphasizes socio-cultural goals that would form inclusive communities. These Buddhist cultural exchange programs help to further this goal. I believe that not just native English speakers but religious others from the ASEAN region could also be an important goal of future iterations of similar programs. These Buddhist cultural exchange programs, which engage tourists, could be a model for similar kinds of interreligious dialogue within ASEAN communities. The values of openness, engagement, experimentation, empathy, and understanding are embedded in the formats of these programs. Projecting a peaceful and stable ASEAN is part of the goals of the blueprint for ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Community.<sup>26</sup> A culture of peace, respect for diversity, and promotion of understanding of other faiths, religions and cultures are all supported by these unique programs in Northern Thailand. These programs can't be reduced to a cheapening of Buddhism or constituting a denigration of change of the Theravāda Buddhist traditions. Instead they demonstrate the creative possibilities of modern religion in the ASEAN region.

---

<sup>26</sup> "Roadmap for an ASEAN Community: 2009-2015," see especially page 10. <http://www.asean.org/archive/5187-19.pdf>. Accessed 30/1/2015.