

BATHING CEREMONY

By

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As already mentioned elsewhere, the ceremony of bathing the Buddha image, as also the abbot of the wat and the aged and respected elders, forms one of the features of the Songkran Festival. I have described it very briefly in order to give a cursory view of the festival in all its aspects. Here follows a detailed description.

During the three days of Songkran people flock to the wat in their best clothes. They bring with them candles, joss sticks, flowers and small bottles of Thai scented water called "nam ob" or water saturated with perfumes. At the wat shrine each devotee lights a candle and three joss sticks and places them together with a single flower or a bouquet in a receptacle in front of Buddha's altar.

The worshippers then make obeisance to the Buddha by partly prostrating themselves thrice before His image in a prescribed form. Each worshipper kneels with his hands placed palm to palm raising them to the forehead in a worshipful attitude and then prostrates himself on the floor with the hands now separated to allow the forehead to touch the floor in between the two palms. Such salutation is called "benchangapradit" (เบญจางคประดิษฐ์) from the Sanskrit "panchangapratishtha" (fivefold body worship, i.e. with the forehead, two palms and two knees resting on the floor.) Such salutation among the Thai is the highest form of respect. Salutation by full prostration on the ground and "kissing the earth with the forehead" is unknown.

After worshipping in this manner, a little quantity of the scented water is poured on the hands of the Buddha image. Such a ritualistic act is called in Thai "Song nam Phra Putha Rup" (สงฆ์ชำระพุทธรูป) (bathing the Buddha image.)

Usually such a ceremonial bath is not performed within the shrine when there are crowds of people participating. Instead the image is taken out of the shrine, sometimes in procession, to a pavilion where everybody may have convenient access to it. When

restricted, devotees usually content themselves with sitting on the heels with raised hands placed palm to palm in juxtaposition to the forehead.

An observer may note some of the worshippers, mostly the women, while in such position, silently move their lips in prayer, although there is no prayer in the strict meaning of the term in Buddhism. The women may be asking for a New Year blessing, or a love to be fulfilled.

In certain places, for the "bathing", people erect a wooden trough into which ordinary or scented water is poured to run down to the Buddha image or images which are sometimes canopied. In the northeast provinces they make the trough with bamboo, at the end of which is a device like a miniature water-wheel which works as a spray.

It is curious to note that in Sriracha, a seaside resort about 100 miles on the east coast of the Gulf of Siam, there is a Chinese idol, supposedly a titular spirit of the place. It also receives a ceremonial bath during Songkran day. The idol is carried in procession through the main street while people sprinkle it with scented water on the way. The idol is afterwards carried to the seashore and merrily ducked many times into the sea before being carried back to the pagoda.

During Songkran, the weather is scorchingly hot and perhaps the devotees consider the idol, unsatisfied with mere sprinkling, requires a sea bath as well. Such unceremonious ducking of the idol may perhaps hasten the advent of the first monsoon which is approaching.

Not only do the Buddha images in Thailand receive the ceremonial bath, but elders of the family and elder monks may receive it too. Here is an account of the bathing of family elders. In Bangkok, especially among the upper class, people are wont to make a traditional call on their elders to pay their respects during Songkran. This they do by pouring scented water into the palms of the

elder who will then duly rub it lightly on his head and face. The elder, in the old days, would then be presented by the visitors with a "phanung" (loin cloth) and a "pha khao ma" for a male or a "pha hom" for a female, both of which constituted every day wear in those days.

Nowadays the elder is presented with a towel, a box of handkerchiefs, a box of soap or other such articles and sometimes with a bottle of scented water. After the presentation the elder will bestow his blessing and best wishes upon the relatives for the New Year.

A gift of a bottle of scented water is specially appreciated by the older generation who are wont to smear themselves during the hot season with a preparation of soft chalk powder called "din saw phong" mixed with scented water which is refreshing to the skin. Sometime the powder is ready-mixed with attar of roses and may be applied lightly with a towel or handkerchief. Such toilet preparation is called "paeng sod" or fresh toilet powder.

In the old days, up to as recently as 60 or 70 years ago, the ceremonial bath was the regular family thing. The elder would seat himself on a broad bench. The children would assist him in the bathing by pouring the scented water on him. They also would furnish him with a new set of clothing to be worn after the bath. Further they would present him with the traditional candles, joss sticks and flowers—emblems denoting the highest respect among the Thai.

Assuredly, a candle is a symbol of light; Joss sticks, as peculiar to the Chinese, in place of incense burners, the symbol of aromatic vapour; and flowers, the symbol of beauty. These three qualities are aesthetic pleasures required by man and possibly by supernatural beings as well.

In some parts of the country the New Year ceremonial bath is performed in the wat or monastery. In that case a monk is invited to give the Buddhist commandments or "sila" to the elder before he takes the bath in the prescribed manner.

In Chiangmai as elsewhere in the north this ceremonial bath is called "dam hua" or immersing of the head. Undoubtedly, in the old days, the bath was an actual plunge in the water after the manner of the Hindus in Bengal who perform the traditional purificatory bath in the river during their Songkran festival.

Some people in Chiangmai for the occasion get themselves a new set of clothing, put it in a silver bowl, and take it to the water for the monk to bless and purify with sprinkling of holy water.

We now come to the ceremonial bath of a monk. It may take place on any of the three days of Songkran. The monk is usually the abbot of the monastery, who is invariably held in high esteem, usually old and, in the case of a village wat, a leading personage in the community life. People call him "Luang Phaw" (great father). He is not only their spiritual father but also their adviser in temporal affairs in the light of his recognised wide knowledge and experience. Sometimes he combines the versatility of doctor, astrologer and adept in the mystical and magical arts separately or all rolled into one.

He is always an unquestioned mediator in disputes; the villagers, in most cases preferring to abide by their "Luang Phaw's" decision rather than report to the courts or other local authorities.

It is not difficult to see, therefore, that such a man would command hosts of disciples falling over each other to do him the traditional honour of a ceremonial bath. But in such cases a notice is circulated before-hand specifying the exact day and time of the ceremony which is the same as for the elder of a family. After the bath the abbot gives a sermon followed by his blessing for a happy New Year.

It may be pointed out that there was a tendency in recent years, particularly in the capital of Bangkok, to shift the ceremonial bath observance from the traditional Songkran festival days to the official New Year on January 1st. But orthodox people stubbornly clung to the time-honored date and the swing at present seems to be definitely with them.

A unique monk-bathing ceremony is performed in a certain east coast district on the afternoon of the first day of Songkran. The abbot or other monk to be honored is invited to seat himself under a silken curtained canopy in a gaily beflagged and flower-bedecked bullock cart. Both young and old men join in pulling the cart around the shrine thrice in a clockwise direction to the accompaniment of music. After thus circumambulating, the cart is pulled to a pavilion specially erected for the bathing ceremony usually in open ground. But the cart takes time to reach its destination. A tug of war ensues as to who shall pull the cart. Two village teams, north and south, decide the issue. Each team is made up of young men and girls. Each tries its best to tug the cart from the other.

The tug-of-war goes on sometimes for an hour or even more. Meantime, it can be well imagined that the monk on the cart must go through the unenviable ordeal of being bumped and jerked and tossed about over ground usually none too smooth. His ordeal might indeed be a tragic one were it not that the good people of the village, knowing what was coming, already had provided him with a pillow stuffed with hay to soften the impacts.

Even so, the experience is none the less a trying one especially if the monk be old, though he, as well as the other participants, takes it as part of the traditional fun. And besides, care is taken not to invite a monk who is considered too old or infirm to stand the strain.

Further, to soften the 'agony' if the contest is a prolonged one with no decision reached after a full hour or so, a 'truce' is called to permit both sides, and the monk too, to take a breather to rest and partake of refreshments. But sooner or later a decision is reached and the winning team then has the honour of pulling the cart to the appointed pavilion.

To celebrate the occasion, victors join together in choral singing, dancing and the exchange of wise cracks, for the Siamese are as a rule a sporting race.

After his ordeal is 'decided' the monk gets down from the cart and enters the pavilion where he receives his ceremonial bath in approved style; this concluded, the crowd entertain themselves in the wat compound to a huge feast financed from the common village fund and amuse themselves by throwing water on each other.

I was told on good authority that in certain villages in outlying districts, especially in the northeast, the young girls seize the opportunity at songkran of ducking their favourite young monks. They will come upon the "luang phi" (great elder brother) stealthily when he is in his cell busy meditating or reading or otherwise preoccupied. Before he knows anything, he finds his yellow robes soaked with water: he is a victim of the unceremonial bath which he takes in good part as a signal mark of esteem from the young females.

Giving a monk a ducking on the occasion of Songkran is deemed a highly meritorious act. If the monk be elderly his permission is often obtained beforehand when he usually appoints the time and place for the ceremony. Often he will choose to receive the ducking in the refectory when he is taking his meal with his brother monks.

During Songkran no one by virtue of his rank, title or calling is exempt from a ducking. Even such exalted local dignitaries as the district commissioner or district officer (Nai Amphur), who are usually regarded as petty gods by the country people, may be subjected with short shrift to the treatment, even as they are walking on the public road. And every one takes it in good part as an honour to both recipient and giver. The recipient gains in the 'respect' shown him and the conferrer of the bath gains not only merit but 'face' in direct proportion to the rank and status of the one he ducks.

In the hot season of the Songkran water is sometimes difficult to get. Indeed it is often muddy. But what of it? The mud reduces neither the dignity nor the merit won by the performance.

The ceremonial bath is not restricted to the Songkran festival. There are four other occasions in the life of a Thai. They are;

1) After the first shaving of the hair of the new born. This is to rid the child of the remnants of the 'mammalian' hair, some of which may still adhere to the body.

2) After the tonsure ceremony or the cutting of the topknot- (a cultivated tuft of hair on the top of the head.) This is also an act of washing away the remnants of the pristine hair on the body. Top knots are rarely seen nowadays.

3) After a wedding ceremony. Here it constitutes an act of purification before the consummation of the marriage.

4) After death. Here it is an act of purification of the corpse preparing itself to ascend to heaven to worship at the Phra Chulamani Cedi or stupa where a lock of Lord Buddha's hair or one of his canine teeth is installed. People believe that the departed who worship at this heavenly shrine gain heaven. It is undoubtedly a cult of the Mahayana vehicle or Northern Buddhism which has unconsciously been assimilated and survived among the southern sect of Buddhists.

On the occasions noted with the exception of the first one, the bathing ceremony is performed by relatives and friends.

The ceremonial bath during the Songkran festival constitutes a purificatory act to start the New Year with a clean slate, as it were, and it is offered as homage to elders to obtain their blessings and best wishes.

There is another kind of ceremonial bath which requires only a holy person (usually an elderly monk) to perform. Its purpose is to avert calamities, bad luck, or evil influences. The water used for this purpose must be a "nam mon" (น้ำมนต์) or specially blessed water.



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