Wat Yarn Rangsee

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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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The religious institution that I visited this month is called Wat Yarn Rangsee Buddhist Monastery at 22155 Glen Drive, Sterling, VA 20164. The denominational affiliation is Theravada. Yesterday on 9/19/2015 at 11:55am, I arrived on the grounds of the blessed building before me. The presiding official is Udom, the head monk.

There were two buildings total on the premises, along with a few picnic tables and gazebos covered in beautiful flowers and decorations. The first building was the main temple where prayer and important events took place. It was large from the outside and when you enter through the front doors, you walk into a large room with numerous buddha statues everywhere you turn, all in different positions: Some laying down, some standing, and many sitting. The other building looked like a regular house from the outside, that was where the monks lived. It was small and a little crowded inside.

Visitors were greeted with a friendly welcome, usually in Thai. If it is obvious that someone does not speak Thai, such as an American person or someone of another nationality, they greet you in English. People of the buddhist community are very welcoming of all kinds of people seeking to reach a spiritual enlightenment through the teachings of Buddha. The people in this community were mostly Thai and the female to male ratio was about 50/50. I would say the average age was 40 years and there were approximately 35 people present.

I was comfortable sitting and talking with people around me because they were very friendly and open to any questions I had. Though I do not speak Thai, I did not feel intimidated because most people there were of my own race and could speak English fairly well. Let, a frequent temple-goer, and a man, whose name I do not recall, guided me through the temple answering any and all questions I had. They walked me through a typical day of giving and prayer which is very similar to most Sundays at the temple, excluding days of ceremonies and other special events. I was grateful for Let’s and the old man’s wisdom.

This was not my first time stepping foot in this temple. Though I am not a strict buddhist, nor is my family, I have come here twice before. Once for a festival in which I have no recollection of what exactly we were celebrating, and another time in remembrance of my grandfather who passed several years ago. Let began explaining the traditions of Thai people and buddhists of the Theravada denomination. When greeting people in Thai, we put our hands together to represent the giving of the Lotus flower. The lotus flower symbolizes the purity of the mind, body, and speech. She also mentioned that I could speak to Udom personally if I had any unanswered questions about my paper. This was my chance to get a real hands-on experience in the Buddhist monastery.
The service I attended was, for the most part, ritualistic. It was mostly ritualistic because of the prayer and worship we did with the monks. In the Theravada denomination, the community follows traditional methods in the temple including rituals, prayer, and worship to Buddha. The service ended in more prayer, then people were dismissed to gather together a plate of delicious homemade dishes. Everyone told me to try a little bit of everything, since each dish is blessed and it is respectful to have a bite of each type of food. After eating, we could either talk amongst each other, speak with the monks, or leave with a friendly gesture.

There are many symbols in the religious organization of Buddhism such as the statue of Buddha, which is usually seen in ten different poses and postures. The Protection Buddha symbolizes courage and overcoming fear, the Meditation Buddha symbolizes one’s search for peace in their life, the Earth Touching Buddha symbolizes the moment of enlightenment for Buddha, the Nirvana Buddha symbolizes the Historical Buddha and his last moments of life on earth, the Medicine Buddha symbolizes one’s search of health, the Teaching Buddha symbolizes wisdom, understanding, and fulfilling destiny, the Walking Buddha symbolizes grace and internal beauty, the Contemplating Buddha symbolizes quiet determination and patient understanding, the Begging Buddha symbolizes compassion and caring for all beings, and the Repelling/Preventing Buddha signifies repelling of floods and preventing family arguments.

Going for refuge is the most common ritual in Buddhism. It signifies enlightenment and that the Buddha’s teachings serve as practical lessons for our everyday obstacles in life.
Offering alms is also one of the most common and oldest rituals among Buddhists. Before monasteries were built, the first Buddhist monks were homeless and begged for food. By giving food to the monks, it reminds us not to be greedy or selfish. The need for rituals in the Buddhist community can be deemed almost essential because it helps us explore our inner selves on a spiritual level.

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