

## "How Big and Powerful Is Your God?"

By Ron Myers

Greetings From Northeast Thailand In the Name Of The Lord Jesus Christ,

By titling this newsletter in this way, I'm not asking you specifically as a believer; "*How big and powerful is your God?*" Yet, it's a question that arises as missionaries seek to evangelize and minister to the 95% Buddhist populace in Thailand—approaching 100% here in the Isan Region. The following treatise can help us ponder what it's like to live in a world without any hope or knowledge of God.

First, to clear up any potential misunderstanding, the Lord Buddha *meaning the Enlightened One, was a Northern Indian or Southern Nepali Prince by the name of Siddhārtha Gautama. Prince Gautama never actually intended for his followers to view him as their god, or to worship him as such, or construct images in his likeness to be bowed down to, or give flowers, or light incense sticks to in respect and homage, or to recite wishes or prayers to. No, these traditions all came from his followers, after his passing. However, Buddha did say: "follow my teachings, seek out the truth for yourselves."*

I've heard Western pastors say that all religions or belief systems seek a path to "God" through a variety of means. This oft-repeated axiom is not necessarily true. Concerning the founder of Buddhism, oral history tells us that *Prince Gautama* considered himself more of a philosophical mentor... a seeker renowned for profound wisdom and the discovery of the *eight-fold middle path* to salvation. What kind of salvation? ...escape from further reincarnations back into this life, replete with all of its pain, suffering, and sorrow. This *salvation* (so-called) is said to be gained through practicing a prescribed series of right works and right thoughts—known as the eight-fold middle path, including its four spiritual truths, all in hopes of gaining entrance into Nirvana.

Called *Nirvana* or *Neepan*, it is *not* to be likened to the Christian's Biblical Heaven, since it is a concept where the few who attain this cease to exist any longer, and thus are "saved" from any further reincarnation cycles. Thus, *Nirvana* is not a land of blissful contentment, but what I refer to as a state of un-being, where people melt back into the cosmic gene pool to exist no longer. Concerning Heaven, their concept of heaven is a temporary place where minor "gods" (Deva or Tewada) dwell, and where "good" people go for a season before undergoing reincarnation again—not having gained quite enough merit to attain the state of *Nirvana*. If they don't make it the first time around, there's always another reincarnation in the future. Unfortunately, many unsaved Westerners who have rejected Christ, have bought into this Eastern religious mysticism, because reincarnation and all of its other trappings sounds quite attractive to their unregenerate minds.

Theravada or orthodox Buddhism (the lesser vehicle or "Way of the Elders") is the mainstay, state-ordained way of life and practice throughout most all of Thailand. Exceptions are the three southern Muslim-inhabited provinces, bordering Malaysia, and the Animistic or spirit-appeasing Hill Tribes, who inhabit the remote mountainous regions in the north and west, bordering Burma. Theravada Buddhism is also practiced in Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos, and Cambodia... essentially almost all of mainland Southeast Asia

The other branch of Buddhism is called *Mahayana*, and is less orthodox in belief and practice. Mahayana Buddhism (meaning "the greater vehicle" due to having more devotees) is practiced throughout the rest of mainland Asia, including Japan. Zen, which is one of its traditions, is more familiar to Westerners. Nevertheless, Buddhism in any form is a "bootstrap" religious system of works. Buddha is even purported to have said: "*You are your own means to salvation.*"

Also, the Thais' Theravada Buddhism is not textbook pure (*nor is Mahayana Buddhism*). Many Thai acknowledge that they blend three separate belief systems together, Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Spirit appeasement or Animism—which includes paying homage to territorial owner spirits and caring for their own dead ancestors, a belief and practice common throughout Asia.

Concerning spirit appeasement (Animism), every piece of property containing a structure throughout the land, as well as in fields and forests, have spirit shrines where interaction between humans and spirits takes place. There are even stores that specialize in their sale. (*Compare what Luke wrote of in the book of Acts about the craftsmen that made and sold silver shrines to the goddess Diana.*)

These shrines can be very expensive at large industries or government buildings, or makeshift old posts with grass roofs among the poor and destitute villagers. Some trees are even sacred, having colorful ribbons and food offerings around them. Elaborate or not, rich or poor, the principle remains the same, appease or pay homage to entities in the spirit world to help ensure well-being. Each village, town, and city has a shrine to its territorial owner spirit, said to be a servant who was killed and buried, and whose spirit now presides over the land there. These spirit entities are prayed to in hopes of gaining wealth, health, or "well-being"... a cultural theme held throughout Thailand.

Then there's Brahmanism, which takes the form of auspicious days or occasions, charms, spells, potions, and amulets. These amulet necklaces contain small Buddha images, and are said to be infused with much power, since they are "blessed" by honored Buddhist monks. They are said to ward off evil and misfortune, as long as they are cared for properly. It's not a laughing matter, yet Christians often quip privately between ourselves: "*How big and powerful is your god?*" "*Can you put him in your pocket?*" "*Does he protect you or do you have to protect him?*" We wouldn't say this to them directly as it would be very offensive, and likely against Thai law.

This all seems so vain to us who believe, but it's part of everyday life for a Thai Buddhist, including all the darkness, fears, sadness, and lack of hope. Any Thai who comes to Christ is deeply elated with God's love and forgiveness, saying this is what they've been searching for all their lives. But this can only happen if they first change their minds, thinking that Christ is merely the foreigners' religion.

Continuing on, Pastor Pitak and I are busily reviewing the Isan New Testament, towards to goal of printing next year. Also, Wycliffe Bible Translators of Thailand has recently contacted me, asking permission to examine the Isan translation (now being done), hoping to give it their stamp of approval. I am confident in its accuracy, so please pray that all goes well, which will enhance its validity among many!

In closing, Cheryl and I want to reaffirm our heartfelt appreciation to all of you who stand with us to reach these people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's worth every menial trial and challenge faced.

By God's Grace and for His Glory,

*Ron Myers*

Ron and Cheryl Myers

