

KONG KA TIN
THE INDULGENCE OF THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST

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Theravada Buddhism is one of the schools of Buddhism. The majority of its following is in southeast Asian. Within the Laotian and eastern Thailand community, there is a ritual to free one's self from the constant cycle of death and rebirth in reincarnation. It is known as *Kong Ka Tin* (ກອງກາຕິນ). The ritual itself is to earn points in *boun* (ບຸນ). *Boun* is the manifestation of all the good you have done in your life. The more *boun* you have, the more likely you are to reach nirvana. Therefore, *boun* might be described as the exact opposite of sin. The ritual can be performed for yourself, for someone you know, or for someone who has died. Typically, the ritual is for good health, to reach nirvana after death, or for a dead family member to reach nirvana sooner.¹

The *Kong Ka Kin* ritual itself is based on reciprocity between the congregation and the temple and between the people and the divine. First, gifts are brought to the monks. In return, the monks bless all those who have given to them. Second, they pray for the specific person the ritual is for. In return, the monks bless those who have participated in the prayer. Finally, the people bring the items and place them in the temple for the monks. In return, the people are blessed again. By doing these duties for the monks, the people are blessed by the monks, who have the authority of the divine to do so.

One of these *Kong Ka Tin* rituals was held at the home of Toby Panyanouvong, located in a Laotian neighborhood just outside of Squirrel Run subdivision in New Iberia, Louisiana, for his great-grandmother and great-grandfather. Both had been dead for more than twenty years, but the family convened to raise *boun* for both family members. However, in organizing and hosting

¹ Toby Sisouphanh Panyanouvong, interview by author, tape recording, New Iberia, La., 11 November 2006.

the ritual, the family also raised *boun* for themselves. This shows how the *Kong Ka Tin* ritual is just as important to the living as it is to the dead.

The role of the members of the congregation is vital to the ritual's outcome. The roles of the head monk, the monks, and the congregation are clearly defined. While on the surface it appears that people attend the ritual out of their own self interest in obtaining more *boun* for themselves, they are also there to make sure their deceased loved ones receive more *boun* as well.

The ritual area was set up outside the home, under several large tents. Surrounding the ritual area were several flags, all with different color strips. These same flags generally ordain Buddhist ritual areas. Upon entering the ritual area, everyone was seated on the floor facing the far end. They had placed planks of wood on the ground and had covered them with cloth to make a seating area. Approximately fifty people were located in the ritual area, ranging from infancy to elderly.

Near the entrance, two twin bunk beds were placed opposite of one another. Household necessities, such as pots, sheets, blankets, and towels, were placed on both beds. Pinned to the wooden boards of the bed were hundreds of bills, ranging in one-dollar bills to one-hundred dollar bills. All of these items, including the money, were gifts to the monks who presided over the ritual.

At the far left corner was a golden statue of Buddha. The statue was approximately eight feet tall. The statue of Buddha sat in the lotus meditation position, very typical position for the Buddha in Theravada Buddhism. Also, the Theravada Buddha is generally thin, symbolizing Buddha's need to suffer to attain enlightenment before finding the Middle Way. Draped from the right shoulder to the left hip was a red sash. The statue sat upon a makeshift altar, made of cargo pallets. However, the altar was elaborately decorated with symbols and water lilies.

Off to the right side of the altar sat the head monk, dressed in traditional red robes, upon a

golden throne. The chair is described as a throne because it sits higher than any other person in the room, clearly making this monk the most important person at the event. Several golden dragons were cast into the arms and legs of the chair. The seating material was maroon and appeared to be made of a velvet like material. The head monk was speaking into a microphone, which was connected to an audio amplifier to the side of him. The head monk, speaking in Laotian, thanked all those present for attending and made special thanks to the hosts and those who brought gifts.

To the right side of the head monk sat twelve monks, ranging in age from about sixty years old to about eight years old. Each of the monks, each wearing the traditional red robes as well, sat upon a raised platform, also made of cargo pellets, that was no more than six inches from the floor. The monks sat very quietly, but were quite attentive to the people around them. Located in front of the monks were twelve wooden bowls. These are bowls for the monks to collect alms. These bowls are known by the Laotians as *bod* (ບາດ). People lined up and individually placed food into the bowls. This specific ritual of giving alms to the monks is called *sai bod* (ສະບາດ). The *sai bod* ritual is a very common part of a Theravada Buddhist ritual.

On a table at the far right of the ritual area sat a table that appeared to be acting as a separate altar. It was a simple wooden table painted a bluish-gray color. Upon the table sat seedling Aspen trees, approximately eight inches tall, in simple black plastic pots. Each of the seedlings had been spray painted gold. The Aspen tree is very important to the monks because it is the tree that Buddha reached enlightenment under.

As people finished filling the bowls with the food they brought, they each sat amongst the others in the congregation facing the altar. Some sat Indian-style, also known as the lotus position, with their legs folded under them. Most of the women and a few of the older men sat with their

legs to the side, probably because their tight fitted wraps prevented them from crossing their legs. They chatted in their native languages. After the last two people were finished filling the wooden bowls, they covered them with gold plates and moved them closer to the monks. Two other men came behind them and uncovered the bowls to put a few more food items in them. They apparently were people who did not get a chance to put the items in the bowl earlier; thus, this was not a typical part of the ritual. They bowed before the monks three times and prayed aloud before leaving the area. The prayers were chanted in Pali, the language Buddha spoke during his lifetime and the official language of Theravada Buddhism.

As soon as the men finished, the head monk began to chant in Pali. They chanted a common Buddhist prayer that professed their respect for the Buddha. When they finished, they bowed before the monks. Throughout the chant and afterwards, the members of the congregation sat with their palms and fingers placed on top of one another, in the position most westerners place their hands when praying. The prayer lasted for approximately seven minutes.

When they finished the chant, three men near the front brought more food and presented it to the monks on trays. An elderly man chanted in Laotian that they offer food, money, cookies, and flowers to the monks. The men then picked up the bowls and placed them even closer to the monks, even the child monks, so that they would be within arms reach. Again, the men bowed before leaving the vicinity of the monks.

When they were finished, everyone in the congregation lowered their heads and began to pray in Pali again. It was a very short chant, only lasting a few seconds, before the head monk took over and began to pray in Pali over the audio amplifier. The rest of the monks followed him in chanting. In the chant, the monks prayed for the people on the congregation. They accepted the gifts presented to them in the prayer as well. They blessed the food presented to them. When the monks concluded their chant, the people raised their hands to their foreheads in a sign of

respect known as *nop* (ໂນປ). This sign of respect is a form of greeting, equivalent to a handshake in North America, but also serves as a salute to a person of higher status. The higher the hands are placed in front of the face, the more respect that individual has for the other.

At the conclusion of this fifteen minute prayer segment, the monks began to eat the food brought before them. Most of the congregation started to chat amongst themselves while the monks ate. The elders of the congregation sat quietly and slowly looked at those around them. No one moved from their place during this time. They sat and waited approximately twenty minutes until the monks finished eating.

A man then hit a gong three times in about a two second interval. Multicolored holiday lights were draped over the statue of Buddha and then lit. A few people then picked up the remaining food and distributed it to the people in the congregation. They all ate in groups on the floor where they were sitting. The young monks, ranging in age from about eight to sixteen, then departed to go back to the temple. As the congregation ate, a few of the monks each had a cigarette and relaxed. Traditional Laotian music, *Mu Lam* music (ໜູລາມ), began to play while the people ate. The setting turned into a very casual atmosphere where people seemed to relax and enjoy each other's company.

About an hour later, members of the congregation started to decorate trees with money. They were artificial trees made of bamboo sticks. The head monk then came over the audio amplifier and introduced the hosts and thanked them for holding the event. An elderly man sitting near the front started telling everyone about his grandmother, who is over one-hundred years old, and how she is related to him. This woman is also the great-aunt of the host, Toby Panyanouvong. Meanwhile, the older women of the community gathered in a small area on the side. Banana leaves, fresh bananas, and rice were brought to them. They took banana leaves and

placed them flat on the floor. They then filled the leaves with rice and bananas. They then rolled the leaves tightly and placed them in metal boxes. The metal boxes were placed one by one on three fire pits just outside of the ritual area. Men, ranging from their early thirties to their late forties, left the ritual area and went into an empty room in the house to socialize. The elderly of the community sat and conversed with the remaining monks in front of the altar.

Approximately two hours later, the head monk came over the audio amplifier again and started to explain why they needed to pray to Buddha. This prayer to honor Buddha's accomplishments is called *wei pah* (ວິໄຍພະ). This is another prayer in Pali. Occasionally throughout the prayer, the congregation bowed. The head monk, sitting on his golden throne, held a white fan with words written with Pali writing. The fan had Aspen leaves drawn onto it in black ink. An unknown symbol was located in the center of the fan. The symbol had a triangle shape at the bottom and a oval shape at the top, resembling that of an Egyptian cartouche. What appeared to be a coiled snake or dragon was located in the center of the oval section.

When they finished chanting, the monk reintroduced the hosts and explained what the ritual was for Boun and Bawthong. Speaking in Laos, he said that they died over twenty years prior and that family wants them to reach nirvana. The head monk began to tell the story of about how the Buddha preached. He said that he is preaching the same way Buddha preached. He explained that the *Kong Ka Tin* ritual is good for the people that hosts, for the people that are present, and for the monks who participated, and especially for Boun and Bawthong. He said that when people die, they cannot take any material possessions with them; therefore, material wealth is irrelevant to spiritual enlightenment. What is important is what accompanies them to the afterlife. What accompanies them is all the good things they have done in their lives, which is *boun*. He said it is possible, through the *Kong Ka Tin* ritual, to send *boun* from yourself to

your deceased family members. This is why the ritual shows appreciation and respect for the ones who have died, the family members of the hosts. He explains that the time it takes to organize the ritual and gather everyone together is very much appreciated and helps to accumulate *boun*.

The head monk then begins to tell the congregation of a Buddhist myth about a man who did not worry about his parents. The man listened to his wife and left his home at a young age. He did not do anything to help take care of his parents when he got older. The man's parents aged and became too weak to work. They became hungry and starved because their son did not care for them the way he should have. The monk said that it is a child's responsibility to take care of the parents, in life and in death, to make sure they get to nirvana. While telling the story, the monk occasionally began to chant certain sections.

When the head monk finished his story, everyone bowed and the gong rang three times again. The congregation then stood up and started to chat amongst themselves. The remaining monks and the head monk began to converse with the elders in the front rows. This was the conclusion of the first day of the ritual. A few minutes later, the monks returned to the temple.

After the ritual, people partied inside the Panyanouvong home until morning. Most of the women and children sat on the floor and played cards. Meanwhile, the men sat at the very long dining table and talked. The hostess of the home served everyone drinks. Located near the kitchen was a buffet filled with traditional Laotian cuisine. Most of the food was vegetarian. The foods that contained meat did not have a large quantity of meat.

The next morning, many people from the congregation on the previous day gathered just after sunrise. They gathered together the items that were placed on the beds for the monks. They placed the items into boxes and placed them in three cars. After cleaning up the ritual area, they all departed for the temple in Lang Xang Village, between New Iberia and Youngsville.

Upon arrival at the temple, the boxes were removed from the trunks and the hosts took the boxes to the temple doors. They were greeted at the temple doors by the monks. The hosts turned the gifts over to the monks and they signed with respect before departing.

The ritual began at noon on the first day and ended around eight in the morning the next day. The early morning ceremony was not elaborate or extravagant, but it showed that the people cater to the monks for their own benefit. Monks live only on the charity of their constituents. The monks are very humble in receiving gifts and will most often give them to a needing family before keeping them for themselves. In this manner, the ritual also works to redistribute the wealth amongst the community.

The *Kong Ka Tin* ritual is a very important ritual to the Laotians of South Louisiana. This ritual helps to remind them of their origins, but also reinforces their beliefs and their convictions. The ritual brings out the good in people, since attendants are expected to give something to charity. But the main theme of the ritual, earning points to reach nirvana, is the most important reason to attend the ritual.

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