

*Rituals followed by novice monks are a  
cornerstone, not only to an individual's  
Buddhist-inspired contentment,  
but also to the future  
of Thai society*

# Rhythm of the Days

BY

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**4.30am** DAWN IS APPROACHING. THE SILENCE IS WARM and soothing. The first white light hasn't yet pried open the quilt of the thick black sky but there are sleepy whispers as a new day starts for 200 novice monks at Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Patum Thani province. Drowsiness shrugged off, the hall is now filled with movement. The little monks rise from their wooden bunks covered with thin mattresses and, with the solemnity of well-groomed adults, they turn to fold their mosquito nets and blankets, interrupting the stillness with the shuffling of feet. A light exercise will commence outside, and soon their religious life — the only life they're living — will begin afresh at the first verse of the monotonous, hypnotic morning prayer. ■ It's a slow life, though obviously peaceful, cultured and happy. From dawn until dusk, novice monks, or *saama nen*, live in a parallel universe that is governed by the righteousness of Buddhist teachings even as they're going through the inevitable process of growing up, just like normal children. They study and play; they think and





dream; they enjoy the present and believe in the future. Yet theirs is a childhood cloaked in the monkhood, a realm of total piety devoid of secular pleasure — no comic books, no movies, no PlayStation — for the ascetic prescriptions must prevent the young minds from any path that might lead them astray.

As city kids wake up to the chaos of morning routines, *saama nen* here achieve their early dose of peace through meditation, as they sit cross-legged and assume the mental clarity derived from the rhythm of their breathing. Meanwhile, outside the windows the first white light begins to break in the vast dawn sky.

**5.50am** PRINCE RAHUL, THE SON of Lord Buddha, was the first novice monk in the long history of Buddhism. When his father returned to the city after attaining Enlightenment, Rahul came to him to beg

for the throne. But Lord Buddha preached to his son about a virtue higher than kingship, about the goodness that would guide him to eternal contentment. Rahul listened, believed and was ordained into the path of the yellow robe.

Today, however, the scale has shifted. The majority of novice monks in Thailand are no longer kids from the aristocratic class, but from poor families who cannot afford the price of modern education and send their young to the care of the temples, hoping that faith will guide them not only to contentment, but also to a brighter future as human beings. In the new Thai society, the tradition of novice monks has extended its function into a kind of social service that brings aid to the underprivileged half.

At Wat Phra Dhammakaya, Khun Ekalak, a 14-year-old boy from a farming family in Buriram, performs his first duty of the day by walking out of the temple to beg for alms. As the villagers put food in

**LEFT AND ABOVE: The path to enlightenment followed by Thailand's novice monks is one of daily repetition that centres on meditation and prayer. This shapes their behaviour to the moral template of Buddhism.**





his bowl — sometimes they're wise enough to give him candies and multi-coloured jelly sweets — he bows his head, grateful for whatever the donors bestow upon him. At the same time Khun Worawut, a 13-year-old from a working class background, stays on at the compound with a broom in hand to sweep leaves off the lawn, while Khun Supakorn, 18, diligently cleans the floor of the sleeping hall as he chats good-humouredly with his friends. More or less the same activities are carried out by 60,000 other *saama nen* at temples around Thailand. A breakfast of boiled rice and milk is served at seven.

Seven is the minimum age for a boy to become a novice monk, though generally you'll find him 13 years or older. He can remain in the frock for as long as he wishes, but must be re-ordained into a full-rank monk once he reaches 20. Or the boy can also choose to leave the priesthood and resume the normal life of a *karavas*, or non-cleric, whenever his heart desires.

**8.15am** AFTER BREAKFAST, A sea of bobbing heads is visible through the line of tall pine trees as the children walk to an open sala that serves as their classroom. Wat Phra Dham-

makaya is fortunate enough to have an expansive compound of unruffled solitude, most other wats in central Bangkok lack such spaciousness and the monks typically study in little more than four-wall classrooms.

Worldly knowledge and religious wisdom combine to make up the curriculum; in fact, that's the educational mix that Thai temples have been teaching the communities for several centuries, long before the time of organised schooling. Nowadays, as the Ministry of Education stipulates, there are two programmes novice monks can choose to study. First is the *pariyati dham samun*, where they learn the basic



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skills of maths, science, social studies and English, the same as students in secondary level of secular schools, but with an additional requirement of Pali, the sacred language in which Buddhist scriptures are written. The temples are allowed to be creative in the arrangement. For example, Wat Wetawan in central Bangkok has a Japanese class and a computer session, while Wat Thammongkol plays it serious with calculus, physics and chemistry.

The second programme is *parian dham*, which is an intensive, profound study of Pali and Buddhist philosophies, with other earthly skills included as extra interests. This is often the path of those who commit themselves to the lifetime of indefatigable piety, and whose goal is to become Buddhist scholars.

Khun Supakorn studies world history and English today. "English is fun," he says with a shy smile. "And I think it will be useful in the future." A guest instructor has refined his conversation skills and explained to the giggling class why they shouldn't blurt out the impolite "I'm hot" when they simply want to describe the hot weather. "I believe that the teachers here (some are monks, others not) will give us the best of their capacity, because they come to help us for charity, not for money," says Khun Supakorn. "To know that they don't work for salary makes me feel confident in them."

Meanwhile for Khun Ekalak, a tiny, restless *saama nen*, studying Pali



is a feat that would define his destiny. "Pali is very difficult because it's the holy language of Lord Buddha's teachings," he explains. "You have to be very careful in translation." Ekalak is now devoting his effort in studying the third level of *parian dham* — his objective is to complete all nine levels — and he shows unusual determination when the 14-year-old says he will reside in the sanctity of monkhood throughout his life. "I wish I could eventually find the ultimate truth in the Buddhist dhamma," the boy says firmly, albeit with a hint of childish innocence.

As Khun Ekalak hops on to join his friends, he doesn't look one bit like a Buddhist philosopher but a child brimming with playful vitality. Yet his training has just started, his options are still open. Whether the yellow frock will be the only garment of his long life, Khun Ekalak's future remains his alone to decide.

**11.05am** WITHOUT the shrieking of an alarm bell, the morning class ends just before 11am. It's lunch time, and all the junior and senior monks move to the nearby dining area, where they will have their last meal of the day.

The Buddhist prescriptions laid down by Lord Buddha instructs a non-cleric to adhere to *seel har*, the five pillars of faith. Top that with the more severe five rules, and you have *seel sib*, the 10 codes of conduct that direct the novice monks' monastic behaviour.

Full-rank monks take a vow to live under ultimate austerity, with a total of 227 rules.

For Khun Ekalak, Khun Supakorn and most of his peers, the *seel sib* may strip them of some excess luxuries, though they've grown to respect them after a few years at the temple. Thou shalt not kill, not steal, not lie, not engage in sexual acts and not imbibe alcoholic drinks — these are the five basic prohibitions. The additional five imposed on *saama nen* serve as the preparation for total asceticism: they shall not eat any heavy food from noon to morning of the next day, though water is allowed; they shall not confuse their thoughts with profane matters (thus no movies and music); they shall not wear accessories on their faces or their frocks; they shall not sleep on soft mattresses (so only a thin cover on the hard wooden bed); and finally, they're forbidden from touching money.

**OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: Religious wisdom is one thing, though more typical activities such as laundry and eating are also a necessity at temples for the self-sufficient novice monks. Aside from Buddhism, the novices are taught everything from world history to conversational English.**



**2.20pm** IT TAKES strength of mind to comply with these rules. Khun Supakorn, the *saama nen* who enjoys studying English, was once a wild child in love with the intoxicating pleasure of liquor, cigarettes and all-night parties. Three years ago his mother begged him to become a novice monk for just seven days, but the boy, to his surprise, found peace and wisdom one morning as he was meditating. He hasn't left the temple since.

"At first I didn't understand why meditation should do me any good; I felt so sleepy sitting with my eyes closed for an hour," he says during a break from an afternoon class. "But once I do, I grow calm inside. I've realised how I made my mother suffer from my behaviour before, and I told her that when she came to visit me."

Bounded by the code of *seel sib*, doesn't he miss the freedom of youth, the parties, the movies, the uninhibited fun of his past? "In the beginning, yes," Khun Supakorn says with a laugh. "But then, not seeing a movie isn't that bad. It's fun, but it's not that I cannot live without it." He pauses to think. "And, after all, I'm happy now. We must be careful, because too much freedom isn't always a good thing."

**5pm** PLAYTIME, WHICH IS NOT much, doesn't become a game of football, but rather more creative activities such as cleaning the dormitories, moving the garbage, tending the gardens or even helping to build a new school structure. No matter how strict their religious existence is, we can see the novice monks blossoming with worldly delight in the brief hour before dusk as they're now free to laugh and tease, run and shout, while one is



pedalling a pushcart in a mock pose of a horse rider and others gather around a new welding tool eager to experiment with it.

Khun Supakorn says he likes it when a senior monk shows the pre-recorded video of wildlife documentaries and news events, because that keeps him in touch with the world. Khun Ekalak agrees, adding that he once was addicted to video games before his ordination, but has sworn off them since. Meanwhile at other temples, like Wat Wetawan, the senior monks even permit an hour of evening television once in a while, though with close supervision.

"We don't want to create a depressing environment for the children," says Phra Thana Bhuddo of Wat Phra Dhammakaya. "On the contrary we see the importance of developing them mentally and physically, and we find the way for them to use their energy in creative ways. These novice monks are like normal children; they're lively and cheerful, only that they're more polite and gentle," the monk gestures at the children playing. "Look at them and tell me if they're not happy. Their joy comes from inside and that, I believe, will last very long."

"After all they're just children, you can't turn a blind eye to that very fact," adds Phra Mahanikorn, the headmaster of Wat Wetawan. "They're going through a period when their bodies and minds are changing, so we have to allow that to happen, but it's also a good opportunity for us to shape their behaviour with the moral template of Buddhism. They came here as poor children with no future, and hopefully they'll go out with something valuable," the monk says. "It's not only their future we're talking

about — it's the society's too."

**9.45pm** WHEN NIGHT FALLS, the secluded compound appears virtually motionless. The evening prayer has finished by 7pm. On some nights there is another meditating session, on others there's an extra class on Pali. Otherwise it's time to wrap up the homework or personal study.

"Tonight I'll have to practice my Pali or I cannot follow the class tomorrow," says Khun Supakorn, his hand clutching a notebook. His wish, the boy reveals, is to study in detail both worldly and religious subjects. He may take an exam at a Buddhist university, or he may become a teacher. He may remain a monk, or he may leave the temple to resume his life's journey as a *karavas*. He has his plan, his dream, though Buddhism has taught him not to cling to the worrying uncertainty of the future. "I try to live for the present," Khun Supakorn says, "and do best in what I have to do."

Lights are out at 10pm. Everything is as black as the thick vast sky. The silence is warm and soothing. The day has ended for the novice monks, though it will begin its slow, peaceful rhythm again when dawn comes. ☸

**ABOVE: For a novice looking towards a lifetime of piety, studying Buddhism can quickly become an intense and profound exercise.**