

# Phra Lersi (The Reusee of Thailand)

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Photo above: A modern day Phra Lersi (reuser), with an electric fan in his cave.

The religion of the Thai population is by and large Buddhist, and decidedly of the Southern Hīnayānic School of Theravāda, or Doctrine of the Elders. But it would properly be referred to as Sinhalese Buddhism as Sri Lanka is the place where it first took form. It may also be described Pāli Buddhism for its strict adherence to the Pāli Language literature compiled by the ancient Sinhalese.

But for a period extending about nine hundred years before the thirteenth-century arrival of Sinhalese Buddhism, a multitude of religious approaches coexisted in Thailand. These ranged from the Brahmanistic styles of ascetic endeavours to the sundry systems of Shiva-Shakti worship, from the Vaishnava and Krishna *bhakti* schools to the Pure Land cults of the Mahāyāna.

A great multiplicity of religious forms flourished in the Thai region before the 14th century. There once existed an awe-inspiring variety of independent religious figures such as shamans, *sādhus*, *yogins* and the *rishī*, that dwelt beyond the pale of any specific community or social convention. These indigenous wisdom-knowers roamed about as free as the breeze and practiced now-vanished forms of asceticism. Such holy men were often skilled healers, as well, and commanded high respect from prominent sectarian leaders.

In the Thai language a hermit is called a *reuser*, (*lersi*) (in Khmer, *rosei*) from the Sanskrit *rishī*, that is, a forest dwelling visionary. In fact, in the oldest surviving Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha himself is referred to as “the Rishī.” In general *lersi* are known as ascetics and are characterised by refraining from worldly pleasures. Those who practice this lifestyle hope to achieve greater spirituality. Essentially they believe that the action of purifying the body helps to purify the soul, and thus obtain a greater connection with the divine. Originating in India before the time of Buddha, most *lersi* are hermits and live, study and meditate in caves or forests. In Thailand one of the most famous ascetics is Lersi Tarfai, (*photo above*) who lives in the region of Nakhon Ratchasima.

The stone-hewn bas-relief of two Brahman *sādhus* (ascetics) joyfully worshipping the Hindu god Shiva bears testament to early Thailand's affinity with the religious culture of India. The two bearded *sādhus* wear only loin cloths. Their hair is tied in a topknot. They sit on the ground in a casual manner and lean back against a low decorative pillar. Each of them holds in their two joined hands a *chilum*, or ritual clay pipe, as they perform the quintessential Vedic rite of honoring Shiva with sacramental smoke offering. The pipes are filled with the herbal offering typically consisting of cannabis-derived substances.

There existed an opulent fabric of religious diversity that had formerly been woven between the ancient ruling houses of Lopburi, Nakhon Ratchasima, Srivijaya, Pan Pan, Grahi, Sathing Phra, Phatthalung, Pattani, Nakhon Sri Thammarat and others. Stretching across a near one thousand-year period beginning as early as the 5th century CE, a broad range of Brāhmanical and Buddhist schools flourished in the independent kingdoms and principalities that once comprised the Central Plains of Thailand and the southern Isthmus of Kra.

Numerous forms of Indian religions had thrived there. Brāhmanic, Mahāyānic, Tantrayānic, Vajrayanic and the Pure Land Amitabha and Avalokitesvara sects flourished side by side throughout the overlapping states. Before the thirteenth-century arrival of Sinhalese Buddhism, a great variety of religious traditions flourished in Thailand. Independent figures such as shamans, *sādhus*, *yogins* and *rishīs* (*reusee*) roamed about as free as the breeze and practiced now-vanished forms of ascetic technology. These holy men were often skilled healers too, and commanded high respect from sectarian leaders. They dwelt in a spirit of mutual appreciation with no one heritage having authority over another. The fifth-century Hindu kingdom of Sathing Phra (present day Songkhla) is an interesting little-known case in point. This extremely ancient city is one of the earliest and most fascinating kingdoms on record. It was a purely Hindu society and an important port from the 5th to the 8th centuries. A Hīnayāna Buddhist school prospered there in the 7th and 8th centuries. During the late 9th to the early 11th centuries, Mahāyāna Buddhism from Nalanda and Java took root and flowered. Khmer-influenced sculptures of Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya dating from the 7th to 9th century were found further in Lopburi (an old Mon capital) and in villages around Nakhon Ratchasima and Buriram in the region known today as northeastern Thailand.

Essentially Phra Lersi are Indian hermits who are credited as founders and patron saints of various professions such as doctors, religious tattooists, white magic practitioners, herbalists and many others. There are currently 108 sacred hermits that are recognised by name and many others who are not. More often than not, the Lersi is generically represented as an older man wearing a conical head dress and a tiger skin robe. In Indian mythology, Phra Lersi received worldly knowledge from the Gods and taught this to mankind. Thus, Phra Lersi are known as masters of knowledge and are frequently worshipped by students and others in academic pursuits. As Phra Lersi are also credited to be founders of the Thai magical arts, they feature prominently on the altars of magic practitioners in Thailand and are often invoked in rituals.



*Detail of a bhikkhu and a rishī (Thai Reusee )  
from a Thai temple mural*

One of the most famous current-day black magic practitioners is Ajahn Noo Kamphai. His temple is filled with hundreds of statues and images of the Thai reusee which comprise his signature tattoos. He is particularly well known for a reusee with a tiger's face called 'Phor Gare, Na Sua.' By carrying or displaying an image of Phra Lersi it is believed that you will be protected from black magic and evil spirits.

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