

# How's and wai's

Etiquette means quite a bit in Thailand, so learning a few ground rules will make your visit much more enjoyable

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## CHARM, THEY SAY, IS ONE HALF POLITENESS,

one half good looks. You can only do so much with the latter, but the former — now, that, you can certainly work on.

In Thailand, the easy-going, all-smiles veneer belies a complex social hierarchy that rests on an elaborate set of rules for interaction. For years, Thai school children have looked to a slim volume entitled *Sombat Khong Phudee*, loosely translated as “Treasures of the Well-Mannered”, for tips on proper behaviour. The classic primer on Thai social etiquette, compiled by Chao Phraya Phra Sadech Surenrathibodi, was introduced to schools in 1960 and is still in use today. Given the major changes Thailand has seen in the last 45 years, it would be interesting to see what a personified “Sombat Phudee”, Khun Sombat for short, Thailand’s answer to Emily Post, would have to say about some modern-day etiquette queries.

Dear Khun Sombat,

When visiting Thailand recently, we were taught how to perform the traditional Thai greeting or *wai*. I found it so beautiful. Yet it was also rather confusing. When I noticed Thai people doing it, it seemed like everyone had their own version of it — some raise their fingers to their nose, some to their eyebrows. Some bow, some don't. I'm also unsure about the protocol for responding to a *wai*, called *rap wai*. How do you properly do it, and to whom? In my month in Thailand, I noticed that every sort of customer-service person from the movie-theatre usher to the supermarket cashier *wais* you. Am I supposed to *wai* back?

Why wai

Dear Why,

Yes, the *wai* is a beautiful custom — and symbolic too. The gesture of pressing the palms together represents the offering of a budding lotus, a symbol of Buddhist enlightenment, or simply the offering of respect and goodwill. Befitting, then, its usage in international beauty pageants, I suppose. Indeed, the *wai*, with certain variations, is actually found in many cultures in Asia, from India to Japan.

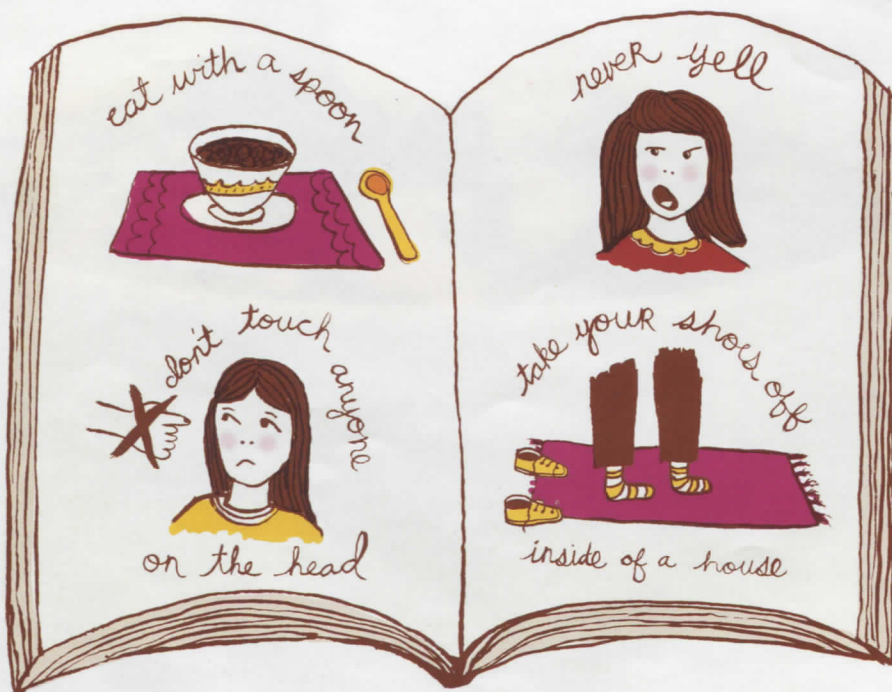
In Thailand, there are also variations. However, it is not an ad hoc or personal decision, but rather, the choice of *wai* is determined by the circumstances of who is being greeted and by whom.

There are three main levels of the *wai*. The highest is used for monks or to pay respect to Buddha images. You should raise your pressed palms until your thumbs touch the space between the eyebrows and your fingertips touch the hairline.

The second level is for parents, teachers, senior relatives, the elderly, and others worthy of special respect. Raise your pressed palms until your thumbs touch the tip of the nose and the fingertips touch the space between the eyebrows.

The third level is for respected persons in general, which includes persons of the same status. Pressed palms touch the lower part of your face, thumbs touch the tip of your chin, and index fingers touch your nose. Bow your head a little but there is no need to bow. Note that with the two other levels of *wai*, the higher the person being respected, the lower you should bow.

When greeting close friends or persons of younger age or lower status, it is not necessary to *wai*. A simple



# 3 ways to wai



to monks



to elders



to equals

“Sawasdee” will suffice. It is also polite to *wai* when saying thank you to persons of higher status. When someone of lower status *wais* you, you should *rap wai* or return their gesture as an expression of mutual respect. To do so, press your palms together at chest level, fingertips at the chin, and bow your head slightly.

I too have noticed the new trend of hyper-politeness among service personnel. I am always a little startled when the cashier at someplace as casual as the food court bows or *wais* before receiving money. While I have a nagging suspicion that it is aimed more at customer ego-stroking, it is still nonetheless a gesture of respect. While some may say such persons are of “lower status” and need not be *wai'd*, the egalitarian humanist in me believes it would be nice to reciprocate their respect and *rap wai*.

Dear Khun Sombat,

When visiting temples, I don't know what the proper way to conduct myself is. I just wing it, and am afraid I am unknowingly showing disrespect to the monks or Buddha images. Please explain to me what I should be doing.

Wat to do

Dear Wat,

You are, unfortunately, not alone. Due to lack of exposure, many do not know how to comport themselves when in the temple.

First of all, it is important to dress appropriately. For extended stays at temples it may be necessary to wear all white or a white shirt and long black skirt for women and black slacks for men. For the day visit,

this is not necessary, but one must still dress modestly. No exposed shoulders, legs, or décolletage. Save that for Siam Square.

When entering a hall with a Buddha image, you should approach it and *khrap* or kowtow three times. People nowadays tend to perform a “speed-*khrap*”, but it is really better to take the time to do it gracefully. It is also customary to make a tripartite offering: flowers, incense and a candle.

If there are monks present, you should then turn to them and *khrap* again three times. If it is not convenient to do so, or the monk is standing or walking past, you should just do the first level *wai* — fingertips at hairline — and bow deeply. All monks, regardless of seniority, deserve respect.

When listening to the monks give a sermon, keep your palms pressed at chest level throughout. When the preaching ends, raise pressed palms until thumbs touch the space between the eyebrows and say “*sathu*”.

When conversing with a monk, always keep palms pressed at chest level. If you are a woman, avoid any physical contact with the monk. Never hand the monks something directly, but place it on the small yellow cloth he will proffer. Similarly, males should avoid physical contact with female monks and nuns.

Dear Khun Sombat,

I'm a stickler for queuing up and waiting my turn. Yet I've noticed that it is very common — in lines for airport immigration, ATM machines and cafeterias — for Thais to allow their friends to “join” them in line, sometimes even several friends. Is this socially acceptable for them to do so or is it still unfairly “jumping the queue” or “cutting in line”, and is it permissible or indeed, incumbent on me, to ask them to please go to the end of the queue?

Queue-rious

Dear Queue-rious,

Your query on queues touches on a pet peeve of mine. It is certainly not acceptable to cut in line in Thailand, or anywhere else for that matter. Thai culture



places the greatest value on being considerate, *krengjai*, so anything that inconveniences others is frowned upon. Yet Thai culture is also highly non-confrontational — sometimes overly so — so few would correct those who cut in line, only encouraging them to continue this rude practice. You would be doing Thai society a favour in speaking up — just remember to do so politely, and with a smile.

Dear Khun Sombat,

I recently hosted a dinner party and one of my Thai guests brought dessert. It was very delicious, but to tell the truth, I was a bit offended because in our culture guests are not supposed to bring anything. Doing so implies that the host is not providing enough food or drink. Did I misinterpret her actions?

Hostess Without the Mostest

Dear Hostess,

This is a classic case of different cultural practices leading to misunderstanding and needlessly ruffled feathers. In Thai culture, it is considered customary to bring something for the host. In fact, not doing so is considered rude or at best thoughtless. It is a sign of *namjai*, or kindness, and gratitude for the host's hospitality to contribute something towards the meal. Accordingly, the host should serve it for all the guests to enjoy rather than keep it for another occasion. Even if there is no meal and it is just a social visit, it is common practice to bring something in hand, a practice known as *as tid mai tid mue*. Traditionally, one would bring home-made food or desserts. Now, in the age of convenience, it is acceptable to bring store-bought food, wine or a basket of



assorted goodies. Accept these graciously and serve it for the enjoyment of all guests.

Dear Khun Sombat,

I recently attended my friend's birthday party. I had shopped a long time to find a gift I thought was perfect for her. So I really wanted to see the look on her face when she opened it, but she just put all the presents given by her guests on a table and left it there, I suppose to open later. Is it considered rude to open the gift in front of me? How disappointing.

Presents in my presence

Dear Presents,

In Thai culture, it is considered indelicate to open presents in front of the guest. One is simply supposed to express gratitude for all gifts, regardless of the size or expense of each. Rather than potentially embarrass guests who had not bought gifts as elaborate as others', or offending the giver by unwittingly showing disappointment on one's face, it is deemed more diplomatic to open gifts in privacy. If your friend is delighted by your gift, she can — and should — let you know in a personal thank you. ☺