

Wat Bang Phra

Sak Yant Bamboo Tattoos

By Ian Ord



Getting a bamboo tattoo (known as Sak Yant in Thailand) has been something of interest to me for over a decade now. From the moment I learned of them I felt that there was something alluring about this ancient art. The branding of ones body using natural elements seemed much more in tune with something natural than that of a sterile stainless steel needle and synthetic inks. Mind you, ever since Angelina Jolie had her bamboo tattoo done in Thailand, their foreign popularity has soared and they've almost become more trendy than spiritually significant. If I was to get this done, I'd need to go somewhere the locals still go for spiritual purposes.

When I learned of Wat Bang Phra, just outside Bangkok, it sounded like exactly what I was looking for. The name translates to simply "The temple of some monks", but naming temples isn't their specialty. It's been a traditional Sak Yant temple essentially since it's creation. 100s of Thais go to get their blessings there each week. The Sak Yant is traditionally chosen by the monk giving the bamboo tattoo. He has a long list of protective symbols to choose from. Each symbol offers a different type of protection or blessing. He decides what best suits your needs, and will give it to you without any prior discussion. The positioning is determined as well... though the majority will end up on ones back.

Upon arriving to the grounds, you should proceed to a booth outside the temple which is selling offerings. The offerings consist of some incense, flowers and candles, and a pack of menthol cigarettes. The total cost of this donation package was a whopping 50 Thai Baht (THB). You are encouraged to leave an additional donation with the offerings. If you see inside the bowl, the average Thai is leaving between 20-100 Thai Baht as a bonus

alm/donation. We played it safe with an extra 100THB. These offerings will be donated to the temple, by placing them in a bowl inside the room with the monk doing the Sak Yant. Later, all the offerings are then brought back outside and resold to future visitors. It's actually a very smart business model, ensuring that the donations are consistent, allowing the Thais to make their offering, and being environmentally sustainable by reusing them.

Next is just the waiting game. Depending on how early you arrive, will determine how many people are in front of you. We counted 2 monks performing the Sak Yant throughout the day. Our monk had a line up of nearly 10 people in front of us, and we arrived at 9am – roughly an hour after doors opened that day. That being said, you would never find a tattoo artist anywhere else who could have 10 people lined up for the same day. I was getting my Sak Yant tattoo by 11am, only 2 hours later!

You approach the monk having already taken off your shirt (or preparing your exposed back in a respectable way, if you are a woman – and yes, the monks were giving Sak Yant to women). Most people had to lean over a triangular pillow, and then have a person on either side hold them down, and stretch the surface of skin where the Sak Yant is to be placed. The monk quickly and precisely guides the elongated piece of sharpened bamboo in the shape of the Sak Yant blessing, tapping it faster than hands should be able to move into your back. I'm not going to lie.. it hurts. It hurts a lot more than a needle tattoo. With this in mind, though, it only lasted at most 15 mins. I practiced breathing techniques, meditation, counting sheep, ANYTHING to get my mind off the pain. It was pretty futile. The pain is sharp and deep, but it's over quickly. Afterwards, my brother Taylor took a quick photo of my back to show me the new ink job. It was incredible! The detail and precision was something you might expect from a 3 hour tattoo in a shop somewhere. After a short lunch break, my brother's tattoo was just as quick! By the time we were leaving, mind you, the room was packed. I imagine there'd be a lot of people who wouldn't be leaving with a Sak Yant that day... I'll re-stress the importance of going as early as possible...even if it means waking up at 5am.

We ended up getting matching Sak Yant protection. It's the Paed Tidt – similar to a compass, this Sak Yant offers protection from the 8 directions. It's intended to give protection in whichever direction you are travelling (pretty handy in my line of work).