



# Wat Po

## Temple of the Reclining Buddha

*Text by B. Lazarus*



Wat Po is easily one of Bangkok's most popular temples, in large part due to the fame of its enormous Reclining Buddha. Yet there are many other unique aspects to the wat complex which casual visitors may miss.

Founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the period when Ayutthaya, not Bangkok, was the capital of the country, Wat Potharam is the oldest of all of Bangkok's temples. Near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Rama I, the monastery was brought under Royal Patronage, as part of an elaborate plan to restore of religious places of historic value. King Rama I intended the temple to stand as a monument to the splendor and majesty of the Chakri Dynasty, of which he was the founder. About eight years were spent

on the restoration, due in part to the need to refill the land with soil and build up the site near the riverbank. After the reconstruction was complete, it was renamed Wat Phra Chetupon Vimolmangkalaram. While the official name was an extremely impressive one, the local people continued to refer to it simply as Wat Po.

During the reign of Rama III (1824-51), many new structures were added to the complex, with one of them being christened "The College", a unique institution and the first of its type in the city. Education was at that time was the provenance of the wealthy, although monks occasionally imparted some rudimentary teaching to children within the vicinity. The King felt that education should reach more of the common





people. He collected books about Thai literature, medicine, archaeology and other subjects to be placed there, and had certain texts inscribed on stone slabs positioned around the compound of the wat, where they could be read by everyone who passed through. He also established a medical school of the traditional variety, where treatments are effected through the use of dried herbs, powdered horn, and other such substances. This medical school, which looks rather like a old fashioned pharmacy from the outside, with its dried roots, powdered substances, and even coiled snakes in glass jars, can still be seen by present-day visitors to the temple grounds.

There are sixteen gates around the compound, two of which are open to visitors. Near these gates, it is interesting to note a number of bronze statues standing or seated in various yoga dating back to Rama III's reign, although the reason he had them cast isn't clear. One theory is that yoga, introduced from India, was all the rage in the Royal court, and the statues were meant to demonstrate the most important positions of the art. In any case, it is interesting to note that many of the figures wear hats, which at the time were associated with foreigners.

The bot, or chapel, at Wat Po has double galleries on both sides holding gilded Buddhas of different styles. The gates of the chapel are guarded by bronze lions, and there are two sets of doors on the eastern and western sides.

These doors are of teakwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl of such fine and intricate design that they are surely one of the most beautiful things one can see at Wat Po.

Within the chapel, painted pillars soar upwards on both sides of the high nave. At the end where the remains of Rama I are enclosed, one sees a Buddha image which was taken from an old temple in Thon Buri. The floor is of marble, and the walls are decorated with frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Lord Buddha.

Outside the chapel, many chedis of varying sizes are scattered about the area. Towards the left of the chapel, there are four special chedis which are decorated with porcelain possessing different colour motifs. These are each



dedicated to a different king of the Chakri Dynasty-Rama I, II, III and IV.

There are also four temples, or viharns, each of which houses a unique example of Thai Buddhist art. The eastern viharn contains a standing Buddha from Ayutthaya, rescued at the time the capital was destroyed by the Burmese; a Sawankalok (11-14<sup>th</sup> century) Buddha Image can be found in the southern temple; a Buddha Image from Chaisri is contained in the westernmost temple; and the northern one holds an unusual Buddha seated in a western-style posture.

The building where the Reclining Buddha (also known as the Sleeping Buddha) can be found also traces its roots back to Rama III, since it was con-

structed in 1832. Upon entering the structure, it is impossible to ignore the huge Buddha fills up the entire space.

The image, 160 feet (49 meters) in length and about 40 feet (12 meters) high, must be viewed by carefully walking around it and taking in specific aspects of it a little at a time. Capturing the moment Lord Buddha passes into the state of Nirvana, this golden colossus is actually made of brick and is only covered with gold leaf. Perhaps most interesting are the stylized feet with mother-of-pearl inlays showing the 108 signs or qualities by which the enlightened Buddha can be recognized. Before leaving, the careful visitor should notice how building's walls are decorated with colorful frescoes whose images retain vitality despite the ravages of time and age.

Finally, the main grounds of Wat Po also encompass sights worthy of attention. Because a full monastery with separate chapels and libraries is in operation, one often sees monks walking around, or perhaps simply sitting quietly under one of the many trees peppering the temple pavilion. Stone reliefs serve as reminders that Wat Po has long been known as a site for fine stone rubbings (reproductions of these are sold nearby). Statues of demons in tall hats guard the entrance gates, while a mondop of Buddha's Footprint is located near the temple. In short, there are many riches for the visitor to discover here. A half day's visit is barely enough for the wonders of Wat Po.

