

## THE WATER THROWING

By

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During the three hot summer days of Songkran, it was the custom in the past for devout people to place a pot or two of drinking water in front of their houses for the benefit of passers-by. In those days there was neither icewater nor aerated water, not to speak of iced coffee and other modern refreshments. Some people, including the monks, drank plain hot tea, like the Chinese.

Now, instead of drinking tea, the younger generation drink iced water, whisky and soda and various kinds of spirituous liquors. With a few exceptions among the older generation and monks the cult of tea drinking with its costly small tea pots and other paraphernalia is gone. Who can say that the refrigerator may not one day invade the wat? Also seldom to be seen nowadays is the betel nut tray which the lady of the house used to place before her visitors. Generous people in the old days sometimes provided free hot tea and sweatmeats to passers-by during the hot Songkran days. These I mention to remind you that our traditional ways of life and old customs are passing away rapidly to make room for new ones, bad ones as well as good ones.

It has been the custom in some wats to hold a festival of building "phrasai." "Phrasai" is an abbreviated form of "phrachedi sai" (พระเจดีย์ทราย) (Sand pagodas). "Phrachedi" means pagoda and "sai" sand. This festival takes place on an open space in the wat. The sand to be used for the occasion is provided by the wat and piled up nearby. The pagoda builders, mostly women and children, will come to the wat in their best clothes. They will buy candles, joss sticks, flowers and banners from the wat stalls set up in the compound. Buying these articles from the wat is regarded as "tham bun" (ทำบุญ) ("merit making"). Some will bring along these requisites, but nevertheless, they will contribute money to "tham bun" as well.

The merit makers will then fetch sand in the silver bowls which they have brought along with them and carry them to the ceremonial ground and start building a sand pagoda - something like a pyramid. The size of the pagoda is optional. The sand is

mixed with water to make it lump together when used to build the pagoda. A coin and a leaf of the religious fig tree will be buried inside the sand pagoda. When finished the pagoda is sprinkled with scented water and decorated with flags and banners. The base of the pagoda is then covered with a small piece of yellow or red cloth. Lighted candles and joss sticks and flowers are stuck around the sand pagoda as an offering. Some of these pagodas, usually the big ones, are beautifully decorated with miniature ceremonial latticed fences surrounding them.

Sometimes people vie with each other in building such pagodas. The ceremonial ground itself is decorated with ceremonial latticed fences called "rachawat" and banners. There is a theatrical performance in the wat on that day for the merit makers to enjoy themselves. It is a one-day festival and the wat benefits by the sand which the devotees bring. For it serves to raise the level of the ground which normally is too low during the flood season. As the open ground in the wat also serves as a meeting place for the community during religious and festive occasions, it is ultimately the public in general who benefit by this religious custom.

The sand pagodas do not last long. Unless they are jealously guarded, mischievous children will take pleasure in prying them open and thus ruining them in order to get the coins inside. The bigger ones are usually the selected targets.

The origin of this pagoda building custom is now nearly forgotten. Here it is. Once upon a time when Lord Buddha was travelling on a pontoon boat, some people were building sand pagodas along the sand banks of the stream as an offering to him while others were building them on rafts. This is a folk story which needs no comment. In some districts people who live near the river bank still follow this tradition during Songkran. They invite monks to the sand banks where the pagodas are to be built. The monks chant chapters from Buddhist scripture, after which there are offerings of food to the monks. Balls of boiled rice are sometimes offered to the sand pagodas.

Pagodas built under such conditions either on rafts or on the sandy banks of the rivers are called "Phra chedi sai nam lai" (พระเจดีย์ทรายน้ำไหล) or the "sand pagodas of the running stream." There is a belief among people that the performance of such a ceremony is an act of floating away or washing away of the sins of the old year. They believe that the sins will be transferred to the sand to be washed away by the tide or float away on the rafts with the running stream.

This explanation is a plausible one, but I am not in a position to give a reasonable answer to the question as to the origin of this cult and whether neighboring races also have such customs. In Bangkok, the building of "Phraçedi of the running stream has never been performed. H.M. King Chulalongkorn gave a short description of this ceremony in his famous book "The Royal State Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year" in which invaluable information on state ceremonies and traditions may be gleaned.

The building of sand pagodas in the open spaces of wats as in Bangkok requires another interpretation. It is a belief among devout Buddhists that whoever builds a wat, casts a Buddha image, erects a Phra chedi, or makes copies of the Scriptures or does anything pertaining to the upholding of the Holy Faith gains great merit.

I have said elsewhere that a Phraçedi originally was a funeral mound. Later on, the Phraçedi has been transformed into a term to denote any structural building of such shape which is sacred to the Lord Buddha. There are four kinds of Phraçedi whose classification is made according to the kind of sacred things each one contains. These may be the Lord's relics, especially his calcinated bones, a tooth or a hair, or his personal effects, actual or counterpart, such as his alms bowl, staff, robes, or his Dharma or Law as it appears in the scriptures, or his image or any sacred things about the Lord Buddha which remain in memory as a source of inspiration.

You will note that in building a sand pagoda a leaf of the sacred fig tree is inserted within. If so, such a pagoda belong to the fourth category of the four kinds described.

In building an ordinary pagoda gold or silver ornaments and other such valuable things are sometimes put in. In a sand pagoda a coin is inserted. A Buddha image has a piece of red or yellow cloth to cover its body; so also with the sand pagoda. With such parallels, I venture to think that the building of sand pagodas which even people of small means can afford to do has the same merit as building a real one or the building of a Buddha image. It is believed that great merit is earned by such an act even if the pagodas are built only temporarily with sand.

There is another possible explanation. In the past and to a certain extent in the present a devout person before entering the precincts of a wat will bring with him a handful of earth or sand which he throws upon the ground upon his entry into the wat compound. It is believed that, when a person leaves the wat, some earth or sand in the sacred compound sticking to his feet may be taken out of the wat, thus depriving the wat of its property, which quantity though small is nevertheless sacred and no one should ever consciously or unconsciously take property out of a wat compound. It is a sin to do so. To make reparation for such a possibly sinful deed a good Buddhist brings with him a handful of earth or sand every time he calls at the sacred ground. The building of the sand pagodas is perhaps an atonement in a way.

H.M. King Chulalongkorn said in his book mentioned above that Bangkok was built on low land most of which was flooded during high tides. The annual ceremony of building sand pagodas in a wat built on low land is an indirect way of raising the level of the ground by religious means. The sand used in building the pagodas may also be utilized by the wat for building purposes.

In the past there were often theatrical performances in celebration of the sand pagoda building ceremony. Elder folks usually left the place at the end of the performance in the afternoon when

groups of children out to make mischief were waiting for them at the wat's entrance. Children usually preferred young girls as the victims of their jovial pranks, to throw water at them as the first bath of Songkran. They did not like to select a man or a woman as their target if they could help it unless they were sure to run away in time before getting a blow or a hit on the head from their intended victims.

On their way back home from the wat groups of mischievous children would be still lurking here and there and waiting to throw water at them.

As far as I know, the throwing of water as done by the children was done with a bowl or whatever kind of container the children could get hold of. Later some one used a water squirter made of small bamboo trees. The water squirter was superior in that it could shoot the water farther and more accurately. Chinese tin smiths, taking advantage of this development, produced such water squirters from tin plate and sold them on a commercial scale to the children who soon improved their technique of squirting water and made the new weapon more effective.

"Shway Yoe" (Sir George Scott) in his "The Burman, His Life and Nations," has depicted the water throwing festival of Burmese children, which was similar to the Thai one which I have just described. What he said about the water throwing in Burma was also true for this country in the past. But the water throwing in Bangkok is now in a sense a fading tradition while in Rangoon it is still going strong in the same fashion as still carried on only in Chiangmai in the north of Thailand.

Let me go on with the story before I draw conclusions in respect of the water throwing festival.

Apart from the children, grown-ups also took part in the water throwing which went on throughout the day during Songkran. For as was their custom, all the passers-by, young and old alike, submitted to the traditional douse. Sometimes a person wishing to attend to certain business did not want to be soaked; under such circum-

stance he might beg indulgence, if he was acquainted with the water throwers. In order to be exempted he usually promised to bring the merry-maker a bottle of spirituous liquor or pay him a sum of money with which to buy a bottle of drink. However, exception was not common as everybody accepted the bath with resignation.

A young man going out of his house during the season must be on guard. A young girl would be lurking behind the corner somewhere waiting for him to pass by, then suddenly and without warning she would give him a showerful. Before he knew it the girl would have disappeared with a giggle. He had to accept the inevitable bath.

The water throwing later degenerated into vicious forms. Children, unrestrained and not satisfied with throwing clear water, used colored or even muddy water instead. Their elder brethren followed their example. Thus water throwing went beyond bounds and gradually became unpopular.

With the adoption of a new style of clothing and with the growth of the community especially in and around Bangkok where there are foreigners who enjoy no such fun, such a custom seems to be out of place and might lead to a quarrel; water throwing in Bangkok has therefore been forbidden to a certain extent by the authorities.

In the past few years water throwing seems to have been revived and it is practiced occasionally in some places. It has gradually become so prevalent in later years that it has interfered with the city traffic. Not wishing to suppress this old tradition in its entirety, the city authorities issued a warning only that this good custom should not be practised in such a manner that it might interfere with the normal flow of the city traffic. Water throwing is now seldom seen in the main streets where there is heavy traffic, but in the outlying districts this tradition still survives.

Late in the afternoon of Songkran days somewhere in the village young people would gather forming themselves into two supposedly opposing groups, one made up of women and the

other of men. Each party would try to kidnap members of the other party, one at a time. Then they would try to blacken the face of the kidnapped person and a ransom would be asked for his or her release.

Woe to a young man who happened to pass by: for he would be caught by members of the girl party. Like a mouse among cats, the young man's upper garment would be torn into shreds by the girls. Perhaps this is something of a psychological gratification for the sex. No doubt such an amusement or game, though crude, is a sort of sublimation of the sexual impulse as a modern psychologist might say.

As I have already pointed out elsewhere, water throwing may have some connection with magic for inducing abundant rain for the coming cultivation season. If after Songkran the weather is still hot and dry for a stretch of more than a fortnight, and there is no sign of the usual southwest monsoon or the rainy season, people become very anxious about their livelihood and welfare. They cannot begin to cultivate their land. Unable to do otherwise, they resort to imitative magic. In some districts where there are Buddha images with mysterious powers, they will bring out their "Luang Phaw" from his shrine on a special cart and pull him in procession to a certain place usually in an open space where people may then play water throwing on each other. By such persuasive demonstration the rain will not be long in sending its first showers, they believe.

I have said elsewhere (Chapter II) that there is often a tug-of-war between the two parties when a monk is borne in a cart for the bathing ceremony. The Burmese believe that the rain gods, "Thain," hold a mimic battle, the thunder and lightning being the results of their clash of arms. When there is a dearth of rain, the villagers will hold a tug-of-war to arouse the rain gods to fight their battle.

Another common magical way to make rain fall is the "Hae Nang Maew" (แห่นางแมว) or the displaying of a female cat in a procession.

A female cat is put in a special cage and carried in procession through the village, and the villagers will come out to throw water at her.

It is a curious coincidence that in some parts of Indonesia, particularly in Java and Sumatra the cat plays the role of a rain-maker by being wetted (See Frazer's "The Golden Bough").

Of all domestic animals the cat is a hater of water and highly antagonistic to such treatment. Perhaps the cat is the personification of dryness; so it might be considered to induce a sympathetic effect on a wet day if a cat is wetted thoroughly. In this connection too, a female cat may also have been thought to have something to do with the symbol of fertility and abundance.

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