The Wat Hua Lamphong Coffin Practice in Thailand

Buddhism remains the most popular and important religion in Thailand, where it is accounting for a majority of believers (Asia Exchange). Over the years, the belief system has provided people with a mechanism for addressing and dealing with social, economic, political, and health issues. Personally, the most exciting aspect of the religion concerns the people’s dedication to their faith and the forms of worship they employ to connect with the spiritual world. On January 12, 2020, I attended a worship service one of the country’s Buddhist temples called Wat Hua Lamphong to gain more insight into their forms of worship and the strategies and symbols they use, among other aspects as the visit was an educational one. Wat Hua Lamphong is a popular place of worship in Thailand that attracts people from different regions. The worship center is located in the Bang Rak District of Bangkok and is affiliated to the Theravada school, which is the most notable religious faction in the country. I visited the temple after a close friend advised that I evaluate its culture of coffin donation, which is an essential aspect of the Buddhism religion. The visit, which lasted from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., provided me with great insight into the impact of the coffin donation practice in people’s lives.

The coffin donation practice is essential in the Wat Hua Lamphong temple as it shows a form of compassion for the less privileged. The practice provides people with a chance to give back to the community and, in turn, attract blessings into their lives. Over the years, Wat Hua Lamphong has acquired the name coffin temple because of its free practice of providing coffins to people who cannot afford them. Therefore, encountering such a practice helps one understand the need for those in need, which is important in creating a benevolent society and cultivating charitable behaviors among individuals. The fact that non-Buddhists are also allowed to partake in the practice seemed to attract many visitors to the temple. A person could donate coffins by giving out 500 baht to a foundation established by the temple leadership. In some cases, however, people were allowed to give less than the stipulated amount based on their financial capabilities. To contribute, one had to communicate with the staff in attendance concerning the amount of money to give and write his/her name on a layoff notice. After donating, the contributors were given back the pink slip and a certificate to authenticate their actions. The documents were to be used in completing the next steps of the practice.

Afterward, the coffin benefactors prayed for blessings and good health and pasted their slips into the coffin. Then, the contributors proceeded to another part of the temple, which looked like a Chinese temple, where they made their prayers and burned the certificate of donation inside a holy bowl. Since a majority of visitors were not familiar with the practice, the staff in attendance were kind and willing to provide us assistance on the donation process and prayers. The process was exciting and thought-provoking at the same time. While burning the certificate of contribution, the contributors also prayed for the sick, the dead, and the bereaved. Other people were allowed to burn incense as a show of empathy for those suffering from diseases and facing financial challenges. The prayers were believed to provide comfort, peace, and hope to the affected groups, which is an important step in the coffin donation practice. Hence, the practice cultivates a form of compassion for the less fortunate in society. Besides, the practice took approximately 40 minutes based on high number of people that participated in the religious practice. The coffin donation process and the prayers are significant practices for a majority of Buddhists in the region and provide a framework for them to connect with non-Buddhists and to engage in social work.

Numerous intriguing aspects were notable during the ritual and in the temple. First, everyone that entered the temple had to adopt a certain dress code regardless of whether he/she was a Buddhist or non-Buddhist. The mode of dressing was clearly stated at the entrance of the temple. For instance, all women and men had to cover their shoulders and knees by wearing either trousers, knee-length skirts or shorts, and shirts or blouses that covered their shoulders. Such restrictions were evident not only in Wat Hua Lamphong Temple but also in other Buddhist places of worship in the country. Another exciting aspect of this practice concerned the behaviors of the people visiting the temple. Everyone was expected to keep silent when donating and praying and accord respect to the staff and leaders in attendance. The people also respected the temple as a place of worship by taking their trash outside. The observed behaviors, especially respect, orderly conduct, and cleanliness, are also notable in other Buddhist religions in other parts of the world (Saisuta 4-5). Buddhist's conducts and behaviors were paradoxical of my previous assertions that such groups are primitive and violent. Overall, the religious practice was fascinating for me and the other non-Buddhists that were present. For that reason, I would encourage people to visit the temple to experience the culture, religion, and practices and to take part in social and charity events.

The coffin donation practice in Wat Hua Lamphong Temple was educational and attention-grabbing. It also gave us a chance to pray for the less privileged in society. The ritual was systematic and well organized. The staff in attendance gave the participants slips to fill their names and the amount they wished to donate. The people then placed the slips in the coffins after making their donations. Lastly, prayers were conducted on behalf of the sick, less privileged, and through with health problems. Hence, participating in the ritual changed my perspective on religion and people’s contribution to social work. I now understand that Theravada Buddhism in Thailand assists in fostering peace, promoting social and charity work, and teaching children the need for helping others. Besides, the set of guidelines followed during the entire process helped me develop discipline in my routines. The observation also changed my perspective of Buddhism. I now understand that the religion cultivates harmony, peace, and discipline among its believers, which is unlike my previous assertion that it was a primitive practice. Therefore, the visit to the temple provided me with much insight into the nature, practices, and essentiality of Theravada Buddhism to society.

Works Cited

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