

FIELDNOTES: CHIANG MAI, THAILAND August 27, 2006

by WALTER WILLIAMS

I first visited Thailand in 1987, when I stayed in Bangkok for about a month, on my way to Indonesia. My next visit was not until 2003, but I was so impressed that I returned for three more visits in 2004, 2005, and 2006. In September 2006 I decided to spend time in the northern part of the country, near Chiang Mai. I visited a Buddhist temple in Hang Dong, about 25km south of the city, and was taken by the beauty of the temple complex there. The abbot was extremely nice, and though he cannot speak any English, his ready smile and kind demeanor immediately impressed me. Dang, who translated for me, was fearful that I should not mention anything about me being gay, but I wanted to be open to him and did not want to hide. The abbot was very supportive, and said he already had two Thai gay men as teachers at the school. Dang was very relieved, since he feared the abbot would not be accepting of me at the school. On the contrary, the abbot has been extremely welcoming.

PROBLEMS WITH TRANSLATOR

After one day it became evident that Dang was not skillful enough to be a translator. First, I was shocked to learn that he does not know how to read or write English. All the time we had been exchanging emails since December, I thought he was writing the emails. But in fact he was taking what he had written in Thai, and got a friend to translate into English to send me emails that he passed off as his own words. Second, when I would ask him a question to translate with someone, he often either did not understand me or after listening to an informant speak Thai he often could not think of the English word. He decided that he will return to Bangkok, and I agreed. I do not think he had either the skills or the interest in doing translating for me. He

apologized for wasting my money and time, and said he would be happy to work with me if I move to Bangkok.

September 22, 2006 THAI ARMY COUP

On Sept 20, while Thailand's controversial prime minister Taksin was in New York, the Thai army took over the government in a military coup. It was frontpage headlines around the world, and many friends in America wrote frantic emails to warn me to get out of Thailand. But it is very interesting that the Thai people do not have that reaction. Everything continued with no disturbance at all in Hang Dong. The only way I knew anything at all was out of the ordinary was that all the schools were cancelled for the day, by order of the military. But other than that, people continued on their usual daily tasks. Today there was a parade of the high school along the main road, complete with loud marching band, for a sports contest. Everybody is as pleasant as always.

Upon talking with several people, I found out the situation is not one of indifference, but of considering what is best for Thailand. Prime Minister Taksin is a very polarizing figure. Some people, especially the poor, adore him. Others despise him. What I conclude from my interviews is that Taksin did some good things for the poor, but really not that much, and these things are outweighed by the high levels of corruption in his administration.

Even people who supported Taksin are resigned to the coup as the best thing for the country, because they realize that Taksin so divided the nation that Thailand cannot progress when there is so much of a split. So, they see the army move as an attempt to resolve a bad situation that

electoral politics got into. They are reassured because the army leaders promised that they support democracy and they want to see control turned back over to civilian leaders as soon as possible.

THAILAND FIELD NOTES by Walter L. Williams

NOV. 3, 2006

After being away for almost a month, I have now returned to the same Buddhist temple complex near Chiang Mai. Today is my birthday, and when I told it to people they seemed not to react. “Oh” or “Really?” but no big “Happy Birthday” greetings except from one man my age who came to me and enthusiastically said “Happy Birthday” in English, even though he speaks hardly any English. Later, I found out that his house just burned down the night before, with him losing everything he owned except the clothes on his back. And he was just getting ready to sell the house, with the buyer scheduled to pay for the house in two days. Yet, after suffering this horrible tragedy, here he was cheerily telling me Happy Birthday as if he had not a care in the world. When I found out about his loss I looked aghast and said in Thai “I am so sorry.” But other people did not seem to react. I know this was a loss, and people are not uncaring. But there is a Buddhist resignation about not caring about the material things of the world, that is most evident in people’s reactions.

BUDDHIST ATTITUDES TOWARD TEENAGE BOYS

This morning was a contest for the novice students (ages 12 to 19) that I think indicates the type of attitude toward life in Buddhist thought. The novices spent a lot of time the day before making balloons out of thin colored paper. On the day of the balloon competition classes were

called off so that everyone could watch. Each group of five boys put their paper balloons over a stove with a fire, and the fire heated the balloon to make it fly. They constructed four very tall bamboo poles, with a square of bamboo at the top that was not much bigger than the balloon itself. It was very difficult to get the balloon through the square. The fire was hot, and I saw several balloons catch fire and burn to a crisp in seconds. Then, even if they succeeded in getting the balloon afloat, a breeze almost always carried it to the side so that the balloon missed the target. In watching this competition for a couple of hours, I only saw one balloon get through the bamboo square. In that one occasion, the novices excitedly jumped up and down in celebration, just as we would see American teenagers do. Yet, what was so interesting to me was the reaction of the novices whose balloons did NOT succeed. If their balloon caught fire, and they saw their hours of careful work go up in flames in seconds, they did not react with expressions of dismay. For those whose balloon floated off in the distance, I saw the same lack of disappointment. And it was in that moment when I realized that the novices' years of Buddhist indoctrination really did sink in and have an effect on their personality.

To me, the lesson of this competition, is that there are many chances in life that will affect the outcome that are (like a spark from the fire, or a sudden breeze) completely out of our control. And that is to be expected. The First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught is that life is inevitably full of suffering. And so, having a strong recognition that this is the way the world is, we do not get bothered by that reality. If we let ourselves be consumed by the misfortunes and inevitable disappointments that occur, then we will never get out of misery. The Buddha taught that if we want to be able to deal with these disappointments of life, then we must train ourselves not to

care if something bad happens. We must discipline ourselves to let disappointments go by us without concern, because we are not attached to the ephemeral things that surround us.

If such a competition were held in America, where the chances of success were so slim, I can imagine American teenagers getting all upset, crying “why me,” or at the least expressing disappointment, when their balloon did not make the mark. Being in Thailand has made me realize the strength of American ideals of success in everything. On the one hand, this ethic of success is responsible for a lot of our progress as a nation, but on the other hand it leads to a lot of stress among people.

Among Thais, in contrast, the major consideration is a phrase that I hear over and over again, when people say “Mai ben lai.” This phrase translates as “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.” Or “It is not worth getting upset over.” In fact, to the Buddhist way of thinking, very little is worth getting upset over. And so, I think this explains the lack of sorrow of the man who saw his house and all his possessions burn to a crisp in thirty minutes. It just is not worth getting upset over something that has already happened, and that no matter how much we wish cannot be undone. And so, as with all the years of lessons that the novices receive, the message that is drummed into them is to accept the bad things of life with a shrug. It does not mean that people are not sympathetic to the travails of others, but that it is just seen that suffering is the normal state of existence. It is our reaction to that suffering, the Buddha taught, that is most important. If we want to have a happy life, we must go beyond the suffering by simply not caring when bad things happen. Then, by not being attached to things, we can focus on the good things that we are fortunate enough to experience.

This is the attitude that I have tried to incorporate into my own life, to savor every moment of happiness, to celebrate the good things that come our way, and to value and express gratitude for the joys of each moment as we live it. Focus on the good, and do not pay attention to the bad. It is ephemeral, and means nothing if we do not allow it to sadden us.

On Sunday November 5, 2006, there was another Buddhist holiday, of which there are many. I have become convinced that one of the major advantages that religions provide for people is that they give spiritual sanction to holidays, festivals, and celebrations. I saw the work that the monks and novices were putting into decorating the temple and all the grounds of the monastery for the Buddhist holiday of Loikrathong.

On Saturday evening I joined in a drumming practice, drawing on my experience of being a drummer in a rock-and-roll band during my youth, and we savored the enjoyment that the kids and adults in the group experienced in the practice. On Sunday morning, there was a big parade through the main street of the town, and all the paraders piled into the temple grounds. This celebration is great fun for everyone, but it is also a major fundraiser for the temple, because donors present decorations that look like trees, and the leaves are money. The money trees, which are about five feet tall, have Thai 100 baht notes (about \$2.60 US) and 500 baht notes (about \$13.00 US) filling as leaves. That might not seem like a lot to us, but for Thai people it is a large amount of money. The trees are beautiful art, and are taken in trucks in the parade and then into the temple where they are presented. People also donate practical things for the monks, including monks robes, cooking pots, fans, and other items that the monks need in daily use.

In exchange, the monks provide spiritual gifts that cost little or nothing, but that the people value as important for their future success and happiness. Monks chant Pali, an ancient language that no one except novices and monks know. Monks provide blessings to devotees. Monks wrap white cotton string around a person's wrist for good luck. Monks drape white cotton string around the heads of devotees as they pray. All of this symbolizes spiritual assistance for the person. It is a way that the monks can receive things of material value that they need to operate the temples and provide for the material needs of this large segment of the population, but they can give something back of equal or greater value, if their spiritual assistance is considered lucky for the people.

I attended a ceremony where a new house was being built. When the house was completed, the owner invited all the people in the neighborhood to a big party. Before the party began, a group of five Buddhist monks arrived to bless the new building. They constructed a pyramid made of bamboo, and strung string all around the family of the house. The string symbolizes spiritual protection for all the members of the household. This is a great value that the monks can give, and the people greatly value it. As a young monk went through the crowd of people, enthusiastically spraying holy water on everybody. When he got to me, he impishly threw a whole lot of water on me, and everybody laughed. It was all in good fun, and indicative of the spirit of joy and fun that permeates Thai life. I smiled and everyone was happy.

As I analyze the important role of monks and novices in Thai society, I think it has a lot to do with young males. I am convinced that a major problem for societies is how to deal with

adolescent boys. In societies around the world, girls do not present the kind of problems (violence, destructiveness, and other anti-social behavior) that boys do. Therefore, many cultures have come to recognize that some kind of social institution has to exist to channel the wild energy and sometimes out-of-control behavior of teenage boys. As we know from problems with juvenile delinquency in America, jails are filled with “problem boys” who do anti-social behavior in their teens and early twenties. Most of these boys eventually settle down and become good citizens of their society. But, during those years in the teens and twenties, they can be very disruptive.

ADOLESCENCE IN MELANESIA

I have learned from my readings in anthropology that different cultures institutionalize ways of controlling boys. In Melanesia, for example, at puberty boys are taken to a separate settlement, away from the village, and they live there with other teenage boys and some adult males who teach them the ways to be a man in their society. They don’t even participate in the general society for years, and those societies have decided that total separation during the “problem years” is the best solution. Instead of a fruitless attempt to repress the sexuality of these boys, as the research of Gilbert Herdt has shown, many of these Melanesian cultures have a form of institutionalized homosexuality that keeps their sexuality self-contained during the adolescent years. By this means unwanted teenage pregnancy of girls is prevented.

ADOLESCENCE IN JAVA

In contrast to separating the boys away from the village, when I was doing my field research in rural Java in 1987-88, I found that the solution of Javanese villagers was to pile many

responsibilities on these boys. They were so busy that they had no time to be of trouble. Each village had a “sinoman” of adolescent boys, with the older boys in their twenties serving as the leaders of the sinoman. In the daytime, the sinoman was responsible for keeping the village’s irrigation ditches in repair. Considering that these villages were totally dependent upon the carrying of water through all the rice fields, this maintenance of the thousand-year-old irrigation systems was economically crucial work for the survival of people. The sinoman was also responsible for maintaining roads, and any time a downpour washed out a section of road a lot of work was necessary to repair it. And at night, the sinoman was responsible for patrolling the village to prevent thieves from entering the village and to make sure that everyone was safe. All this work, from early morning late into the night, meant that they boys were so occupied with their duties that they literally had no time for anti-social mischief. In my opinion the secret of the Javanese success, was that the sinoman not only did the work, but the boys themselves were given responsibilities and held important leadership positions. Rather than just doing labor under adult supervision, the heads of the sinoman reported directly to the mayor of the village. They thus learned not only the value of hard work, but also the responsibilities of leadership, early on.

ADOLESCENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

To my mind, what is most needed in dealing with juvenile delinquency and gangs in America is to give important social duties AND responsibilities to teenage boys who are potential troublemakers. That is, instead of them joining a gang to get emotional connectedness with peers, they should join patrols to keep the neighborhood safe, and help people in need and in emergencies. What is crucial is that these boys should not just be workers under adult

supervision, but that they be awarded with leadership positions and be given high status as a result. Social prestige for such positions is crucial.

ADOLESCENCE IN THAILAND

This is how I think Thai Buddhism deals with this question of adolescent boys. When I first came to Thailand, my feminist convictions led me to react against the obvious difference in gender. Thai Buddhism really emphasizes boys to become novices and monks, but does not make a similar effort for girls. I thought it would be wonderful if similar emphasis could be placed on girls becoming nuns, and especially for population control progress to be made by removing a significant percentage of young females from the reproductive pool. But that is not done. Buddhist nuns are not common in Thailand, and most of those nuns who exist are elderly women. In my time here I have not at this point seen even one Buddhist nun. They exist, but girls are not given the offer of free education and support that is offered to boys and is a major attraction for boys (especially from poor families) to become novices. I still think it would be a good idea for Thai Buddhism to encourage adolescent girls and adult women to become nuns, as is done in Taiwan and other Buddhist countries.

The main reason the Thai Buddhist establishment focuses on adolescent boys is because of this problem of male anti-social behavior. Buddhist novices are daily drummed with the message of gentleness, non-violence, kindness and compassion, which is the antithesis of the “macho man” syndrome. This establishment is not perfect, to be sure, and there is still crime and violence by young men in Thailand. But I think the violence levels are much lower because of the influence of the novice and monk system. By giving teenage boys the spiritual power and

authority to bless devotees who come to the temple, this institution accords them with high respect and prestige that they would otherwise not have.

During the week, as I help to teach the novices English, I am in the position of authority. They clearly look up to me as their teacher. However, during a ceremony, when I approach one of them for a prayer of blessing, the authority is reversed. I think it is important for teenage boys to have that experience of being in authority. I think the focus of Thai Buddhism on male novices is Thai culture's way of dealing with this problem of anti-social behavior by adolescent boys. There are important lessons that can be learned from a cross-cultural perspective on the various ways to deal with this issue.

PARADES AND CELEBRATIONS IN THAI CULTURE

Later in the day, after enjoying the parade and ceremonies at Wat Kam Pang Ngam, the monks told me that I should not miss the Loikrathong celebrations in the city. I took the "yellow car" (which is actually a yellow pickup truck with a cover on top and two rows of seats in the back; it is a major form of public transportation and costs 12 baht which is about thirty cents US) into Chiang Mai to see the major Buddhist celebration of Loikrathong.

There was a big parade, with floats and marching bands. Thais love parades, and seem to have one at every major holiday. After the parade I made my way to a beautiful Buddhist temple beside the Ping River, where I purchased a small floating offering made from banana leaves and flowers, with incense sticks and candles on top. I was told to make a prayer for good luck and happiness in the future, and to place the offering into the river for it to float away. This also

seems indicative of the idea that I saw in the balloon competition, that we put our hopes into the river of life and where it floats is beyond our control, but we hope for the best.

At this temple novices were helping people fill balloons with hot air from a burning mass connected by wire to the bottom of the balloon. As the smoke from the fire filled the paper balloon and it floated upwards, people were told to put all their worries, resentments, and cares into this balloon and let it float away, out of their life. The balloons had some kind of fuse in the burning mass, so that after the balloon had risen far into the sky it let out a stream of light that looks like a beautiful comet in the dark sky. Literally hundreds of these balloons were being released by Thai people from temples all over the city, so that the sky was filled with these sparkling lights and streaming tails. It was like seeing hundreds of comets in the sky at the same time. As I looked up in the sky with a large full moon, listening to the Buddhist chanting that was being broadcast from the temple, and seeing the hundreds of glowing lights in the sky I was overcome with the beauty of the moment. It was a true Buddhist experience of being mindful of the joys of the moment, of savoring the wonder and the majesty of the senses. As I sat there, not knowing a single person, I experienced a strong emotion that I was surrounded by good feeling. Some people helped me light the incense, and took a picture of me as I put it into the river. Novices helped me fill a balloon and send my worries and cares into the night sky. The playwright Tennessee Williams, who I was fortunate enough to meet once in Key West, spoke of “the kindness of strangers.” I felt that strongly at this event.

Late in the evening, after the Loikrathong festivities were dying down, I tried to get a yellow car back to my home at Wat Kam Pang Ngam. To my chagrin, I learned that the yellow cars had stopped service for the night, and I asked several taxis to take me home but no driver wanted to drive that far. I was stranded. As I repeatedly tried to flag down some taxis, two teenage boys

(ages 17 and 19) who were nearby struck up a conversation with me. One introduced himself by saying his name was “Chicken.” I giggled and then asked his name in Thai and he said “Guy” which is the Thai word for chicken. I told him he should just call himself Guy because that is a common name in English and if he told Farang (foreigners) his name was Chicken they would laugh. The other one’s name was Dish. Thais have long formal names, which they hardly ever use, and usually have a one-syllable nickname that I find amusing when it replicates English words like Golf, Gap, or Nope. First born sons are often nicknamed “Nung” which means “one.” Anyway, Guy and Dish tried to help me get a taxi, but without success. Then they offered that I could stay at their room for the night. I wondered if I was taking my life in my hands by agreeing to go with two rather tough-looking adolescents who I did not know, but I decided on the spur of the moment to let happen what would happen. So I piled onto the motorcycle seat with the two of them and they drove through the crowded streets to a back alley where we stopped. They lived in a slum of a rooming house with mostly young men, and they took me to their room. They wanted some beer, so I paid for three bottles and some shrimp crackers for us. It was a small room with two pads on the floor, a small closet, a small table, and nothing else. Three filthy bathrooms and showers were at the end of the hallway. They apologized that they could not afford a fan to cool me in the hot night air.

Then they started asking me for money. I asked how much they wanted, and they said 3,000 baht (about eighty dollars US). I said that was an outrageous amount, and that I could get a nice hotel room for about six hundred baht, even though I knew that all the hotel rooms were occupied for this holiday. I told them I did not have that much with me, and one of them then asked for my watch. I said no, explaining that this was my father’s watch that I greatly valued. Now I was starting to get worried, that something might be stolen from me. So we started

negotiating. They then asked for 2,000 baht, and when I said no they asked for 1,500. I asked how much the rent was and they said 1,600 baht per month, so I pointed out that their cost was only about fifty baht per night. So then we settled on six hundred baht. That is about what a hotel room would cost, but I was happy to pay that since I was stranded. We had a pleasant conversation over beer, I taught them some phrases to say basic conversation in English, and we had a very enjoyable evening. Then I fell asleep. As I drifted off in exhaustion I wondered nervously that I would wake up to find my camera, watch, cellphone and gold ring gone. But I was too tired to go anywhere, so I just decided to relax and have a good sleep.

When I awoke in the morning every baht was still in my wallet, and nothing was stolen. The two boys and I had a nice talk, and they invited me to stay there anytime I wanted to come into the city. I think if I get stranded again I will pay them more, just because I know they are no danger and I could feel safe sleeping there. They both accompanied me to find the nearest stop for the yellow car. It turned out they were very nice, and even though they were desperately poor I do not think I was in any danger. I have learned in my travels that sometimes you just have to trust in the moment, and trust in the good nature of people.

My whole experience during the holiday turned out to be fantastic. I feel lucky to be in a place like Thailand, because kindness toward others is a basic value here. I am also privileged as an American because everything is so cheap here. I am continually aware of the inequalities of the world, because for me to purchase a simple meal for twenty baht that is only about fifty cents in US money, yet it is not cheap for Thais. Teachers at the monastery school are paid 5,000 baht per month (\$135 dollars) and though that is considered low pay a good salary is about 30,000 baht per month (\$810 dollars).

THE IMPORTANCE OF DREAMS

After getting home, I crashed in bed and fell asleep. While asleep I had an incredibly realistic dream of my mother's parents, who are both deceased. My grandmother died of a heart attack at age 66 in 1973, and my grandfather died at age 82 in 1986. In my dream my sister and I were going to their house in North Carolina, and I was bringing them a big piece of beautiful carved wood from Thailand. I could hear them talking as we entered the house from the living room door. I sat the woodcarving down and rounded the corner of the den to see them sitting at the dining table and watching TV. They both looked so happy when they saw us, and my grandmother started clapping her hands excitedly.

In the dream I wondered to myself why I had not seen them in a long time, and considering how much I always enjoyed being with them why I had not visited them more often. I rushed over and hugged them, we just sat there a long time holding each other and crying tears of joy.

Then I woke up. It was a short but incredibly powerful dream, and it was so realistic I thought I was really there. I felt tears on my face when I woke up. Both my grandparents seemed so happy, and I have to believe that their spirits are happy now.

I have had several of these dream visits over the years, and from my work with American Indians I have come to value the importance of dreams. Are these dreams just a figment of my imagination, or are these really spiritual visits from my grandparents? Rationally, I cannot answer that, but there is something in my heart that says this is real, as real as anything I perceive in my waking. I think this dream was my gift from the offerings I made at the temple.

I have come to believe that there is something spiritual, what the Lakotas call Wakan Tanka "The Great Mystery," that is beyond our meager capabilities of understanding. I end this

commentary with a feeling of gratitude for the wonderful experiences I have had, and for a great birthday weekend. It is a birthday that I will not soon forget.

MISS KATHOEY HANG DONG CONTEST

On Monday evening November 6, 2006 the Loikrathong Holiday celebrations reached their culmination after a weekend of fireworks and festivities. What is notable about this major Buddhist holiday celebration involves a beauty contest for “kathoeys” (male-to-female transgender people). I was told about this Miss Kathoey Hang Dong contest, and I thought it would be a rather small affair considering that Hang Dong is a small town. When I arrived at the fairgrounds I was surprised to find a major event with probably a couple thousand people in attendance. At the entrance, boys were happily setting off firecrackers in celebration. Lots of families, children and old people were in attendance. A large tent near the entry had Buddhist monks judging the best Loikrathong offerings, which are beautiful arrangements made with intricately folded banana leaves and flowers. These offerings are placed in a river with wishes for good luck and happiness in the future. In the distance, at the back of the grounds, was a stage where a band performed Thai pop music in a rock-and-roll style, with a crowd of people dancing enthusiastically.

The main stage in the middle of the grounds was nicely decorated with palm fronds and well lit with neon lights. There were three contests for the evening. The first contest was for little girls to sing traditional Thai songs. They were dressed to the hilt in traditional Thai style, and with complex hairdos. Thai girls are socialized from a young age to value beauty, style, and performance. No wonder so many Thai young women are good dancers and have a strong appreciation for beauty and fashion.

Right after the little girls performed, the main event of the evening started with the introduction of the kathoey contestants. I took photos of them backstage while they were getting ready to perform, and also during the contest itself. Fifteen contestants, aged from their mid-teens to their thirties, wore either Western-style evening gowns or traditional Thai elite women's dresses. But, interestingly, when they later performed dances even those in Western garb danced traditional Thai dance styles, with the elaborate and graceful hand movements for which Thai dancing is most noted.

After each contestant walked down the runway in an exaggerated feminine style of walking, they left the stage. Then each contestant was called back individually to respond to questions put to them by the panel of judges (some of whom are themselves kathoey). The MCs for the event were one man and one woman, who treated each contestant with respect and dignity, but also with some humor mixed in. In many respects, this contest was not much different from an international beauty contest like Miss Universe. These internationally-televised pageants have become models for transgender contests all over the world. So, watching the pageant itself was not much different from a transvestite contest in America.

After each contestant finished their individual interview, the show took a break to make the awards for the best Loikrathong offering. These offerings were beautiful and obviously took a long time for the person to make. Loikrathong offerings are central to the whole Buddhist holiday. Yet, when the kathoey performers left the stage, the audience notably thinned. People went off to get something to eat or drink at the vendors selling food and drinks, or went to the bathroom, or wandered over to watch the dancers at the pop music stage in the distance. Not many people paid attention as the four finalists who produced the prize-winning offerings, three

men and one woman, received their awards which were envelopes I assume contained money inside.

After the Loikrathong awardees left the stage, the little girls were brought back on stage and they were awarded First, Second, and Third Prize winnings. They received large trophies, and paraded around the stage in a victory walk. Then, after the little girls left the stage, the climax of the evening occurred when the kathoeys came back on stage. By this time many audience members had returned to watch the show, even though it was now about 10:30pm in the evening. Each contestant did a performance, either singing a traditional Thai song with live voice over the microphone, or performing a traditional Thai dance in a graceful feminine style of dancing.

After the final contestant performed, the judges announced the decision. First, Second, and Third Place trophies, even bigger than those given to the little girls, were presented to the winners by top government officials of Hang Dong. The winner also received a crown and a sash with the title “Miss Kathoey Hang Dong”, and posed for photos just like a Miss Universe pageant. The character of the contest was not that different from a transvestite contest in America.

What was significantly different about this event was not the performance of the contestants, but the nature of the audience. The large crowd of people who enthusiastically watched this performance included many families with their children, as well as individuals of all age ranges from adolescents to the very elderly. I never once observed any kind of negative or derisive reaction from any person in the large audience, as might be expected from an American audience. Small children excitedly applauded when the winners were announced. And except for one group of lesbians who sat near the stage and loudly applauded their favorite kathoey

performers, this audience would not be distinguishable as any different from the audience at any other kind of performance.

The contrast between Thailand and America is striking. Imagine a typical small town in the United States sponsoring a commemoration of a major Christian holiday, with preachers in attendance and blessing the proceedings, where the main event of the evening was a drag show! And the mayor presented the awards to young males of the town for dressing like women. Not only would such a show not be sponsored by the town government and religious leaders, it would not even be tolerated. Such a show would be considered a scandal, especially on a religious holy day. The major reason for this difference between Anytown USA and Hang Dong, I think, is the value system of Buddhism versus Christianity.

Buddhism does not contain that intolerance of difference that is so evident in so many American Christian groups. I interviewed the head monk of the Hang Dong district, who is a major religious leader in this area of northern Thailand. Over a thousand people came to the small village where he lives, to honor him on his sixtieth birthday party. After this major event concluded I interviewed him. He told me: “What gender a person prefers to do, or who they are attracted to sexually, is a matter of what is in their heart. It would be stupid for a religion to be in opposition to this reality. Buddhism has no problem with transgenderism or homosexuality.”

In a short phrase, that sums up the major attitude that I have encountered from Thai Buddhist leaders: they are not just “tolerant,” but they have a genuine acceptance of the reality that people differ, that it is stupid to expect all people to be the same, and that religion should acknowledge that reality. As Japanese Buddhist writer Daisaku Ikeda said, “Religion exists for the benefit of people. People do not exist for the benefit of religion.”

In my opinion, Buddhism offers the most accepting and inclusive attitude toward transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual people of any major religion in the world today. It would behoove those who celebrate gender and sexual diversity to take a close look at Buddhism as a philosophy for humanity in the twenty-first century (which to Buddhists is now the year 2549 dated from the birth of the Buddha).