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Buddhism and the Wat

Wat [vwawt] is the Cambodian word for a Buddhist temple. In America, a wat is commonly called a pagoda. These temples can be found in every Cambodian city and village, and are the center of traditional and modern Cambodian life. By serving as the site for community events, celebrations, and religious services, these temples are a place for Cambodians to express their beliefs and values.

Starting Points

1. Ask the students what Asian religions they have heard of. If Buddhism is mentioned, ask them what they know about the religion. Ask them if they know what a wat is. Explain to them that the wat is where all of the elements of Buddhism come together.

2. Ask the students what they think of when they hear the word church. Some may think of a building; others may think of a specific religion. Ask what they think a typical Cambodian church would be like. Explain that in Cambodia, a Buddhist church building is a wat, and unlike most American churches, much more than religious services happens there.

3. Show the students a picture of a wat (see Traditions Visual 1). What does it resemble? A few students may venture to say that it is a temple. Ask them if they know what kind of temple it is. Explain what a wat is.

Information

Buddhism in Cambodia

Many cultures have either a physical or figurative center of daily religious life. Cambodia is no different. In Cambodia, there are Buddhist temples, or wats, that serve this purpose. Wats are Theravada Buddhist temples; Theravada Buddhism is the national religion of Cambodia.

Theravada Buddhism is what many consider to be the purest form of Buddhism—the form closest to what the Buddha taught. Buddhists believe that there are many Buddhas who live in different worlds, but “the Buddha” refers to Gautama the Buddha, who was born in India in the sixth century B.C.E. He was the most recent Buddha to be reincarnated in this earthly life to save human beings from suffering.

Another form of Buddhism, commonly called Mahayana Buddhism, is the adaptation of Buddhism that was introduced to Vietnam, China, and Japan. One obvious difference between the two forms of Buddhism is that Theravada Buddhist monks practice what may appear to be begging for food. However, they do not knock on doors or verbally beg for food; the monks walk along the streets and take whatever is given to them by followers of Theravada Buddhism.
Understanding Buddhism is vital to understanding Cambodian culture. Cambodian Buddhists believe that suffering is caused by desire; if you don’t want to suffer, you need to get rid of desire. They believe in an eight-fold path that expresses some specific teachings of the Buddha. Buddhists also believe in reincarnation. They believe that if you live a good, righteous life, you will be born into a better situation in your next life. However, if you live wickedly, you will be born into a worse situation, possibly even as an animal. The goal is to continually be born into better lives until one finally reaches a state of nirvana. Nirvana is a state where peace and nothingness prevail, a state of mind that the Buddha reached. Another common Buddhist belief is the importance of having reverence toward one’s ancestors. This reverence inspires many Buddhists to pray to their ancestors.

Celebrations at the Wat

Cambodians go to wats on special holidays. Many of these holidays are religious and national holidays, similar to Christmas in the United States. Christmas is a religious holiday, but it is not always celebrated religiously. This is similar to some holidays in Cambodia. The Cambodian New Year celebrates the new lunar year. Cambodia follows the Buddhist calendar, which started with the birth of the Buddha. Thus, each Cambodian New Year indicates how long it has been since the Buddha’s birth. However, most Cambodians focus more on enjoying themselves during this holiday period than on thinking about the birth of the Buddha. Similarly, Pchum [pah-joom] Ben is a holiday that reverences ancestors, but not all Cambodians think about their ancestors when they celebrate the holiday.

Every waning or waxing crescent moon constitutes a holy day in Cambodian Buddhism. On these days, all Buddhist followers come to the local wat to give offerings to the monks and listen to religious services.

Monkhood at the Wat

An important function of the wat is to serve as a Buddhist monastery. Monks, young and old, live at the wat (see Traditions Visual 2–3). They live a strict, disciplined life. Monks generally enter monkhood in their early teens. They can serve for a few months, a few years, or for the rest of their lives. Cambodians believe that all males should enter monkhood for some period of time. This service brings honor to families while helping the young men develop self-discipline to overcome worldly desires.

Monks live by specific rules and vows. For example, monks are not allowed to touch women, even to shake hands. This is seen as the ultimate expression of a commitment to chastity. Money is considered a corrupting influence, so many monks will not touch it. Monks typically start their day by walking around a local neighborhood collecting offerings from followers. The offerings may include food, pantry items, or clothes. Buddhists are obligated to provide these gifts every day when the monks make their daily walk. The monks take these offerings in satchels. Some Buddhists give monks money instead, and the monks come prepared with a plastic collection bag so they do not have to touch the money. These gifts provide monks with food for their two meals of the day. Monks are allowed to eat breakfast and one other big meal, which must be before noon. On celebration days, these meals are
The tradition of giving material items to monks shows the obligation Buddhists feel to support their religion.

Wats are also living quarters for monks. The monks’ quarters are usually separate from the main temple structure, but they are still in the wat complex. Monks live in these quarters for the length of their service. There is also a school in the wat, where monks learn more about Buddhist doctrine and the ancient Pali and Sanskrit languages. Monks can be quite young; any teenager is eligible to be a monk. If there are younger monks living in the wat, an older monk typically supervises them.

Monks also participate in other aspects of Cambodian life. They preside at events such as weddings and funerals. These services often take place at the wat. They can also be teachers at the wat.

**Civic Uses**

Wats are also centers of secular community life and can have civic uses. In Cambodia, wats have served as stations for election, registration, and voting. Most wats have schools. Monks are typically the teachers, and the subjects taught tend to focus on Cambodian language and culture. In times past, wats were major centers of learning for children in Cambodian communities. This was true especially in the countryside, where either there were no formal schools or children’s parents were too poor to send them to such schools. Wat schools were often a child’s only option for an education. Today, most Cambodian children no longer attend school at wats because there is an abundance of formal schools—even in the countryside. However, some children still attend wat schools if they live too far away from a formal school or if their parents are very poor. In Cambodian communities in Vietnam or in other countries, such as the United States, wat schools may be the only place where Cambodian children learn about their language and culture.

The wat is an important part of Cambodian culture. Many aspects of daily and religious life are centered in these temples. Cambodians hold many traditional values and beliefs, and wats are where these values are openly taught and manifested.

### Activities

1. Organize a role-play of a typical holy day at a wat. Pick three or four volunteers in advance to be monks. For the whole day, they must follow the rules of monkhood as closely as possible. They can follow standard rules of monkhood such as being forbidden to touch females or money. Assign some students to bring in food for the designated monks. Others can prepare short essays on Buddhist subjects. The “monks” can read these essays to the class as their sermons. If desired, these monks could also wear traditional orange robes for the class period. Emphasize to the students that many Cambodian males their age or younger regularly enter monkhood.

2. Plan a field trip to a local Cambodian Buddhist Wat. Wats can be found in every major city throughout the United States (see Additional Resources). For example, there is one in Oakland, California (see Traditions Visual 4). Contact wats for the dates and times of upcoming celebrations and holy days. The workers at these wats would be happy to show their temple to visitors and explain more about
their religious beliefs. However, remember that the wats in the United States can be slightly different from the ones in Cambodia. Sometimes there is not enough land to build a large temple structure and a typical house has to suffice. Nevertheless, Buddhists go to great lengths to make their wats in the United States as authentic as possible, and the wats still portray the same cultural ambiance. If the field trip is scheduled during a period of religious celebration, the class could join in on the celebration with the devotees. Going during a period of celebration would be an excellent opportunity to try some Cambodian cuisine.

3. After showing the students pictures of wats, have them draw a picture of a wat and the layout of the temple complex (see Traditions Visual 5). Make sure that all aspects of the complex are included, such as the worship area, monks’ living quarters, school, and offices.

4. Have the students write a journal entry as if they were a monk living in a wat. This could be written for a normal day or for a holy day. What would a monk do at different times of the day? What would a monk’s feelings be about the rules he has to live by? Details about the importance of the wat should be included.

Discussion Questions

1. How does understanding the wat help us to understand Cambodian culture?
2. Compare a wat to a church in your community.
3. How would you feel if you were a monk living in a wat?
4. How would Cambodian culture be different today if there were no wats?
Traditions Visual 2: Monk in Battambang City, Cambodia
Traditions Visual 5: Floor Plan of a Typical Wat Structure

City Street

Outer Fence

Front Gate

Temple Worship Area

Open area for gathering, parking, etc.

Wat School, area for civic use

Monks' Quarters

Tree

Monks' Quarters

Tree

Monks' Quarters

Tree