

Buddhism in Thailand

A guide for expats and visitors

Lawrence Whiting



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Chapter One - The Wat Compound and its Buildings

Temples (*wat* in Thai –both terms will be used interchangeably) are the most visible form of Thai Buddhism, and it is unlikely that you will visit an urban or rural area of Thailand without feeling the urge to go into one. You don't have to be particularly interested in Buddhism as a religion or as a philosophy, but the exotic architecture and decoration make temples very attractive.

Temples can vary considerably, and the most obvious differences can be seen when the bright, colourful and extravagant *wats* of Bangkok and other urban centres are compared to most rural *wats* which may be deliberately austere, or in many cases are just not so richly endowed. Despite such differences, there is also a common design but even this is subject to the situation of a particular *wat*. For example, it is customary for the crematorium to be located near the western edge of the compound, but where a new *wat* has been established in an area already bounded by roads and other buildings, this may not always be possible. The complex is usually surrounded by an outer wall with three or four entrances through arched gateways. Buddha images will be aligned so that they face towards the East and the rising sun, or towards water, perhaps a natural feature such as a river, or a man-made feature such as a pond.

Most *wats* in Thailand are not particularly ancient but Wat Mahathat in Sri Thammarat was founded more than 1,000 years ago. It has undergone several restorations and alterations, the most recent in 1990. In Bangkok the oldest *wats* are about 200 years old because it was only in 1782 that Bangkok became the capital of the new dynasty. However, older *wats* can be found in the north, at Chiangmai, Lampang, Lampun, Phrae and Nan. Ruined *wats* can be found in the former capitals of Sukothai and Ayutthaya.

Temple Buildings

Knowing something of the buildings and architectural features to be found within a *wat* should enhance the enjoyment of a layperson's visit. As with the buildings of almost any religion, there is something about the atmosphere which induces a feeling of calm and peace, and this is certainly the case in those buildings which house Buddha images, although first-time visitors may be surprised that there is also a fairly relaxed atmosphere amongst those present, especially those who have brought children with them.

Viharn is the nearest equivalent to the word 'temple'. The word '*Wat*' refers to a temple where monks are in residence. A *Viharn* within a *Wat* is a temple building which contains important Buddha images and artefacts and is used when lay persons join the monks for ceremonies such as the recitation of precepts and to listen to chanting. Monks assemble in the *viharn* for chanting in the morning and the evening. The *viharn* is often enclosed by a gallery walled outside and open inside, with pillars to support the roof. Along the galleries will be many Buddha images and in a few cases the walls of the gallery are decorated with paintings.



A typical *viharn* – except that it is built on a boat

Ubosot

Most temples will have a special building set aside for ordination ceremonies and for other ceremonies involving the monks rather than laypersons. This is often quite a small building and is known as the ***Phra Ubosot*** or ***Bot***. It is one kind of *viharn* and is usually of a similar architectural style. In smaller temples one building may serve both purposes. The *ubosot* is the most sacred building in the *wat*. What distinguishes the *ubosot* is that it stands on consecrated ground. Eight sacred stones resembling huge cannon balls are buried at each of the four corners, at two intermediate points along the sides and one either side of the entrance. A ninth is buried centrally beneath the floor of the building. Each of the eight is normally marked by a stone standing above ground, known as *sima*. These vary in size and shape and some may have a carving on one or both faces. In a *wat* where the *bot* does not serve as *viharn* lay people are often excluded from the building and it is reserved for monks only. In such cases it will often be found locked.



Ubosot, Wat Phra Lao Thepnimit, Phana



Sima stone in front of ubosot

Mural Paintings

When the walls of a *viharn* or an *ubosot* are decorated with mural paintings, these may illustrate some of the *Chadok* stories which recount the Buddha's previous lives. The story of the Buddha's final life is also frequently illustrated in 32 pictures. There are some *wats* where the paintings date back to the mid-19th century. Many *wats* are not that old and much more modern murals can be found in them. All murals in a *wat* are very colourful and tell stories through a sequence of 'scenes' but it is often difficult for a non-expert to know where the boundaries between scenes are. It doesn't really matter. You can learn a lot about Thai Buddhism through looking at these murals – and that is their intention, to serve as a learning tool and a reminder of the Buddha's lives and teachings.

One particular story from the *Chadok* resonates strongly in the Thai imagination and parts of the story are frequently seen illustrated in a *wat*. This is the story of a monk called Phra Malai who visited seven different hells on his way to see the god Indra. Sometimes a separate building is given over to it as in Nan within the compound of Wat Phumin where a circular, domed concrete building houses three-dimensional representations of some very grim 'punishments' meted out to people who had behaved particularly badly in previous lives. Here and elsewhere special attention is often given to the punishment of people who killed animals. Creatures with human bodies and animal heads suffer agonizing tortures. Murals on similar subjects, as well as some very pleasant ones illustrating the rewards of leading a good life, can be seen in many Thai *wats*.



Wat Phumin, Nan

The heavens and hells which Phra Malai visited are part of the Buddhist cosmos, which itself is firmly based on the Hindu cosmos. There is a complex of worlds, planes of existence and heavens and hells. At the centre is the sacred Mount Meru. The god Indra presides over the highest of six heavens. Other heavens are inhabited by celestial beings known as *devas*. In one heaven known as *Dusit* in Thai, is the Bodhisattva (literally, a being destined for enlightenment, on the verge of complete enlightenment) who will become the next Buddha. In many temple compounds there are statues which show him as the ‘fat Buddha’. It is said that he was a very attractive man who deliberately made himself appear unattractive in order to avoid being distracted by his many female admirers.

The *Chofa* is an instantly-recognisable and visible part of Thai temple architectural design. *Chofa* are the slender finials found at either end of the roof peak of a *viharn* or *bot*. They have the shape of a bird’s head, although the word translates as something like a ‘tassel of sky’. The *chofa* is the last portion of a building to be added and the raising of the *chofa* is seen as confirming the sacred nature of the building.



Two examples of *chofa*

The *chofa* is the last piece to be added to a building in a *wat* and raising it onto the roof is an occasion for ceremony and celebration among the community associated with the *wat*.

Most wats will have at least one *Sala*. Uniquely, this word comes into the vocabulary of the *wat* from Portuguese. In older *wats* the *sala* is an open-sided, roofed building which usually contains a Buddha image. Originally, the chief function of a *sala* was as a place to sit and rest, or where travellers could sleep overnight. Within a large *wat* there may be several *sala*. Monks usually take their mid-day meal in a *sala*, and often meet and talk with visitors there.

A large *sala* is used on occasions when a lot of lay people are present. Its full title is *sala garn parien*, which translates as 'preaching hall'. This building is more likely to have folding doors or windows along at least three sides and will contain a major Buddha image and several smaller ones.

A *Mondop* is most often found in urban *wats*. It is a small structure built on a square base with a pyramidal superstructure, sometimes with two or three layers of roofing. It is usually highly-decorated with glass or porcelain mosaic pieces, and doors and window shutters are painted and ornately decorated.



Mondop, Wat Burapa, Phana, Amnat Charoen

The *Mondop* may enshrine some holy objects as does the *mondop* of Saraburi which houses the Buddha footprint which that *wat* is famous for; or it may house a statue commemorating a revered monk, for example. A *mondop* may also be a store-room for objects used in religious ceremonies. There are often doorways at each of the cardinal points and the building may be topped by a *mongkut* (a tapering, tiered feature that also refers to the crown worn by the King of Thailand on certain ceremonial occasions) or a roof such as is found on a *viharn*. The new building that houses the city shrine (*lak muang*) in many Thai towns is usually a form of *Mondop*. Spirit houses which you find in a corner of most gardens and business premises in Bangkok and the Central Plains area are also found in the form of a *mondop* or a *viharn*. These spirit houses (including the *lak muang*) are not Buddhist, but they have appropriated Buddhist architectural forms. In the same way, Thai art reflects the themes, styles and colours of Thai temple murals and decorative motifs.

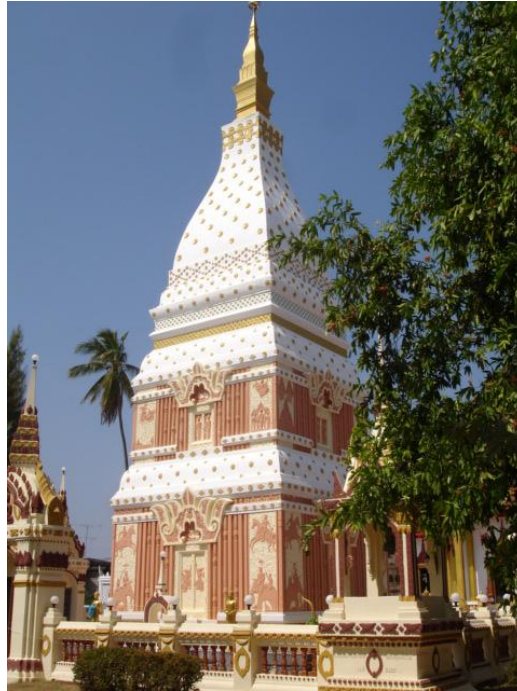
Chedi, That, Prang

The Thai word *Chedi* refers to a particularly important building which has become a symbol of Thai Buddhism, although in many small or rural *wats* it is not found. Other non-Thai words you will come across for essentially the same structure are *stupa*, *pagoda*, and in Isan and Laos, *that*. A *chedi* is a tower-like structure, built on a square base. In Central and Northern Thailand, the overall shape can best be described as bell-like, but in Isan and Laos the *that* is more slender. Originally, a *chedi* was built to contain relics of the Buddha, but nowadays they may contain the ashes of a revered monk, or even a lay person. Very often a *chedi* can be found in remote forests, but in the last years of the 20th century it became fashionable to inter the ashes of lay persons

in small *chedis* inside temple compounds. This practice has been abandoned in some places because of the lack of space, and people have reverted to interring their loved-ones in temple walls and other places within the compound.



Chedi, Nan



That, Renu Nakorn

Chedis come in all sizes, from about two metres high to the *that* at Nakhon Phanom which is 57 metres high and the large *chedi* of Nakhon Pathom which measures 115 metres. The shape and form of the *chedhi* is an earthly representation of the sacred Mount Meru. A *chedi* or *that* is pre-fixed with the term *Phra* as a form of respect and if it is contained within a *wat*, the *wat*, too, is accorded the title, such as Wat Phra That Phanom. The oldest and biggest *chedi* is at Wat Phra Pathom Chedi, Nakhon Pathom Province, north-west of Bangkok. The original structure was built about 500 AD by the Mons who populated the area. In 1860 Rama IV began the present *chedi* which encloses the original structure. The *chedi* is now 120 m high and is said to be the tallest Buddhist monument in the world.

Another tower-like structure is the *Prang*, which has a rounded top. The *prang* derives from India via Angkor Wat and was first found in the Khmer temples of Isan and Lopburi. A *prang* is usually topped by a feature that represents the Hindu God Indra's thunderbolt. In Bangkok, the best places to see the Thai adaptation of the *prang* are Wat Arun, Wat Po and Wat Phra Kaew. It is a design found in many Thai contexts other than a *wat*.

Hor Trai

The *Hor Trai* (**Scripture Library**) is a small building, usually quite separate from others, which is used to house the library of palm leaf texts. These are books with pages about 45 cms wide and 4 cms high. Some of them contain stories from the *chadok*, others are teachings of the Buddha. Both use the Thai language (or the Lao) but old ones were written in scripts considered sacred which were only readable by scholarly monks. Because these books are susceptible to destruction by termites, the *hor trai* is often built on tall pillars, sometimes embedded in a pond. Usually there is no interior decoration, but some have paintings on the walls and window and door panels. Some have a high base built of brick and the library room of wood, others have a ground floor room in brick with another room made of wood over it. This latter form is common in the north of Thailand, and there are fine examples in Chiang Mai and Lamphun.



Hor Trai, Wat Tung Sri Muang, Ubon



Hor Rakhang, Wat Phra Lao, Phana

Hor Rakhang (Bell Tower)

The *Hor Rakhang* (**Bell Tower / Drum Tower**) houses the temple drum and the main bell. In some *wats* they are housed separately. The *hor rakhang* may be whitewashed or decorated in gold and red. Towers built of brick have a high platform with steps on one or four sides. A pyramidal roof is built over the platform and the bell is suspended from the roof. Both the drum and bell are struck by hand by a monk. Bells (and occasionally a drum) which can be struck by lay visitors to a *wat* are not housed in such a tower but are found in a conspicuous position within the temple compound.

Sangarama

The *Sangarama* or *Aram Song* (monks' quarters) are in a part of the temple complex separate from the main religious buildings and are not ordinarily open to lay visitors, particularly women. They should not be visited as part of a 'temple tour'. They may be built in a row as a series of small rooms, or they may be in small separate buildings, usually of wood, sometimes with a verandah or other shaded sitting area at the front. These are usually found in rural *wats* where there are fewer monks, and in forest monasteries. The individual 'house' is known as a *kuti*.



Kuti, Wat Burapa, Ubon

In *wats* where there is a *Chapanasatan* (crematorium), it is situated on the western side of the compound if possible. It is a small, whitewashed building with a distinctive, tall, narrow chimney, usually facing a sala in which the main mourners at a funeral can sit sheltered from the sun and rain. Three stairways lead up to the cremation platform.

Gateways

When you first enter a temple you may not have noticed the arched **gateway**. Each *wat* seems to have made an effort to make their gate different to others. Above the arch you usually find a representation of a moment in the life of the Buddha, either his last life or one of the previous ones. Some gateways feature the god Indra (known in Thai as *Phra In*) and other celestial beings. *Phra In* is sometimes portrayed with his three-headed elephant known as *Erawan*.



Wat gateway, Si Sa Ket Province ... and Ubon



Wat gateway, Amnat Charoen Province and ...



... Ubon



Wat gateway, Amnat Charoen Province and ...



... Nan Province

You will see at least one ***Bodhi tree*** within a wat compound. Depending on the age of the *wat*, the tree is likely to be very old. The trunk may be up to about three metres or more in diameter. The sacred nature of the tree may be indicated by having wide strips of cloth wound around the trunk. The tree goes by various names. The Buddhist name for it is *Bodhi Tree*, because it was while sitting under such a tree that the Buddha achieved enlightenment. You may also find it referred to as a bo-tree, a pipal tree, a sacred fig, or perhaps by the latin name *ficus religiosa*.

The sacred *Bodhi tree* is a popular place for visitors to a *wat* to sit. The tree is usually surrounded by a rectangular or circular concrete wall and it is quite permissible for you to sit on this. Beware of large red ants, though.



Ancient Bodhi Tree, Nan Province

Guardian Spirit

In Northeast Thailand, many *wats* have a 'guardian spirit' statue somewhere in the temple compound but not always made much of a feature. They all look very much alike, as these from Ubon (left) and Amnat Charoen Provinces:

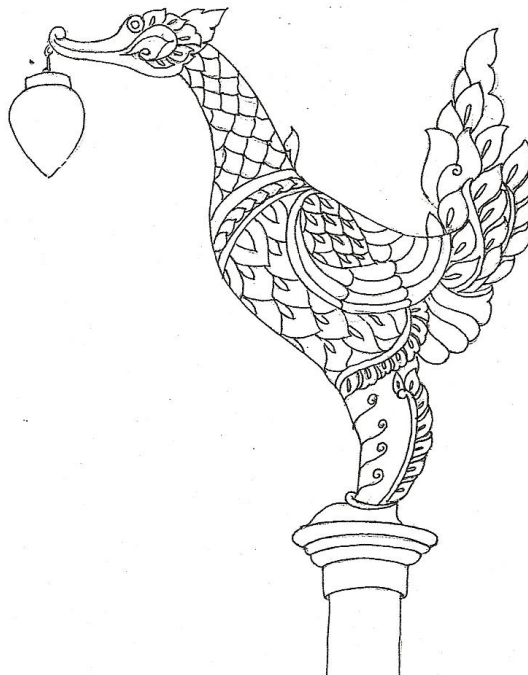


Kindergarten School

A **kindergarten school** is often housed in a building next to one of the walls of the wat compound especially in rural areas. These are usually free with the support of the local government authority (*tetsaban* or *OTP*). The wat maintains its close contacts with the community by providing space for such a school, and it is also a reminder that all education was conducted in the temples not so very long ago.

Animals are always found in a wat compound. Most commonly, these will be dogs, cats, hens and cockerels. The dogs can seem very fierce, often running in packs and barking loudly at visitors. Cats and dogs have often been ‘donated’ to the *wat* (or abandoned there) and the monks feed them on left-over food. The hens and cockerels are most likely visitors from neighbouring houses and they do not generally roost in the *wat*.

The dogs seem to be encouraged by nervous visitors so if you are nervous it is probably best that you heed the dogs’ warning and do not proceed. On the other hand, most of these dogs will soon ignore you if you ignore them. Making a hissing sort of noise will make them go away, but this requires a leap of faith that may be beyond you. Still, there is a Thai proverb that says that barking dogs do not bite.



Temple light held by a mythical bird