

Report on First Visit to Wat Lao Saoputh Buddhist Temple

1. Wat Lao Saoputh Buddhist Temple on a Monday morning was quiet, at least from the outside. And the open yard with a few rows of trees surrounding the temple gave it a secluded feel, even though the temple is situated on a main street in South Sacramento. A lay person who arrived before me was carrying bags of foods inside, and a monk in yellow robe is walking leisurely in front of the entrance. Invited in by the monk, I found myself facing a very large hall, with many big statues of the Buddha and postures of scriptures and decorating flowers at the far end, and a large open space in front of it, which I thought must be where lay people sit to hear the teachings and learn meditation. While waiting for Venerable Joy, who is probably the most fluent English speaking monk in the temple, I heard loud chatting (in Laotian) and laughing, and cooking utensils clanking in the kitchen. Having been to a few Theravada meditation centers (in Malaysia), where everyone speaks quietly since the monks and others might be meditating, I found the relaxed, casual feel to this whole place a new and surprising experience.

Venerable Joy came out, walking fast and smiling very radiantly, wearing a red fleece vest underneath his yellow robe (another casual detail!). Showing me to a seat on the floor rug and seating himself on the higher ground, probably where he usually sits to teach the Dharma to the community, he began to welcome my questions and answered them zealously. To my surprise, the monks and nuns here (nine monks and two nuns)

don't meditate as rigorously and meditation retreats aren't a common thing. With just a few of hours of meditation a day, they're more involved with community activities, with teaching and learning instead. And then just after Venerable Joy explained to me the good merits of the Buddhist teachings and meditation, the bell rang. It's time for the monks to have their meal.

In the dinning room, the two nuns and two lay persons laid down lots of foods on the round table for the monks, bowed to them, and then nuns sat down at a small tray of foods on the ground. The monks began to say thanks and blessings to the donors of the foods, after which individual bowls of warm rice were presented to monks. I was suggested to do the offering myself, by carrying the bowls of rice to the table, where Venerable Joy had me put them down on a piece of napkin he held out, and then I bowed with my hands pressed together in front of my chest. Conversations continued as the monks started dining, and the monks talked very casually, which was totally different from what I had observed in Theravada temples in Malaysia.

2. The presence of the nuns in the temple and their contribution in preparing foods for the monks indicates that women are accepted and welcomed in the order while still playing the role of the donors/officers/servers, and still holding an inferior position to the monks. And the ritual food offerings seemed to be mostly the same as they have been for thousands of years, in that the givers of the foods receive merits, and in that the monks accept all the foods they are given without discriminating, and without touching the hands of the givers.

In the ancient texts, when a devoted woman persistently asked the Buddha, through Ananda, to accept her into the monastic order, and Ananda has asked Him the third time, “The Buddha replied: ‘Yes, Ananda, a woman who is earnest and zealous and who dwells in seclusion can realize any of these four fruits of the monastic life.’”(EOB pg 55: 2.1.4 The Acceptance of Woman into the Order)

However, there are a lot more rules that apply to female ordained persons: “...A nun, even one who has been ordained for a hundred years, must respectfully salute a monk, even one who has been ordained but a day.” ...and “Nuns should not receive food, beds, seats, or lodging ahead of monks”. (EOB pg 55 & 56) Whether the Buddha himself set all these rules or were it later monastery leaders who set them, these rules are still followed these days, as in Wat Lao Saoputh Buddhist Temple.

And the offering of foods to spiritual ones has always been a great deed of merit, as what Sujata did to the Buddha (unknowingly), around the time of his enlightenment. “Uncovering the dish of milk-rice, she offered it to the Blessed One with her own hands...” (EOB pg 49: 2.1.2 The Laywoman Sujata) And so later on, “when the Master was assigning statuses to the laywomen, he established her as the foremost laywoman among those taking refuge.”

3. Contrasts:

The casual conversations going on at the dining table, between the monks, and between the monks and lay persons, contrasted significantly with the strict rules I perceived in reading Nagasenabhiksu Sutra, where monks were restricted from speaking amply to the donors. This detail is highlighted in the passage: “When it was Nagasena’s turn to go to get food from this layman, Kavigupta told him to fill his mouth with water and keep it there for the duration of his quest for alms at the layman’s house.” (EOB pg 71: 2.4.1)

Also contrasting is how the monks are served at the temple instead of going for alms (i.e. no hardship in looking for food and acquiring nutritions). And from talking to the lay lady, I learned that they do this everyday for the monks, and that after the monks finish their meals, the lay people (and the nuns) would clean up and eat after them. *It seems the monks are well provided for* – which is nothing bad, except that according to the ancient standards it may seem like indulgence, and thus a hindrance to their spiritual path. (But I guess it wouldn’t make sense if these monks were to impose hardship on themselves in finding food, since food in America is not scare compared to India in ancient time, and since the lay people are all too willing to provide for them).

