

# Thai Monks: Resisting the restrictive robes of religion



**Highland Views**  
Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Listening to the BBC “Heart and Soul” podcast I was fascinated to hear the story of a Buddhist monk in Thailand (“Thai Buddhism: Leaving the monkhood”). The 30-year-old monk from Bangkok, Phra Maha Pai-van Worawono, was presenting popular sermons on Facebook that included laughter, jokes and some political commentary. Some Buddhist elders and government authorities weren’t amused. They found the young monk’s approach disrespectful and began an investigation. In the podcast he explains why he eventually left his ordination because of the reaction, but also to care for his sick mother. He retains a desire to teach Buddhist principles and hopes to continue engaging his hundreds of thousands of followers.

Buddhism is one of the world’s missionary religions. Spreading the teachings of Buddha (the “dharma”) is a devotional commitment. Buddhist converts have carried the message of Siddhartha Gautama for 2,600 years, to China, Southeast Asia, Japan and throughout the world. There are many “denominations” of Buddhism and one form it takes in Thailand and elsewhere is Theravada or “the way of the elders” (with about 100 million followers around the world). Theravadins believe they adhere to the most original teachings of Buddha and are more scripturally based than Mahayana Buddhists and others.

What is dharma and how do you teach it? Can the teachings be managed by traditional control or can

they be taught in new, creative ways? “As more monks turn to social media in a bid to revolutionize how the Dharma is taught, is the resignation of Thailand’s most popular internet monk a sign that traditional Buddhism must modernize, or face becoming irrelevant to the country’s young population?”

It’s not easy to listen to this story or similar stories from faith leaders who leave their positions or their faith, yet there are many reasons for these difficult decisions. Understanding those reasons could potentially reform or revolutionize faith communities. It can be especially hard to hear when, as in the BBC segment, a person’s language, culture and religion are unfamiliar. It takes concentration (a Buddhist value) and patience to comprehend the words and the meaning.

The split from orthodox faith that social media and modernization has caused is pushing some to “turn [their] back on the temple.” This can mean losing relationships, connections to community, respect and one’s livelihood.

When asked if he thinks the Buddha would use social media if he was living today, the monk confidently replied, “Absolutely.” Since a large part of Thailand is on Facebook, he seems to have tapped into a contemporary conduit for communication that has wide appeal – at least to younger people.

According to the Bangkok Post in December 2021: “The 30-year-old monk of Wat Soithong in Bangkok’s Bang Sue district posted a message and photos of him leaving the monkhood, prostrating himself in front of senior monks at the ... royal Buddhist temple, on his Facebook page ... .” Seeing this, one supporter said: “Whatever status he holds, a good man is still a good man.” This is important to keep in mind when we learn of someone who leaves ministry or even faith. It doesn’t mean they are giving up goodness, abandon-

ing morality or personal ethics. In fact, we might think of teachers such as Jesus who did not throw away the essential teachings of his Jewish faith, though he re-framed and popularized a refreshed understanding of those “essentials.” Maybe we could say he was interested in living something deeper than his religion, or any religion?

The Buddha himself stepped away from his Hindu culture perhaps not so much in an effort to create a new religion but to take the core teachings of the sages and re-vitalize them. He too may have chosen a deeper (or more inclusive) practice of his religion, any religion. Muhammad may have done something similar. A kind of creative defiance. The move from orthodox tradition to heterodox innovation isn’t always a long leap far from the source. This young monk may become a “better Buddhist,” or at least less inhibited in his expression of what he considers the heart of Buddhism. Hopefully he can now feel more free to speak the truth – dharma – from outside the monkhood, without the robes and rituals.

Those who control the “true faith” have always felt threatened by the reformers. They believe they are the defenders of the “true way,” more faithfully following scriptures. Change comes slowly to religion as it does to human society. In every age there have been challenges to the accepted authorities. Social media is transforming Buddhism and potentially all religion. This emerging form of “crowd-sourced” religion will be shaped by the imagination of the next generations.

*Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker’s Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.*