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Dispositions for Christian Witness Among Theravada Buddhists

Abstract:

This article reflects on communicating the Christian gospel appropriately and effectively among Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhists (SEATB). It is concerned with contextualizing the means of communication rather than theological concepts. Contextualization is often discussed with little reference to the level of contextualization, including: the content of the gospel, liturgical forms, social rules for relating, and dispositions shaped by Buddhist virtues used in communication. Examples are given of contextualization among SEATB, and then descriptions of how communicators of the gospel can use dispositions shaped by key Buddhist virtues. An argument is made that among SEATB, the means of communicating the gospel is often far more important than the content of the gospel. This suggests that communicators of the gospel would do well to become competent in communicating in ways that reflect the local rules for relationships and by appropriating nonverbals that communicate dispositions of Buddhist virtue.

Keywords: Laos, Christian witness, Theravada Buddhism, contextualization, communication

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This article reflects on the task of communicating the Christian gospel appropriately and effectively among Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhists (SEATB). The ideas shared here are the result of many conversations with SEATB and colleagues who also struggle with this important task. Many discussions with twelve scholars and practitioners, from six different nations via Zoom during the COVID pandemic shaped the section on dispositions. More than 450 years of sincere, sacrificial, but largely ineffectual Christian witness among SEATB highlight the urgency of the task. Today, less than 1% of the Buddhist background people in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand are Christians.¹ The churches that do exist in these nations tend to be small sub-cultures made up mostly of non-Buddhist ethnic minority groups.² In spite of many efforts at different levels of contextualization of the gospel message, SEATB have not shown much receptibility. The thesis of this article proposes that Christian witness among SEATB would be more appropriate and effective if it embodied dispositions that communicate important SEATB virtues. I begin by discussing the challenges of four other levels of contextualization among SEATB to demonstrate the complexity of the challenge. This then leads to the argument that embodying virtuous dispositions will likely allow SEATB to interpret the gospel as good news for their communities.

Missionaries dating back to Paul have wrestled with the tension between the transcendent nature of the gospel that is revealed to God's servants who were shaped by ancient cultures. Christians in mission however have generally been confident in what Tennent calls the "translatability" of the gospel. Translatability, or in this article, contextualization, "refers to the ability of the gospel to be articulated, received, appropriated, and reproduced into a potentially infinite number of cultural contexts."³ The task of cross-cultural Christian witness requires contextualizing the gospel at several levels.

First, the Bible must be translated into a local language. As of the writing of this article, missionaries have translated the full Bible into 717 languages.⁴ Each of these translations required decisions about the choice of words, syntax, font style and layout of the Bible so that it communicates the gospel in ways that allow the meaning of the text to impact readers in ways "dynamically equivalent" to the way those who first heard the gospel were impacted.⁵ To read the Bible in any language requires the activation of the social experiences, history, cultural categories, and even the geographical memory of readers. Bibles translated into SEATB languages are

loaded with Buddhist terms. Yet translators are confident that the context of the biblical narrative, interpreted in the community of faith, will transform the meaning of these terms that once referenced the mental and spiritual “world” of Buddhists to point to the God of the Bible. Typically, it takes SEATB time to understand the new meanings and direction that the Biblical narrative gives formerly Buddhist terms.

An example of a contextual issue in translation is found in John 1:1. The Lao translation reads, “In the beginning was the *phatham*.”⁶ The Lao word *phatham* read by a Lao Buddhist typically means *dharma*, a reference to the sacred teaching of the Buddha.⁷ The Lao translation of the Bible requires the reader of John to transform the meaning so that *phatham* refers to Jesus, the living *dharma* of God. Charles Kraft would say that this is an “appropriate” (to the context and to the Bible)⁸ translation for “in the beginning was the *logos*.”⁹ Eugene Nida wrote that an appropriate translation of the Bible should allow people “to interpret the relevance of the message within the context of their own lives, without having to consider or be distracted by the formal structures of the original communicative setting.”¹⁰

The second level of contextualization requires that Christian theological ideas be communicated by means of “bridge” ideas from within the local culture. In the SEATB context, we must use Buddhist concepts that trigger Buddhist cosmological assumptions. But Buddhist ideas can and do bridge understanding of Christian theological concepts. All communication involves some misunderstanding that must be overcome through dialogue. Indeed, all learning builds upon what is already known, requiring adjustments and corrections to old knowledge of the world. This will be illustrated in the struggle to communicate the Biblical concept of grace among SEATB.

Terry Muck writes that Christians, “have not yet presented the gospel of grace in a way that connects with the Hindu-Buddhist understanding of gift-giving [that is free and without reciprocation] or *dana*.”¹¹ The biblical idea of free grace is understood against the backdrop of the utter holiness of God the creator (1 Sam. 2:2) and the sinful nature of humanity (Rom. 3:23). The sinful nature of humanity exists as an obstacle to human fellowship with the holy God of the Bible. This dilemma is only overcome by the death and resurrection of God’s son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:19). Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to redeem humanity from the penalty of sin is the free gift of God to the world (Rom. 6:23). People must receive this gift through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior (Matt. 21:32). In

part the difference between Christian and Buddhist concepts of grace lies in the different ways they think about sin. For Buddhists the concept of sin is linked to the concept of *kamma* (*karma*).¹²

A fundamental Buddhist teaching is that to live is to suffer (*dukkha*).¹³ We suffer because of our persistent efforts to hold on to what is impermanent. Attachment to the impermanent produces *kamma*. “According to the Buddha...karma is action with intention.”¹⁴ It explains everything about a person’s station in life and everything that happens to a person is the result of their previous actions. To a certain degree, the Bible affirms this law of cause and effect by acknowledging that the result of sin is death, and the result of obeying God is blessing (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15; Proverbs 10:16). But the Bible teaches that sin is ultimately a denial of God by acting contrary to God’s will. Meanwhile Buddhist *dharma* focuses on the bad consequences resulting from doing bad deeds with no reference to God or gods. If an action does not result in bad consequences, it is not typically considered to be evil. This explains the Buddhist value of non-attachment. To be free from suffering, the consequences of our *kamma*, we must stop clinging. Clinging is the root cause of evil and suffering. Only when we completely let go of our clinging to the world can we escape the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*) and achieve *nibbana* (*nirvana*) which is freedom from suffering or bliss. Since SEATB are pessimistic about being able to achieve *nibbana*,¹⁵ making merit (*bun*) to improve the quality of their present and future lives is the most important practice of lay Buddhist people. According to Tilakaratne:

The regular life of a Buddhist is characterized by merit making. In fact, it is correct to say that everything he does as a Buddhist has to be understood with reference to merit making. In this context there are three meritorious deeds, namely, giving (*dana*), morality (*sila*), and meditation (*bhavana*). The idea is that one must engage in these activities as much as possible, as the more one does, the more one accumulates merit; and the more one accumulates merit the better his life in the *samsara* will be.¹⁶

In the Lao context the Christian concept of grace is communicated by the phrase *bunkhun*.¹⁷ But the meaning of the Lao word, *bunkhun*, is set within the Buddhist narrative of *dhamma*. The Christian claim that bad *kamma* is overcome by the gift of grace in Jesus Christ, creates at least three challenges for Buddhists. First, gift giving among SEATB builds strong

relationships precisely because gifts obligate people to each other.¹⁸ A free gift that has “no strings attached” communicates that you do not want a relationship with the receiver. Second, Buddhists understand *bunkhun* as an ethical quality that indicates a person of merit (good *kamma*). But for a Buddhist no one’s *bunkhun* can liberate another person from suffering from their own *kamma*.¹⁹ Finally, God’s love in the giving of this free gift suggests attachment and thus God’s *kamma*. Theologian and missionary to Thailand, Kosuke Koyama notes the following:

The Christian message is based on the “infinite love” of God ... According to ingrained Thai emotion and psychology, the word “love” (*khwamrak*) denotes people’s attachment to things, persons, or supernatural beings. Attachment inevitably produces sorrow and trouble. Detachment inevitably creates tranquility, honesty, and genuine happiness.²⁰

There are however two ways in which *bunkhun* can serve as a theological bridge for the Biblical concept of grace. First, Christians can explain that while God’s grace is a free gift, God also wants to form a covenant relationship with us. God, like any SEATB giver of gifts wants a relationship.²¹ The relationship creating nature of a gift that forms a covenant relationship with God is likely to be experienced as *bunkhun*. Second, *bunkhun* as biblical grace can be connected to powerful local symbols of grace. Two are worth exploring. First, the well-known *bunkhun* of the village temple abbot. Monks give freely of themselves without repayment of any kind. They give the laity opportunities for making merit, they teach children to read, counsel troubled villagers, treat illness with traditional medicine and help organize village work projects. Mothers also give freely and sacrificially by serving their children without any chance of the child ever being able to repay their mother’s *bunkhun*. Of these two symbols of grace, a mother is perhaps the most potent metaphor of God’s free grace given in covenant relationship. People commonly say that no one can repay the *bunkhun* of a mother. This kind of *bunkhun* forms a powerful bond between parent and child that mirrors that between God and believer. While all analogies have weaknesses, if these symbols are used in dialogue with the biblical text, the concept of the grace of God can cross the theological bridge and transform SEATB people in dynamically appropriate ways.²²

A third level of contextualization adapts indigenous SEATB forms for use in the liturgical life of the church. Churches in SEA have not used

many indigenous forms. Church buildings reflect western architecture, and congregations mostly sing western Christian songs. While SEATB typically take their shoes off in homes and temples it is rare to find SEA Christians following this practice in their churches. Sitting on a clean floor in a Buddhist temple is a standard for worship but nearly all Christians sit in pews or chairs in their churches. However, some efforts have been made. Catholics have adopted Buddhist architecture for a few churches.²³ A few Protestant congregations sit on a wood floor after removing their shoes before entering the church. More churches encourage the use of traditional musical instruments (such as the Lao *kaen*)²⁴ and melodies for Christian worship on special occasions. Some Christians wear traditional clothing for important Christian events like Christmas and wedding ceremonies.²⁵

While these levels of contextualization have been implemented to varying degrees by missionaries among SEATB, these efforts have not resulted in significant church growth. Some may attribute this to SEATB not comprehending the gospel; but it might be because they have not yet even heard it. This lack of engagement of SEATB with the Christian message may have more to do with the means of our communication than our efforts to contextualize the message. “Mehrabian, a researcher of body language, . . . first broke down the components of a face-to-face conversation. He found that communication is 55% nonverbal, 38% vocal, and 7% words only.”²⁶ This is particularly significant in SEA, where indirect, nonverbal ways of communicating are often more important than what is communicated. Nonverbal communication plays a large role in shaping how a message is understood and accepted or rejected. This might be true everywhere but it is particularly true in SEA.

The ability of a recipient to understand the intended meaning of a message depends on more than the choice of symbols and syntax in the communicational context.²⁷ Interpreting the meaning of a message also depends on whether the message is conveyed by text message or verbally, by a friend or an enemy, or by a man or a woman. Sometimes the means of communication is so powerful that it becomes the message itself. When one person screams at another, the screaming says it all. Furthermore, how the *intention* of a communicator is understood determines how the messages will be interpreted. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson speak to this issue:

Relevance is tied to the idea of “ostension” or, “behavior that makes manifest the intention to make something manifest.” The connection to relevance is seen in that processing information requires work and humans do not normally put forth the effort for it unless a positive return can be expected. Behavior that demonstrates an intention to communicate assumes that the speaker feels that processing the information will be relevant to the audience. (1995:49)

In other words, “an act of ostension carries a [kind of] guarantee of relevance, and . . . this fact--which we will call the principle of relevance--makes manifest the intention behind the ostension.”²⁸

There are two levels of ostensive information:

The first is the information itself, which is called the informative intention. The second is the information at which the first level of information was given intentionally. This is called the communicative intention. But there is a twist to this claim. A speaker can fulfill her communicative intention without fulfilling her informative intention. In other words, it is possible to successfully make a hearer understand that you have information you want to convey without successfully conveying the information itself.²⁹

If I am led to believe that a communicator is against me or is untrustworthy, then the way I understand the meaning of their communication is influenced in a negative way. The opposite is also true. Once I decide on a communicator’s intention it is not easy to change my understanding of what the person means to say. Furthermore, how recipients understand the intention of a communicator is largely determined by the communicator’s way of using (or not using) the social rules for relating and by the dispositions the communicator displays. Below I will address both of these means of contextualized communication.

From a biblical point of view our relationships must always be characterized by love of God and a love that makes us willing to lay down our lives for others. But cross-culturally people express and experience love in different ways guided by social structure. A community’s social structure shapes local cultural assumptions about right relationships. We can illustrate this by comparing one general rule for relationships among Americans and one for SEATB. Americans assume equality in relationships and believe

that relating to others as equals is “the right way.” Hierarchy is wrong, even if it is tolerated in some important American institutions. Even there however Americans praise leaders who put their status aside and act like they are “no better than others.” This pattern shapes the way they experience love. Not surprisingly, the key component of marriage in America is friendship described as finding one’s “soul mate.”

The most fundamental rule for relationships in SEA is to relate in terms of a hierarchy referred to as knowing who is “older and younger.” While status is commonly determined by who is older, it can also be determined by positional power, wealth, and education. So, a person can be referred to as your “older brother or sister” because their social status is higher than one’s own even if they are younger in age. SEATB often use kinship terms since doing so indicates a fictive family closeness between people that allows for a balanced exchange of favors that tie them together. The exchange of favors creates strong relational bonds. The fundamental assumption in any SEA relationship is that someone is “older” – the patron – and someone is “younger” – the client. Being a superior to someone else but acting like their equal dishonors the person and their position.

A communicator of the gospel to SEATB who wants their listeners to understand their positive intentions in communicating the gospel will need to communicate within the “older and younger” paradigm and use the appropriate rules for communicating up and down in the system. This system gives the role of teacher to older sisters and brothers who instruct younger brothers and sisters. An older sister can teach religion directly and expect the younger to take the message seriously. Most Americans would find this direct style abrasive, but it is embraced by SEATB younger-lower status people since it demonstrates the concern and care of the older-higher status person. Older brothers and sisters must care for the welfare of the younger. Obligation runs in both directions though they are different in kind.

On the other hand, “younger” people do not teach religion to those who are “older.” Younger-lower status people must communicate the religion deferentially and indirectly. Offering religious truth to someone “older” must be done in the same way that SEATB offer drinking water to a guest. When a guest comes to the home no one asks the guest if they want a drink, the guest is immediately brought water (and sometimes a snack) which is placed in front of them. It is completely up to the guest as to whether they drink it or not, although to be polite most guests at least taste

it. Nothing is said but hospitality and deferential respect is communicated from the younger to the older in this way. An example will help explain how this can happen in Christian witness.

A Lao older brother and I worked together for many years. He was not a Christian and never showed the slightest interest in the Christian faith. Feeling the constraint of the older to younger roles I left my Bible at his home. When I returned, he scolded me saying I should take better care of a sacred book. This was the appropriate rebuke and concern of an older brother. Using indirect communication, I left the Bible at his home again and several more times after that. After I returned to his home one day, he asked me to take a walk with him. While walking he explained that he had read my Bible twice and that he had some questions. As explained above, it is not in character for an older brother to ask younger brothers religious questions, but since he assumed I understood the book, he took me away from the others to ask his questions in private. After each of my replies to his questions, he “improved” on my answer and felt satisfied that he was getting somewhere. Later he went to a conference on community development and the Kingdom of God where an older man was teaching. He returned and told me he was now a Christian. The crucial point here is that had I tried to instruct him in the gospel I would have violated the social order of older-younger and this would have communicated an intention of trying to honor myself while dishonoring him. Because of this perceived intention, it would have been very unlikely that he would have interpreted the meaning of the gospel in a way that made it good news to him.

The final but related level of contextualization is dispositions. The Bible speaks to virtuous dispositions frequently. For example, 1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” 2 Timothy 2:24 “... be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed.” Philippians 4:5 “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And Galatians 5:22 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” As will become clear below, Christian and Buddhist virtues overlap but their meaning and application differ because of the larger religious narratives to which they a part.

By dispositions Muck refers to “the way we articulate the issue at hand...and the way we behave, the actual way we carry out our missions

(that is, volitional factors).³⁰ Here I am also referring to the way dispositions are indirectly communicated through body language, speech (i.e. tone, volume, pace of speech), emotions, attitudes, and virtues.³¹ SEATB dispositions often communicate virtues through the way bodies are positioned in relation to other bodies and in the way the quality of speech indicates deference and honor.

The dispositions of the ideal Buddhist monk are noticeably different from those of the ideal Christian leader.³² Christian leaders learn to confidently and zealously persuade others to put their faith in Christ. They preach and lead with passion. They often use loud voices, work with entrepreneurial energy, dress in western clothing that reflects the business world of SE Asia and use technology in a way that projects the power of consumerism. These dispositions appear to a SEATB to represent a person with a “hot heart” (*chairon*).³³ While these characteristics of force and materialism can also be found among some Buddhist monks, most SEATB see this as a corruption of the *sangha* (monastic community).³⁴ Christian witness done with aggressive dispositions that reflect worldly power tell Buddhists that the gospel produces people who cling and who suffer for their *kamma*. I suggest that adopting Buddhist dispositions as a non-verbal means of communicating the gospel will help SEATB to interpret the meaning of the gospel as one free of *kamma* and thus good news.

I turn now to discuss some key Buddhist virtues that shape Buddhist dispositions in communication.³⁵ The Buddha’s teaching on the “four ways of sublime living” highlights the virtues of friendliness (love), compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.³⁶ Here below is a brief introduction to how Buddhists understand these virtues.

Metta – To translate this word as love communicates too much attachment and translating it as friendliness risks sounding too distant. The meaning lies somewhere between. “Since clinging or craving is the root cause of suffering, it is important that *metta* is not confused with the emotional love that simply reflects a need for the loved object. *Metta* has to be a non-clinging form of love, in order that other Buddhist qualities may spring from it. Without this, compassion for example would not be separated from self-interest - and can descend into ‘do-gooding’.”³⁷ *Metta* is a love that does not seek to control or possess and that recognizes the freedom of the other to be what they will be.

Karuna – “Compassion is celebrated in many of the Jataka tales, which claim to be about former lives of the Buddha, in the compassion of

a hunter who spares the life of a deer, for example, or of an hare who volunteers to give his own life to feed a starving man.”³⁸ Buddhist compassion is an empathetic response to the human condition of suffering resulting from our clinging to the impermanence of everything in our lives. Christians might think of John 15:13 and Matthew 5:43-48.

Mudita – Sympathetic joy is rejoicing in the goodness of others. It is understood as an antidote to competitive and jealous attitudes. It is the discipline of rejoicing in the excellent qualities of others. By rejoicing in the good deeds of others we can share in the merit (the good) that results from their deeds.³⁹

Upeka – Equanimity, is “the ability to see without being caught by what we see . . . which gives rise to a great sense of peace.” It is seeing and understanding with patience what is happening so that we do not take offense or get caught up in the emotions of the up and down of life that leads to improper and unwise responses.⁴⁰ Equanimity allows us to respond with empathetic compassion and peace to the pain we see in the anger and hate others project into the world.

All virtue must be exercised in the peaceful repose of knowing that all sentient beings suffer until they release their hold on the impermanent, allowing the beauty of each moment to come and go without clinging. Friendship, compassion, sympathetic joy must all be expressed with equanimity, peacefully and without clinging to what we cannot change or keep. The enactment of Buddhist virtues shaped as peaceful repose is on display in the bodies and voices of SEATB. Five examples of how these virtues shape dispositions communicated through bodies and voice quality follow.

The first example related to the virtue of *metta* or friendly love, presents the greatest challenge for a Christian since the passionate love of God is what Christians seek to emulate in all their interactions. While Christians will not want to abandon the character of God’s love that causes God to be “jealous” (Ex. 20:5) and to “long” to be gracious to us (Is. 30:18), the Buddhist perspective on love can be instructive. Scripture itself instructs us that our love can be misplaced (the story of David in 2 Sam. 11) and even idolatrous (Hosea 3:1). Furthermore, God’s love, however passionate, does not coerce or manipulate (Matt.10:8). Consider God’s willingness to allow Samuel to anoint a king even though this was a rejection of God’s leadership (1 Sam. 8). Consequently, in communicating the gospel to SEATB Christians should demonstrate love that does not seek to control or ma-

nipulate, but rather is characterized by a profound regard for the freedom for the other. Of course, deeper, and longer conversations with Buddhists will reveal to them new dimensions of the strength of God's love for them. The practical form this can take is by relating to Buddhists as cherished neighbors whose welfare we seek and whose faith we respect whether they come to faith in Jesus or not. Just as a host does not force a guest to eat or drink, so Christians should in body and voice gently offer the gospel with dispositions that communicate deference and hospitality.

Second, the virtue of compassion (*karuna*) can be communicated directly in word and deed in gentle and emotionally quiet ways. But it can also be communicated indirectly through the quality of one's speech. That is, speaking with a gentle tone of voice, in low volume and with a slow pace of speech. Compassion is communicated by sitting with still bodies and silent voices with those who suffer; by listening attentively without judgment while others speak. Compassion quiets our need to be right, correct others, or attempt to fix what is not ours to fix.

The third example relates to sympathetic joy (*mudita*) that celebrates the accomplishments and status of others. Perhaps the most practiced virtue among SEATB is honoring others. Honor is most often given for a person's age or position, but it is also given to recognize a person's *bunkhun*. Most typical are the celebrations of parents, monks and teachers. Without demonstrating respect and giving honor to elders no one can be said to have virtue. There simply is no occasion when a virtuous person will fail to show honor, respect, and deference to those above them. In everyday interactions honor is communicated by paying attention to the position of one's body in relation to the other's body. Questions such as, "Is my head above or beneath the other's?" and "Are my feet tucked underneath me or pointing away from the person I wish to honor?" guide the position of her body. The proximity of one's body to the other's should be close, with some shoulder or hand contact if the other is of the same gender and status but politely separated with no contact if the other is of higher status or of the opposite gender. The gaze of one's eyes is deferential when it is down or away from the gaze of the other's eyes, but challenging and rude if directed into their eyes. One bows the head before passing in front of the other, and greets people of status by raising their hands, pressed together, their fingertips touching their forehead as they slightly bow their head. One sits on a chair showing respect by sitting on the front of the chair without leaning back.

Fourth, the virtue of equanimity (*upeka*) shapes the response to success, failure, difficulty, and conflict. The phrase “it is nothing” is repeated frequently.⁴¹ It is typical for SEATB confronted with a problem, conflict, or an insult to smile and repeat this phrase as a means of controlling unpleasant emotions and accepting what has occurred. An outburst of anger can end relationships forever as it dishonors both the person failing to demonstrate equanimity and the person to whom the anger is directed. Instead of showing emotion to empathize with the other, as westerners tend to do, one should be sincere but remain in peaceful repose. Even big displays of positive emotions should be avoided as expressive joy reflects ignorance of the impermanence of all things.

Finally, a practical means of communicating these virtues well is found in ritual. Ritual provides a powerful means of communicating honor, friendship, blessing, healing, and forgiveness. Ritual words of blessing are spoken over a home, a meal or to a person embarking on a new endeavor such as international travel, business, or school creating a strong emotional bond. Examples of ceremonies that communicate virtue include the Lao *baci*, and the Cambodian *pchum ben* blessing rituals, and the Thai *ahosikarma* ritual of reconciliation.⁴²

In a Buddhist society shaped by hierarchy and a collective concern for the welfare of family over a single child, the village over a single family, the nation over a single village, the means for communicating the gospel must be done with dispositions that honor a person and their kin group. Christians who embody these dispositions will not share all the assumptions they invoke that their SEATB interlocutors do. But this dissonance in the communicational exchange can be overcome when our intentions in communicating are seen as virtuous and for the welfare of SEATB. SEATB do not fear syncretism or the experience of difference in diversity. They appreciate a virtuous person who respects the sacred whatever their religious tradition. Christians who can skillfully communicate the gospel by means of honoring others through deference to the social hierarchy and virtuous dispositions will help SEATB understand the gospel and be transformed in ways dynamically equivalent to the way it transformed people in the first century; even as it continues to transform the Christians who share it.

I have argued that the importance of contextualizing the means of communication is more important than the contextualization of the content of the gospel among SEATB. If true, this thesis should prompt communica-

tors of the gospel everywhere to consider the appropriate social rules for relating and the right dispositions that should shape the communication of the gospel in their own contexts. As we consider why the church is growing and spiritually vital in the Global South, we are likely to find that social and relational factors prove far more important in this process than the contextualization of ideas and forms.

End notes

¹ The Buddhist context of Sri Lanka (the other predominately Theravada Buddhist nation in SEA) is not discussed in this paper simply because it is beyond of my knowledge and experience.

² It should be noted that there are some small movements of Buddhist background people to Christian faith today in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand. For an overview of the history of the churches in these nations see, Kiem-Kiok Kwa and Samuel Ka-Chieng Law, *Missions in Southeast Asia* (Langham Creative Projects, 2022). For an overview on the church in Laos see, David Andrianoff, "Laos" *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds. Kenneth R. Ross, et. al., Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, UK (2020): 167 – 174.

³ Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century*, Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, MI: (2010): 325.

⁴ "2021 Scripture Access Statistics" <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/> Accessed September 29, 2022.

⁵ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY (1979): 271. Kraft borrows this idea of "equivalence" from Eugene Nida. Translators should seek to the "discovery of symbols which will permit an equivalent type of response within the new cultural context" (Nida 1960: 155).

⁶ The Lao Bible reads, ເມື່ອຕົ້ນເດີມນັ້ນ ພະທ້າວຊົງເປັນຜູ້ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Lao Version, 2nd Edition. United Bible Society (2013).

⁷ Significantly, the *dharma*, and not the Buddha himself, plays the central liberating role in Buddhism. So, *dharma* in a sense plays the role in Buddhism that Jesus plays in Christian faith.

⁸ Charles Kraft, *Appropriate Christianity*, William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA (2005): 4.

⁹ For John's audience, the Greek word *logos* meant simply "word," but in this context it likely refers to the "Word of YHWH." "The widespread way of understanding 'Word' here is the Son as God's speech, address, or communication. This text should be understood in terms of the theophanic texts where God's visible image is called 'the Word,' 'the Word of YHWH,' or

‘the Word of God.’” The narrative of John’s gospel reveals to the reader that the Word previously known as Torah or by way of the prophets is ultimately Jesus. See Charles A. Gieschen, “The YHWH Christology of the Gospel of John.” *Christian Theological Quarterly*. 85 (2021): 3. Robert Peltier and Dan Lioy write, “John also adopted the Greek prologue motif as a literary device to introduce the eternal Logos of the Christian world while simultaneously redefining the commonly-known logos of the Greek world as the Christian Logos.” In other words, John was bringing the Greek Stoic meaning of Logos into conversation with the meaning of “word” as it relates to creation in the book of Genesis. See their article, “Is John’s Λόγος Christology a Polemical Response to Philo of Alexandria’s Logos Philosophy? (Part 1)” in *Conspectus: Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*. 28 (2019): 65-90.

¹⁰ Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA (1960): 140.

¹¹ Terry Muck, “Three Reasons Why Christian Witness to Buddhists Has Failed” *Communicating Christ Through Story and Song*, ed. Paul H. De Neui, William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA (2008): 117.

¹² In most cases this article will use the Pali form of Buddhist words used by Theravada Buddhists rather than the Sanskrit form. SEA languages have several words that roughly translate “sin.” *Kamma* can refer to action (good or bad) as in acting on the world. In this sense a person must be free of all *kamma* to achieve enlightenment and *nibbana*. But *kamma* can also refer to bad deeds probably because all *kamma* is a problem that keeps one in *samsara* and suffering.

¹³ This does not mean that SEATB do not experience joy in their lives but simply that since everything in life passes away the overall nature of existence is loss/suffering.

¹⁴ Asanga Tilakaratne, *Theravada Buddhism: The View of the Elders (Dimensions of Asian Spirituality)*, University of Hawaii Press, Kindle Edition (2012): 63. “There is, however, an equally important dimension of karma as human action that accounts for one’s identity in the absence, according to the teaching of the Buddha, of the soul held to be the essence in every human being” (61).

¹⁵ Unlike the Mahayana Buddhists in East Asia, SEATB are pessimistic about being able to stop clinging to the impermanent, ending *kamma*, escaping the cycle of *samsara*, and attaining to bliss or *nibbana*. Almost every time I have asked a SEATB if they thought that they might attain to *nibbana* the person laughed at the thought.

¹⁶ Tilakaratne op. cit., Kindle Loc 123.

¹⁷ In Lao, *bunkhun* is a compound word with *bun* referring to “merit” and *khun* referring to “virtue.” The Lao Bible translates grace as *Phrakhun*, the Khmer word is *preahkoun*, the Thai word is *phrakhun*, and the Burmese word is *kyaayyjuutaw*. In Lao *Phra* is an honorific prefix given to things attributable to a king or divinity. *Khun* means goodness or virtue. So *phrakhun* can mean divine goodness. *Bunkhun* according to my experience and the Lao – Thai – English Dictionary, means “good (done by one person to another, creating a sense of gratefulness in the receiver)”

(1999: 356) and is I believe a better translation of grace. For a discussion on grace in a Mahayana Buddhist context see Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is influencing the way we think about and discuss theology*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI (2007): 135 – 161.

¹⁸ While the Lao also understand *dana* gifts that are not repaid and that result in merit, gifts given in the context of reciprocal – interdependent relationships characterize all relationships.

¹⁹ In more than sixty interviews with SEA Christians who had converted from SEATB, I asked, “What was the most difficult aspect of Christianity to understand?” The most common reply was, “I could not understand how Jesus’ death could free me from my *kamma*.”

²⁰ *Waterbuffalo Theology*. Revised Edition, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY (1999): 60 – 61.

²¹ Muck argues that in Asia “freedom from the obligation to give a return gift is considered one of the essential attributes of a well-given (and received) gift” (2008: 116). I do not think this is generally the case in SEATB societies. I would argue that in the vast majority of cases gift giving that binds people to one another in reciprocal favors and gifts provides the foundation for their relationships.

²² One of the weaknesses of this theological bridge is that it does not completely escape the charge of attachment that always results in *kamma* and suffering. However, SEATB desire love and relationship like all humans and this is exactly why they are pessimistic about ever being completely free of suffering (*nibanna*).

²³ A good example is the chapel at the Redemptorists’ Fr. Ray Foundation in Pattaya, Thailand (<https://www.cssr.news/2017/02/this-thai-catholic-church-is-so-beautiful-a-buddhist-style-redeemed-in-christ/>).

²⁴ See Christopher Adler. “The Lao Khaen” *Center for World Music*. <https://centerforworldmusic.org/2016/01/world-music-instrument-the-lao-khaen/> Accessed November 30, 2022.

²⁵ For an example see “Northeast Thai (Isaan) Worship – Christian Music Videos” Godtube.com Accessed November 30, 2022. https://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=7W66WNNX&fb_comment_id=10150195921915983_21395383&ts=0.

²⁶ “How much of communication is non-verbal?” The University of Texas. <https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/communication/how-much-of-communication-is-nonverbal/> Accessed November 15, 2022.

²⁷ For an introductory discussion on the intercultural communicational context see James W. Neuliep, *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*, 8th Edition. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA (2021): 40 – 213. For a Christian perspective on this subject see Charles Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Theory*, Revised Edition. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY (2013).

²⁸ Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. 2nd edition. Blackwell: Cambridge, NY (1995): 50.

²⁹ Stephen Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness Among the Lowland Lao Informed by Worldview Themes in *Khwan* Rituals," Fuller Theological Seminary, Ph.D. Dissertation. 2002.

³⁰ Muck (2008: 121).

³¹ Muck (2008) refers to this level as "meekness" borrowing from Nanthachai Mejudhon (1997) and Ubolwon Mejudhon (1997). Muck prefers to call these "attitudes" by which he means emotions and predispositions (121).

³² Here I am referring to missionaries of all cultural and national backgrounds because missionaries of non-western backgrounds usually share a common idea about the kinds of dispositions that should shape their communication. I do not mean to say that the dispositions of Christian missionaries are not virtuous in some contexts, but simply that they do not communicate virtue in the SEATB context.

³³ For a discussion on the contrast between the "hot-hearted" (*chairon*) Christian God engaging the Thai Buddhist cool heart (*chaiyen*), see Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* Revised Edition. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY (1999): 60 – 61.

³⁴ See Rachelle M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*. SUNY Press (2009).

³⁵ There are two means of religious persuasion in SEA. The first is by demonstrating that the communicator has or can manipulate *saksit* (sacred) power. *Saksit* power refers to a kind of amoral power that functions like electricity. It can help you or hurt you depending on how skilled you are at handling it. Demonstrations of *saksit* power in SEA attract significant followings and while the power of monks is primarily of a virtuous nature, *saksit* power has always been woven into the practice of SEATB. The second key means of religious persuasion comes from the communicator's virtue, which in the Buddhist cosmology is superior to *saksit* amoral power. I have chosen to discuss the persuasive power of virtue communicated indirectly through dispositions because I have found that people coming to Christian faith by this means have a more stable foundation for faith than those who come to faith because they seek *saksit* power in Christian healings and deliverance. Of course, if this *saksit* power is followed up by an encounter with virtue through discipleship, faith becomes more enduring. Preaching the gospel in SEA in a way associated with *saksit* power draw crowds and sometimes lots of temporary conversions. Chinese evangelist John Sung held very successful evangelistic meetings in Thailand between 1938 – 1939. "Sung's loud, direct style conflicted with the quiet decorum of Thai culture, but his meetings nevertheless made a great impact on many Thai and Chinese who attended. Hundreds of conversions or recommitments of nominal Christians, as well as open weeping and repentance, were reported at Sung's meetings" (Dahlfred 2022: 155). Healing services at the Hope of Bangkok Church in Bangkok have done the same. Texas Evangelist Mike Evans drew a crowd of 30,000 to Phnom Penh. Some of them had "sold cows, rice, and possessions to pay for the trip to the capital." Since he was unable to bring healing to anyone, the crowds turned violent (*The Phnom Penh Post*, December 2, 1999).

³⁶ Tilakaratne, op. cit., 120.

³⁷ Mel Thompson, *Buddhism: Key Ideas*. (Published by Mel Thompson, 2013) Kindle Edition. Loc. 1174.

³⁸ Thompson, op. cit. Loc. 453.

³⁹ Namchak, "Sympathetic Joy: A Tibetan Buddhist Formula for Multiplying Happiness" www.namchak.org Accessed November 10, 2022.

⁴⁰ Gil Fronsdal and Sayadaw U Pandita, "A Perfect Balance: Cultivating Equanimity" *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Winter 2005), www.tricycle.org accessed November 10, 2022.

⁴¹ The phrase in Lao is *bo pen nyung*, in Thai, *mai pen rai*, in Khmer it is *men ay tay* and in Burmese it is *kate sa ma shi par buu*.

⁴² For detailed discussion on using ritual to communicate the gospel among Buddhists see, *Sacred Moments: Reflections on Buddhist Rites and Christian Rituals*, ed. Paul H. de Neuvi. Christian World Imprints: New Delhi, India (2019).

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