

**Spirits and Selves: Contextualizing the Mind in Northern Thailand**

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## Abstract

This article is the product of a \$1,500 WSU CAS Undergraduate Scholar Grant used under the mentorship of Dr. Julia Cassaniti in the formulation and carrying out of a relatively independent research project in northern Thailand. This project was formulated with the intention of unraveling an understanding of the structure of mind in the northern Thai Buddhist context and elaborating on a model of northern Thai mind. This article is also intended to contribute a dialogue surrounding the concepts of non-self and mindfulness in Western psychological study and practice. 10 monks were interviewed at Wat Suan Dok, a university temple in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Interview questions related to local spirit and mind concepts as well as concepts more generally embedded in Buddhist religious texts. Results generally supported the initial hypothesized conception of northern Thai mind that related spirits to reinforcers of mindfulness practice and merit making practice (to monks on the local community). However, conditions were considerably more complex than initially expected. Western psychology's use of mindfulness in experimental and clinical practice is assessed in light of information uncovered about the relationship between mindfulness and non-self. Historical, political and global processes are considered for further research intending to contextualize northern Thai Buddhist mind.

## Introduction

I arrived in Chiang Mai, Thailand at the bustling hour of 9AM to the reception of my professor friend, Dr. Julia Cassaniti. More than 24 hours prior, we had parted ways in Seattle. We were now cruising through the wildly new (to me) city terrain on her motorbike. At short notice, I had been awarded a \$1,500 grant to study "spirits and selves" in Thailand as part of a WSU CAS Undergraduate Scholar Grant. The project I had proposed consisted of mapping out a new model of Thai mind that accounted for a psychological perspective suited to the local culture I believed myself to be studying. Though I found some of what I was expecting to find (as will become clear), the situation was considerably more complex than I had initially imagined.

My intention with this paper is to elaborate on the relationship between spirits and the Buddhist concepts of non-self and mindfulness. I also intend to assess the place of these concepts in Western psychology, which has become increasingly interested in particular aspects of Buddhist psychology. I examine whether the decontextualization of Buddhist concepts from Buddhism can be done: if each concept is interrelated with other concepts that systematically contribute to their meaning and form, or whether each concept can be taken as functionally independent. I conclude with a discussion about the need for more historical and political analyses of temples and their relationship with the Central Thai government, and a closer examination into the cultural exchanges that have influenced the expression of Buddhism in northern Thailand which may help to better understand where and how information about what it means to be a Buddhist is transmitted.

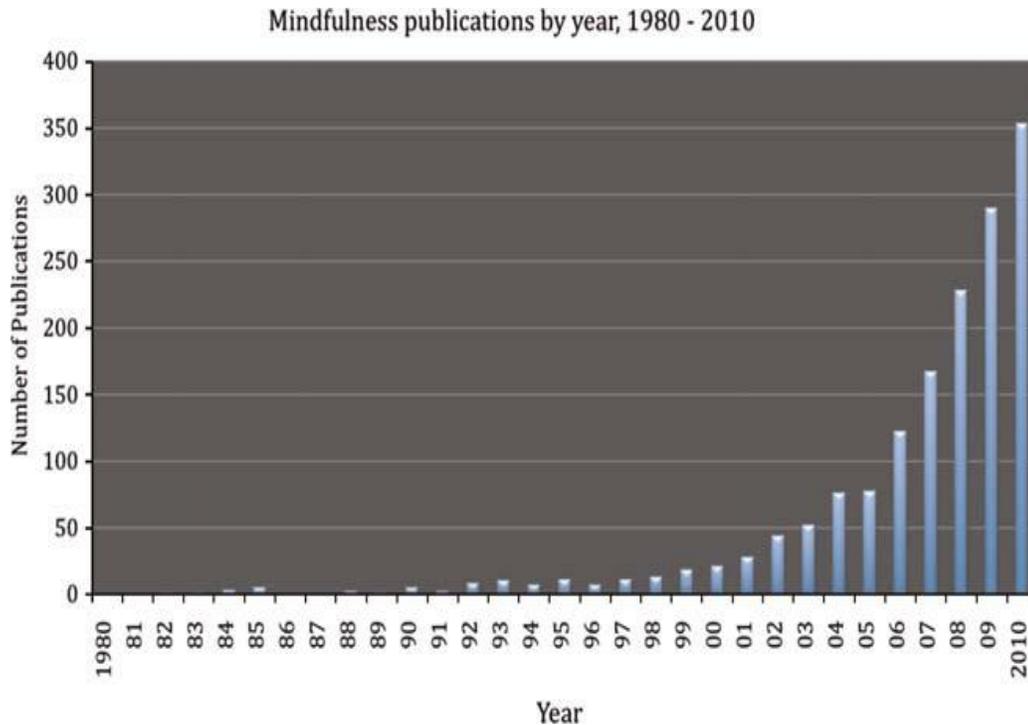
Thailand is an overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) Buddhist country. Theravāda Buddhism arrived in Thailand around the 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. through a gradual continental transmission from India. Its teachings, transmitted through Pali (a language with its roots in Sanskrit), have changed little since their initial transmission (Gombrich, 1988). Theravāda Buddhism stresses a conservative reading of the *dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha. The

Buddha in Theravāda is viewed as the ideal teacher and a former human being. Temple depictions in Thailand display his life as one that others can and should strive to emulate (Swearer, 1995). Non-monks may also promote good *karma* by visiting these temples to make *merit* by giving offerings to the monks (Cassaniti, 2006).

The concept of karma is tied to the higher systematic order of *samsara*, the conception that human beings live through successive rounds of rebirth. Karma is one's action(s) that simultaneously inform one's place in the rebirth cycle. An individual might therefore be seen as embodying his or her own merits and demerits (Collins, 1982; Kirsch, 1977). Following the path of the Buddha to break from this cycle and obtain *nibbana*, the release from *dukkha* (suffering) inherent in life, is one way of being a Buddhist. Another is through making merit and positioning oneself better within the cycle (Cassaniti, 2006; Spiro, 1982).

I had initially been interested in exploring the spirit conception in northern Thailand known as *phi*. My inspiration primarily came from reading Nancy Eberhardt's *Imagining the Course of Life: Self-transformation in a Shan Buddhist Community* (2006) in an anthropology class at WSU. In it, Eberhardt elaborates on another local conception, known as *khwan*. *Khwan* is a soul concept, and 32 of these entities are said to inhabit the human body. *Khwan* can be made to flee from the body by *phi*, or hungry ghosts, and illness may fill their absence. *Phi* are thought to scare *khwan* away from the body and feed on the body. *Phi* were once human beings reborn into this form due to attachments to worldly desires or failure to make enough *merit* to monks in their human lives. It was my hunch that *phi* as a concept functionally served as a justification for unexplained feelings of fear, that it was something one was motivated to build up a defense against through the strengthening of mind (through mindfulness training), and that as such it was a strong justification for active merit making in the local community.

It soon became clear to me on arrival to the field that it would be important to explore two other Buddhist conceptions in my interviews: *sati* (mindfulness) and *anatta* (non-self). However, my motivations here concerned something else entirely. The conception of mindfulness has become incredibly popular to academics that have taken interest due to its potential application in medical (especially psychiatric) settings (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Williams, Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Debate however has arisen between religious scholars, clinical psychologists and those involved in the experimental sciences as to how to operationalize it (Bishop, et. al., 2004; Tyson & Pongruengphant, 2007). It indisputably involves a kind of present moment awareness. The controversy relates to the degree of flexibility that should be afforded to those who wish to strip it from its religious and cultural context. Some feel (Rapgay & Bystrisky, 2009) in order for it to translate at all into Western empirical psychology, any "sectarian and supernatural" (Hayes, 2002) baggage must be removed. My concern was this: how do we separate the sectarian and supernatural from aspects of the Buddhist cosmological system that gives the concept of mindfulness life and meaning psychologically? For instance, what happens to the related conception in Buddhism that there is no self (Rahula, 1974), and does it lose its meaning when scholars relate mindfulness to "self-observation" and "self-management" (Baer, 2003)? In anticipation of future research, and in recognition that mindfulness stood in direction relation to my hypothesis of *phi* for a mental model of northern Thai Buddhists, I decided to ask monks about both mindfulness and non-self and their relation to health and wellbeing. This data could prove helpful for all involved in such disagreements especially in that most involved are textual scholars, American psychiatrists and neuroscientists. This is because what is primarily missing from psychological literature is the people who have been living these concepts as contextualized in their everyday lives for centuries.



Graph 1: from Williams, Kabat-Zinn, 2011

**Research Context**

I conducted my interviews at Wat Suan Dok, the “Temple of the Flower Garden” (Forbes & Henley, 2011), a university temple in the Chiang Mai. I interviewed a total of ten novice monks through a program called Monk Chat offered three days a week in the evenings in one of the temple halls. Monk Chat has been in operation for over ten years at Wat Suan Dok, and allows the English-speaking public to ask questions to novice monks about Buddhism and Thai culture. For monks, it offers the opportunity to practice English with foreigners. Monk Chat also openly conveys its association with the Central Thai government’s interest in promoting “Buddhist and Cultural Tourism” ([www.monkchat.net](http://www.monkchat.net)).

Monk Chat appeared to me to be a quite informal setting through which monks wandered in and out, engaging foreigners and waiting to be engaged. The main room was lined along the far outer wall with reception desks and fold out chairs. The inner wall was lined with fold out tables and chairs for Monk Chat guests. Most of my interviews were conducted in this room, though on occasion a monk would appreciate the semi-formality of an interview and find us a quieter space that offered room for more personal discussion.

Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder that used in addition to a notebook for recording important contextual information for later transcription. The basic structures of my questions were as follows:

1. Where are you from?
2. How old are you?
3. How has non-self been important in your life?
4. What does the Buddhist teaching of mindfulness mean to you?
5. Can you tell me about kwahn?
6. How does non-self connect with khwan?
7. How does mindfulness connect with khwan?
8. Have you ever experienced phi?
9. Are spirits and ghosts connected in your mind with psychological processes like attachments, emotions, and desires? How so?
10. How does mindful help people be healthy?
11. Is there anything connected to these questions you would like to share with me?

Interestingly enough, only two of the monks I encountered were Thai. I was initially confused when I attempted to *wai* (the traditional greeting in Thailand that involves placing the palms of the hands together, fingers pointed upward at sternum level and bringing the head downward to meet the hands; see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRtsCuVqxtQ> for a great instructive example) several monks and greet them with “sa-wat-dii khrap” (“hello”). Many of those I interviewed made it explicit that they did not actually speak Thai. It is unclear to me whether this was a phenomenon of the wat as a university temple and its ability to attract flows of individuals transnationally or whether Monk Chat as an entity in itself attracted the international monks who may have been more likely to speak English. The non-Thai monks consisted of five Burmese, two Lao and one Bangladeshi individual. All of the monks were male, as females cannot ordain in Thailand and between the ages of 21 and 29 with a mean age of 25.

## Results

### *Mindfulness*

*A dog has a mind, but no sati, but they know themselves. If you kick a dog, they know, they fear you. They cannot think like the human, they do not know what is good, what is bad.*

In discourse related to the concept of mindfulness, monks used the term interchangeably or in part with consciousness, awareness, focus and concentration to the present moment. Mindfulness was discussed as a skill or power that everyone is capable of but which can be prolonged and understood more fully through the practice of meditation. Six monks contextualized mindfulness specifically in the discussion of working at both manual labor and at studying. Four monks related mindfulness to the ability to avoid accidents while walking or driving. Here are some examples:

*If we work for something in our life- a dangerous job, if we lose this we will get into danger or have problems. And sati is called concentration and we try to be aware of what we're doing at the present time, to know our self all the time, be aware of- be mindful all the time.*

*If you have sati, mindfulness, you will have no accident. If you think about something when driving, sati goes to another place, like back to your country, so you get into an accident. Focus means what you're attending to, to important things in this moment.*

*Mindfulness for my experience is important for me because, for example, if I do my homework or research. If I have no sati, I will do the wrong research. We need to be mindful all the time, every moment. If we don't have mindfulness, we lose our mind to do something.*

*If we work on the road, if we lose mindfulness, maybe we can get in an accident. If we have mindfulness, when I cross the road, I have to be careful, mindful, that some car could crash into me or not. Especially at a traffic light, I can stop the car or not. If I'm talking on the phone while walking or singing while working, maybe a car will come and crash into me, I lost my mindfulness. If we have mindfulness, there will be no accident at all. We can be safe and peaceful.*

Four monks related mindfulness to a kind of medicine. For example:

*Mindfulness helps people to be healthy. When I practice meditation, meditation- mother told me don't take medicine; use meditation to help sick. You can observe what is the problem going on with mind. When you suffer you don't think I'm so bad, you can observe how the suffering is doing with you. Observe and maybe the first time you cannot think. Ten minutes later you observe again. It cannot exist with you all the time. It comes and disappears.*

*In my country, Burma, there was a man with cancer. The doctor said, "You will die in one month." He gave him medicine for one month. He worried a lot. He understood what he could do for the next life and asked the abbot to meditate in the temple. The abbot allowed this and the man practiced with the abbot. He did a lot every day. He was not afraid to die and had strong mindfulness and concentration. Meditation helped him to not die. He went to the doctor, the doctor was surprised and explained he felt that the disease problem had gone away.*

Two monks related it to the immediate interaction we were engaging in:

*My sati is the focus of my answer to you. On the other hand, when we practice meditation, concentration and mindfulness are together.*

Other contexts in which mindfulness was used included: in solving mental problems, managing angry feelings, determining the 'right' thing to do, conserving energy and keeping calm. Overall, mindfulness seemed to relate to the calling of the mind to the physically immediate conditions of one's actions. It related to bringing the mind to where the body is and what it is doing.

## *Non-Self*

Eight monks discussed non-self in terms of a lack of control human beings have in relation to change and impermanence in life. Individual monks varied in their expressions of this concept referring to non-self in the contexts of:

### 1. Physical pain:

- *When I practice meditation and when I get a pain, I observe pain, pain, pain, but I cannot control my pain. We can understand that it's not my self. We call that non-self.*
- *If I think I know myself, I can order my body: do not get fever or don't get attached with any painful things. I order myself but we cannot do it, we say that is non-selfness.*

### 2. Sickness and Aging:

- *It is uncontrollable. We cannot try by telling, by protecting: Don't get old, don't get sick. These things always happen. We are not able to control it.*
- *Non-self is when we get a fever or sickness, we try to control it, we take medicine but it's not controlling it.*
- *I don't want to be old person, a sick person, but this I cannot control. It is just the nature of our life.*

### 3. Mortality and Death:

- *I have body and mind in reality. Both are matter and I think they belong to me. I think I must never die. When we grow to 70, 75, 80, 85, we must die someday. Mind and matter do not belong to us. We think we can do everything, but in reality, we cannot.*

### 4. Beauty:

- *If I want to be beautiful, handsome, I cannot control this. I want to be forever... If someone does not know non-self, they are just suffering. They go to the shop to make them beautiful every day. In Buddhism we know it is very difficult to stay beautiful forever.*

One monk interestingly indicated that although everything is impermanent and always changing, “everyone has a self.” Another related the self to the ego and stated that the ego is rooted in the name we are given by our parents. “We are given a name by our parents. We can give the body many names. Where is the I? Does the name exist in my hand or head? If I cut off my head, where is my name?” One Lao and one Burmese monk elaborated on the Theravādin conception of the four elements. “Non-self is our physical inner body, it is comprised of... the earth element, wind element, fire element, water element, that exist in our body. So, when the time and conditions come up, these things will separate when we pass on and die.” These elements are prevalent everywhere around us and help us to understand we have “no form”. “People call us by different names, but we are all the same”: earth, fire, water, air. One lone Lao monk said that by non-self, it is meant that there exists no body, “Because we have only consciousness, in my understanding.” Together these responses suggest that non-self is understood as the realization that our minds are not our body and we cannot control what the body does with our mind. Our

body exists as other matter exists and our mental processes cannot interfere with the natural degradation processes of matter.

### *Khwan and Phi*

When I asked about khwan, only two monks recognized the term. Khwan was mentioned as the place in the body where the soul, mind or consciousness inhabits. Khwan is what is lost when one fears and loses mindfulness.

*The mind is only one. We have many minds, but when you sit here, you sit with one mind, and you know you sit here with one mind. Khwan is the same. We say khwan when people have lost mind. You fear something. If I fear you, I have lost khwan.*

*Khwan is the mind, the mind is khwan. We compare it to the mind. When people fear ghosts, loss of mind.*

*Khwan, in Buddhism, we call that soul. You know soul? Maybe a spirit? Because in Buddhism, we believe that in our body, every organ, every part of our body we have a soul. So we have 32 should souls in our body. Even in the thumb, finger, hairs, eyebrow, all of these things have a soul. So we have 32 souls. If our soul goes away or runs away from our body, you get ill. So that's why in Buddhist culture, in Buddhist tradition, we have a ceremony... in order to call the soul back to stay with the body because they believe that it, the soul, does not exist to stay with the body, they will get illness or sickness so that's why they make the ceremony to call it back.*

Khwan therefore seemed to relate to the presence of mind as it exists and is constrained by the physical body. If mind escapes these constraints, sickness happens. In this sense, khwan was related to mindfulness, but more directly stressed the mind in body rather than the mind in action, as did mindfulness.

Seven monks had something to say about phi. Four monks related phi to rebirth. Humans who were reborn as hungry ghosts needed merit due to their accumulated bad karma or attachment to loved ones at the time of death.

*Ghosts exist as- we believe they come to us for something to eat because maybe when they were alive they had an enemy they took revenge on and could not release or let go of the enemy. They could not let go of their anger towards their enemies or friends. When they die, pass away from this earth, they come back to, maybe, around the temples or where we have good people who share merit to relatives. So, in the last consciousness for that person who's gonna die, if he thinks or worries about his past, he has done bad things to other people, when he dies, his consciousness- he will still think things of that and goes to be reborn as a hungry ghost or ghost. A hungry ghost when it was alive never offered food or made merit and when it passed away it had nothing to eat and it became a hungry ghost. So it's concerned or related to angeriness when alive, they had bad temper, always got angry, and they didn't know how to let it go. And when they become a hungry ghost and the fire is burned in their body and mind.*

*I have experienced this in my village. In one family a father died seven years ago. One day he became a hungry ghost and he came to his daughter in a dream. " Please do some good for me, I was reborn a hungry ghost." Every night the daughter had this dream. She understood. One day she talked with the family. She ordained to be a novice for her father. That year they invited many monks and at the end of the ceremony, after that day the father never visited again. He was reborn somewhere else.*

*In Buddhism we believe if someone is dead, if they have attachment to their children or family, they will be reborn as a ghost. Some are reborn as an animal or some are reborn like a snake. If there is attachment, they are reborn as ghosts or spirits and they wait in his or her house and wait for merit from their family. When I was in Burma, in one house the grandmother died. Her grandchild saw her ghost or spirit because of her attachment to the child. In Buddhism we believe this, if they have attachment to some one, they need merit. If we talk about mind, if death occurs now, the mind goes to another place.*

*I have never experienced phi. In my dreams I have. Some people say they want to get merit from other people because they need merit. If someone dies, they come, like with a smell or show their body because they need merit from that person. If we merit or do good things for him you get merit and are be reborn and go to heaven or to human being.*

Four monks spoke of phi in relation to personal fear and mindfulness as a protective agent that could be used against phi.

*Phi, we call phi when people die. Everyone has mind, but when you die, the mind does not go with you. It's chained to your existence. When human, the mind exists with you as a human mind. When you die, mind goes to the dark, to the animals. Phi is to the death. If your mind is not constant with the body, you fear everything. You think about the bad, about people who make you suffer. If the mind stays with the body, it is connected with the body. If you have mindfulness, you don't fear phi.*

*When I became a novice monk, I practiced to try to understand what is the ghost. Because in Buddhism, the ghost is just our own mind. We just think. But in reality, in our world, it has two sides: black and white, human and non-human or creatures that I never experienced. By nature I am afraid. But right now, I'm not so much afraid. I can go alone. But some say oh, that place that has the big tree, that place has a ghost and I can get fear, but if you don't know, you won't be afraid, it is part of our mind that we can imagine.*

Three said they did not believe in phi.

*I think I believe that there is no phi anymore in the world because now the people know their religion. All people use their religious activities or good deeds for the dead, so there is no need to think there is a ghost that will come to attack us.*

*I've been staying as a monk for 10 years, but I've never seen a ghost. In my idea I think it depends on emotions: fear and imagination.*

*I don't believe in them. I don't really experience them. I don't know this kind of ghost or what they look like. But when they told me, I feel something scary. It's like my own belief even though I have no experience. And if you always listen to them, and you're always talking about this, then you become very aware of that. And sometimes it can become very real, what you are aware of. But if you don't really listen or think about that, there is no attachment to the world or people who told you about it.*

One stated that mindfulness would allow me the power to contact phi if I chose to.

*If you have clear mind maybe you can contact phi. Because you have more concentration, like a power.*

There were many things to say about phi, but most of what was said related to Buddhist cosmology and the rebirth cycle. Phi also seemed to serve as an immediate reminder of larger scale consequences, should one not shed attachments in this life. Phi could therefore provide incentive to learn mindfulness practices as well as for non-monks to contribute to monk efforts through merit making in order to help family members (and themselves) with less strong minds be recirculated through the karmic cycle without getting stuck between lives.

## **Discussion**

Although I had entered the field thinking that khwan and phi would be substantively connected to mindfulness, they appeared to be considered relatively independent phenomena. Non-self, on the other hand, seemed to be central to understanding mindfulness. Non-self and mindfulness were discussed relatively independent of khwan and phi. Much of what was said about khwan was practical, relating it to mentalist constructs. Mindfulness was also discussed independent of any reports about rebirth, which were brought out instead in discussions related to phi. With this consideration taken alone, I think mindfulness can safely be discussed in a Western psychology context independent of a more elaborate Buddhist cosmology. I am more skeptical however when it comes to the relationship expressed between non-self and mindfulness.

Non-self, in being related to one's attachment to the body, seemed to be an extremely important facet for the practice of mindfulness intended to assist one in tending to the present moment or in detaching from things not immediately present. Facets of the self as they relate to pain, sickness, aging, mortality, death and beauty and any attempt to preserve them, control them or isolate them as static characteristics of one's person were mentioned as facets to detach from. "Self management" and "self maintenance" therefore aim at maintaining an illusion, and this seems to be in direct contradiction to mindfulness as a practice, and potentially an illness-prone notion. I am not aware of any literature that attempts to make a case for utilizing the self concept in the translation of mindfulness to Western psychological contexts. It could be that the stress American culture places on individualism warrants a different viewpoint for mindfulness. However, I find it equally likely that this could be little more than a blind spot. It is possible to that depending on how the practice is oriented, "self-knowledge" could be indexed in order that one might begin to break down the self, leading to a healthier mind (de Silva, 2000).

In general, a preliminary analysis of the data points to the theoretical model of mind I had suggested that positions phi as reinforcing mindfulness practice and merit making in the

community. Non-self was generally relayed as having an almost exclusive tie to the body and difficulties with and arising from the body. Khwan and phi, when mentioned, were tied to emotional states and ideas surrounding rebirth and attachment. Mindfulness could be utilized as a practice to avoid attachment through the strengthening of concentration and so a distancing from fear and the possibility of being reborn as a hungry ghost.

Nevertheless, from my current position, I realize I was not simply dealing with local, isolated cultural contexts that easily give way to such generalizations. My own data was of ten novice monks from four different nations embedded within a particular temple institution being interviewed in a common language, but not a primary language to any one of the individuals interviewed. Furthermore, as I later realized in learning more about the larger sociopolitical context, this university temple was contextualized within a national hierarchy imposed by the Central Thai government in its apparent attempts to standardize Buddhist teachings (Gosling, 1980). There doesn't seem to have been much written about how these national processes affect the ways in which individuals engage or utilize Buddhist conceptions, and I especially found difficulty back in the United States finding strong historical-political information on Wat Suan Dok. In order to pick apart this puzzle of context as part of not just Buddhist philosophy but also political and cultural history that has arisen, I intend to examine this information through another field trip to Chiang Mai, conducting additional research at Wat Suan Dok, Chiang Mai University, and the French Consulate library in Chiang Mai in the Summer of 2013. During this trip, I will gather more contextual data that might reveal the relationship between Wat Suan Dok and the Central Thai government.

It also appeared as rather striking to me that Monk Chat itself overtly stated as a principle goal: the promotion of cultural and religious tourism. It clearly is not enough to think of the Thai cultural context in terms of an essentialized difference inherent in local Buddhist psychologies. More depth is necessary within larger scale global and transnational framework to begin to understand the processes in the exchange of ideologies, media, technologies, finances and peoples (Appadurai, 2010). This will be a fundamental part of the next phase of research in contextualizing Buddhism in Chiang Mai: at the level of not only the monks, but the temple institutions and their situatedness in the context of globalization. Such data can be integrated into the study of Buddhism in a way that moves away from objectified, abstractions, into the lives of real people and the real processes affecting these lives. This aspect of the project will probably have little use for psychology, but it will have important implications for anthropological study in northern Thailand.

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Web Links:

Monk Chat. ([www.monkchat.net](http://www.monkchat.net))

Learn Thai – Lesson 2: Thai Greetings and How to WAI.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRtsCuVqxtQ>)