Richard G. Condon Prize
Toward a Cultural Psychology
of Impermanence in Thailand

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Abstract How do people in a northern Thai community think about the central Theravada Buddhist concept of anicca (a Pali term referring to impermanence)? Different interpretations and applications are explored through conversations with 27 monks and laypeople in the town of Mae Chaem, Chiang Mai Province. Authoritative discourse, occupation, life experience, and personal concerns were all found to be involved in the ways that people in this community use the concept of impermanence in their everyday lives. I address a distinction between abstract and practiced culture, and make an argument for the significance of lived experience in the scholarly understanding of Buddhism. [Buddhism, psychology, practice, Thailand, religion]

In this article, I explore how people in Thailand strategically interweave diverse cultural models of Buddhism. Specifically, I examine how villagers in a northern Thai community think about a particular Buddhist concept in their everyday lives. In investigating Buddhist ideas in this way, a question emerges about the place of lived experience in the expression of what is sometimes called high and low Buddhism, in which high Buddhism relates to what is seen as a true Buddhism of textual abstraction and low Buddhism is seen as the corrupted practices of its followers. I ask two questions in this article: First, how do people understand a particular Buddhist concept in northern Thailand? And second, how are these folk understandings related to a high Buddhism of textual abstraction? I offer a tentative answer to the first question, on the basis of a small interview-driven research project in a
northern Thai community. From this analysis, I raise issues related to the second question and offer suggestions for future research on the study of a cultural psychology in Thailand.

Textual accounts will often posit high Buddhism as the embracing of certain worldviews, such as nonattachment, impermanence, and nonself whereas folk or low Buddhism often is seen, at best, as imperfectly aiming toward these ideals, or, at worst, as not following them at all. On the one hand, Buddhist practitioners are potentially the best resources for understanding Buddhism; on the other hand, they are seen as corrupt or imperfect followers who are not relevant for understanding the Buddhist canon. I explore here the tension between these two positions, claiming that people do understand Buddhist ideas, and that they do so in a particular way. This is not a way that tends to be decontextualized from experience and regarded as an abstraction explicitly tied to a discourse of other technical, religious concepts, as some scholars might suggest Buddhism be best understood. Rather, there is a tendency for these ideas to be incorporated into implicit evaluative orientations toward personal experiences.

The literature, with which a majority of modern scholars (both Western and Thai) agree, states that for the most part Buddhism is an elite practice of abstract ideals, and that in juxtaposition the average person is not able to or is not interested in pursuing this abstract system of thought. In other words, there has been a tendency in scholarly work to isolate Buddhism as an objective system that only elites can understand and to relegate Buddhist practitioners to a lower level of Buddhism emphasizing increasing good karma through merit making rather than the pursuit of nirvana. Melford Spiro may be the most emblematic of this approach in psychological anthropology, although he avoids making hierarchical judgments: in his *Buddhism and Society* (1982), Spiro says that there are different categories of Buddhism, a system of *nibbanic* Buddhism and a system of *kammatic*, with nibbanic Buddhism concerned with release from the Wheel of continued existence and kammatic Buddhism concerned with better positioning within it (1982). Spiro says,

Although they [the practitioners] don’t use these terms, they know precisely how nibbanic differs from kammatic Buddhism, in both aim and technique. If they follow the latter system, it is not from ignorance of the former, nor from a confusion of the two; it is, rather, because they have knowingly chosen the one and rejected the other. [1982:13]
In a similar vein, Phra Prayudh Payutto, one of Thailand’s most prominent scholar monks, writes in the Introduction to his *Buddhadhamma*,

> In explaining the Dhamma, I will try to show the actual Buddhadhamma that Lord Buddha taught and intended. I will not be considering the popular meanings generally understood by many people, because I feel that they are peripheral and not necessary for understanding the actual Buddhadhamma at all. [1995:48]

The real Buddhism, these scholars imply, exists with the elite few who understand it, whereas the rest of the people in Thailand practice a corrupt form that is not relevant for understanding the core religious precepts. I challenge this supposition using interview data from fieldwork in a northern Thai community, arguing that religious concepts are and always have been amorphously changing from situation to situation in the context of individual lives. I do this by illustrating the ways in which individuals think about a particular Buddhist idea. Different positions of authoritative knowledge, different livelihoods, cohorts, life experiences, and personalities all seem to contribute to the way that Buddhism is constructed in northern Thailand. Differences found in interpretations of particular ideas seem to have more to do with contextualized orientations of individuals than with a break between different levels or different eschatological aims.

I subsequently trace how the dichotomy cited above evolved in part from early British encounters with Pali texts in the mid-1800s and the idea of the religious “virtuoso” (Weber 1978) into the present state of popular understanding and the foundations for a psychological anthropology of religion. My aim in decentralizing the authoritative voice of Buddhism is to argue that people are employing concepts of Buddhism in ways that would not at first glance seem obvious when an authoritative stance is taken. To this end, I emphasize a cultural psychology locating meaning at the nexus of cultural constructs and individual minds.

To examine how culturally salient symbols are interpreted by individuals, I choose to focus on one aspect of Buddhism, that of *anicca* (Pali; impermanence). Anicca represents the idea that everything causally arises (dependent conditioned origination) and is susceptible to decay. The importance of anicca cannot be overemphasized in the system of Buddhism. Three of the most fundamental tenets of Buddhism are the concepts of anicca, *dukkha* (suffering, that
life as such is unsatisfactory) and anatta (that there is no fundamental self). The Four Noble Truths taught by Gotama Buddha as the way of attaining nibbana (Pali for the Sanskrit term nirvana) are (1) the fact of dukkha, (2) the cause of dukkha (which is the craving and attachment to that which is impermanent), and (3) the way to escape from dukkha (the cessation of craving) through (4) the Eightfold Path, a plan of self-discipline regarding ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom.

The isolation of this one concept of anicca, which is situated within the greater scheme of thought, is an artificial act that could create misunderstandings or lead to false conclusions. I isolate anicca, however, to better highlight the myriad ways in which people in a particular community relate to the idea and, by analogy, may relate to other ideas in Buddhism as well. I examine the language with which individuals talk about anicca, and the framework in which they orient their discussion. There are many ways to talk about the idea of impermanence: the term anicca is a Pali technical term; the closest Thai comes to it is in the phrase khwam mai nae non (the general idea that things are not stable). Words referring to change, such as plian plaeng, mai thieng, mai thieng thae, mai nae non, yu samoe, prae, prae pruan, phan prae, and phan phuan are also used. The vocabulary that people use in talking about the idea of impermanence is in part representative of their position within the authoritative hierarchy of Buddhism in the area: Those with most authority use the Pali terms and describe impermanence abstractly whereas those with less religious status often use colloquial descriptions and refer to more authoritative sources for knowledge.

In Western countries people tend to think of anicca as one of the most basic and accessible points in Buddhism because of its prominence in modern representations of Buddhism (below I trace the historical emergence of these representations). In contrast, in Thailand I am told that anicca is one of the most difficult aspects of Buddhism. This dichotomy is not the result of Westerners “getting it” and the actual practitioners not “getting it” (unless the only criterion of “getting” a concept is to be familiar with its terminology). Rather, it is an example of the orientations in which the Westerners see Buddhism as a distilled and rationalized system of philosophy.

I do not by any means claim authority to a “correct” understanding of anicca, because my views and interpretations are couched like those of my subjects in a web of relevance particular to my phenomenological and social self. Just as
the commentators of the Buddha and the Western scholars who interpreted the ideas were oriented in their interpretations by situational concerns, I am also oriented toward my own perspectives. Yet it is only when the idea is abstracted into a bounded, authoritative entity that it may be seen as being understood or not understood by individuals (to the tune of “those villagers, they don’t understand Buddhism,” a comment I heard in different guises a number of times from many people), and I wish here to refute the implications of this abstraction.

Field Research

I conducted my fieldwork in the northern Thai community of Maet Chaem, in the mountains 120 kilometers West of Chiang Mai near the border of Burma. Northern Thai peoples, related ethnically to central Siam but with a more Mon (Burmese) and Tai (southern China) ethnicity, have had until recently an autonomous political and cultural history that peaked in 1296 at the founding of the Lan Na Kingdom in present day Chiang Mai. The Tai of northern Thailand were often vassal states of Burma or Siam, but they retained their own identity until early in the 19th century (Condominas 1990; Davis 1984; Wijeyewardene 1986). The name people call themselves in northern Thailand is Kon Muang. Kam Muang, the language of the northern Thai, is officially a dialect of Central Thai, although many consider it a separate language (e.g., Smalley 1994). Kam Muang is spoken today by about three million people, although the number is decreasing as Central Thai is taught in all government schools. The Lan Na script is almost obsolete, although through cultural revival there is at present a push to reintroduce it, and during many interviews I was shown old bamboo paper books in Lan Na that could still be read by older people.

Mae Chaem, like all cultural communities, has never been an isolated and static society. Besides the recent encroachment of official Thai culture and the official Buddhism that it brings, there are multiple other religious influences in the area. Traditional Buddhist authorities, black magicians, healers, wandering ascetic forest monks, and the almost 50 percent non-Thai-speaking hill tribe members who practice syncretic religions (mostly Christian Karen and Buddhist and Christian Hmong) coexist within the cultural milieu of the town. Traditional kon muang Buddhist culture, for example, often focuses on temple festivals at which monks sit in high red boxes called dhammasana (lit., dhamma-seat).
performing recitations of Jataka stories (of the Buddha's past life), and copying
texts in Lan Na script on bamboo paper. Temple festivals are the focal point of
both religion and entertainment; dancing, drinking, courtship, and (more
recently) cinema are common at these affairs. Traditionally, monks are active
participants in the village, helping to build community buildings and aid in
education. In other words, their influence is more than that of a detached and
ascetic role model for the “non-virtuosos” of the community. Although the
authority of powerful, locally based monks is decreasing as the Thai-ification
and modernization of the kon muang continues, these traditional avenues of
Buddhist influence are still very much a part of villagers’ lives.

Modernization from Bangkok and the West are also influencing the area. In
the past it took nine hours to reach Chiang Mai through the mountains; about
15 years ago the way was paved, and it now takes only three hours. The
improved transportation allows many villagers to visit Chiang Mai on the
weekends. A bank and hospital were recently introduced, and many families
now have televisions and motorbikes, along with the outstanding debts these
things incur. Travel past Chiang Mai and Bangkok is also more common now
than ever; one monk I met at the village temple Wat Pah Det had just one week
earlier returned from a trip to Chicago.

Mae Chaem is also a district in Chiang Mai Province, one of 76 provinces in
Thailand. Ten kilometers to the east is Doi Inthanon, the highest mountain in
Thailand. Fifty kilometers further is Chiang Mai City and further still is Laos.
To the west is a river followed by hill-tribe communities and, around 200 kilo-
meters further, the border of Myanmar. To the north is a mostly unpopulated
expanse of hills, with Burma and China in the distance, and to the south are
further provinces. One thousand kilometers beyond is Bangkok, accessible by a
15-hour train ride or short flight from Chiang Mai. The town consists of about
3,000 people in 1,000 houses. There are mostly paved center roads ending in
dirt and dirt side streets. There are a few main intersections with no lights or
stop signs. A market, police station, and school are all clustered by the main
intersection near the bridge. Across the river the road diverts to the right up
the hills to the upland peoples and to the left to a few villages.

There are about 55 temples in the district of Mae Chaem, a few of which are in
the main town whereas the rest occupy the place of local wats in outlying vil-
lages. The few in the town are more powerful than the village wats, but power
also lies in the system of temple education. There are three wats in Mae Chaem district with temple schools, which serve as both residential temples for novices and as centers of learning, where all the novices from the area’s temples go each day to learn a curriculum of science, geography, social studies, and dharma. The main temple school wat is Wat Gu, where all the monks congregate for regional meetings; the other in the town of Mae Chaem is Wat Ban Tap, and the third is in a small town about 50 kilometers away.

I lived in and interviewed villagers in Ban Tong Fai, a weaving village around 700 meters across the river from the town’s main market. This village has about 50 households, with most people occupied in rice farming and a small number working as business people or laborers in town. Ban Tong Fai shares a temple called Wat Ban Tap and a school with the village under the mountain next to it. There were at the time of my work (summer 2003) about 40 novices and 25 monks residing at the temple, a number higher than usual as the fieldwork took place during Pansaa, the annual rainy season retreat in which monks must by tradition remain in their home temples, and new monks often ordain during the wet months of July, August, and September. I conducted 27 interviews over the course of two months in Mae Chaem, 20 with laypeople and 7 with monks (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Interviews with laypeople were conducted for the most part in the interviewee’s home, and interviews with monks were conducted in their resident temple. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, ranging from 45 minutes to three hours, and some people were interviewed on more than one occasion.

In each interview, I began with general questions about occupation, education, and family, and then guided the conversation to a discussion of Buddhism and impermanence. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, I did not have a fixed hypothesis predicting the ways that people would relate to the idea of anicca. Generally, I expected it to come up technically in official contexts and less technically in discussions of everyday items and events in a person’s life, but I did not try to guess the extent, the particular domains of life, or the orientations toward particular relationships in which people would raise the concept.

I loosely followed a structured format interview script. In general, the first half of the interview was aimed at gathering personal demographic information and life history, and the second half was spent discussing experiences with and
Table 1. Demographic subject data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Interviews = 27</th>
<th>Monks</th>
<th>Laypeople</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ordained status</strong></td>
<td>7 monks</td>
<td>20 laypeople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place of interview</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 (74%) Ban Tong Fai</td>
<td>3 at Ban Tong Fai's Wat Bang Tap (43% of monks)</td>
<td>17 at their homes (85% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (26%) Mae Chaem town</td>
<td>4 at Wat Buparam, Wat Gu and Wat Pah Det (57% of monks)</td>
<td>3 at shops in town (15% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (52%) male</td>
<td>7 monks (100% of monks)</td>
<td>7 laypeople (35% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (48%) female</td>
<td></td>
<td>13 (65% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation (of laypeople)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>12 (60%) farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 (40%) other business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 (56%) terminated before age 13</td>
<td>0 monks</td>
<td>15 (75% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (18%) terminated in teen years</td>
<td>3 (43% of monks)</td>
<td>2 (10% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (26%) earned university degree</td>
<td>4 (57% of monks)</td>
<td>3 (15% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (26%) over 60 years</td>
<td>3 (43% of monks)</td>
<td>4 (20% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 (63%) 30–60 years</td>
<td>3 (43% of monks)</td>
<td>14 (70% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (11%) under 30 years</td>
<td>1 (14% of monks)</td>
<td>2 (10% of laypeople)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

perspectives on Buddhism, finally coming to focus explicitly on the concept of anicca. After eliciting the demographic information, I began asking a series of questions about household objects and hypothetical situations. In doing this, I hoped to extract comments on the impermanent nature of life through non-explicit, guided inquiry. For example, I asked “Could you tell me about this pot here (in the house)? Where did you get it? When do you use it? If you lost it one day, how would you feel?” In asking these types of loosely directed questions, I was curious to see if people would bring up the idea of impermanence in discussing their feelings about a particular experience or object.

In the second half of the interview, I asked questions specifically aimed at the person’s experience with Buddhism and their understanding of anicca. For example, I asked “In what situations do you think about anicca? Where do you learn about it?” From this interview format, I collected personal stories of experiences in life in which the idea of impermanence was made salient.
At the end of the interview, I asked for suggestions or ideas on how I could investigate the issue better. I wanted to know not only how the person I was speaking to thought about anicca, but how others might be thinking about the idea. Some of these suggestions I incorporated into the first part of later interviews, and others I added as topics for discussion in the second half of later interviews. For example, a point that came up again and again, one I had not anticipated, was that people often think of anicca in relationship to their farming. I incorporated this domain into my first set of questions in further interviews by asking the following: “If you have had a bad crop one year, how do you feel?” Farming proved to be a rich subject for uncovering thoughts on impermanence. This learning of new contexts and applying them to further interviews proved invaluable for my research. I had gone into the field knowing little about what to expect, and although some of my early expectations produced results (such as the prevalence of thoughts of anicca during exposure to death described below) many of my expectations did not yield the rich data that suggestions from interviewees did. I discuss my findings below.

Analysis of Interview Data
The position one holds in the Buddhist hierarchy is clearly a significant orienting perspective. I trace interviewees’ positions in this hierarchy from the more authoritative to the less authoritative, focusing on how one’s position is related to how one thinks about impermanence. Powerful monk scholars in Bangkok are the most authoritative, followed by those in large cities like Chiang Mai, and then scholar monks at the local level, continuing down to monks, nen (novice monks), ex-monks, and pious laymen and laywomen.

In general, monks talk about anicca in a much more authoritative and confident way than laypeople, although both monks and laypeople look to the wat for definitions and understandings of anicca. Seventeen (63 percent) of the interviewees discuss the wat as a site for learning about anicca, four of whom are monks (57 percent of the monks) and 13 are laypeople (65 percent of the laypeople). Authoritative speakers often call into discussion the importance of practice (by which, for the most part, they mean meditation), using technical Pali terms. Four of the monks mentioned meditation to me as a way to understand anicca. For example, in discussing the idea with one of the head scholars at the Buddhist University at Wat Jedi Luang in Chiang Mai I was told:
When the mind is well concentrated we can see things as they really are. But right now with our polluted mind we tend to see things as they appear, not as they really are. We cling to the superficial, to the ephemeral. We don't see anicca, the change, the suffering, the imperfection. But if we practice meditation we have concentration, wisdom and insight into anicca. [Field notes, July 25, 2003]

Senior monks in Mae Chaem also discussed anicca in this way, as Monk Tepitak says at Wat Gu: “Study and theory of anicca go together. If something happens, you will know the cause. Meditation is not the high state. But it is the basic way to get to the high state.”

With a growing voice as a social class is the young educated lay follower, prone to study the modernist (rationalist) interpretations, which often take a Western attitude even as they espouse a particular Thainess. Emphasis is often placed on learning by experience, through books and meditation. Oi is one example of this well-educated, young social class. Oi is a native of Mae Chaem and a graduate of Chiang Mai’s Payap University. She now runs a stationary shop and does research on local practices through a grant at Chiang Mai University. She told me,

People my age study dhamma from books, and practice vipassana meditation. About the technical terms of anicca, anatta, I don’t know these, you should ask the monks. I know that anicca is the impermanence of life. The monks taught us not to stick to things, to life. To learn about impermanence you have to know yourself. Who are you? Where do you come from? Not—Julia from USA—our parents make us human, but before that, we don’t know—have to study yourself. [Oi, Mae Chaem, June 10, 2003]

Oi and her friend Sia were the only two I interviewed who represent this emerging authoritative voice. Although not well represented at the village level, there are a number of these young, liberal thinkers living in and passing through the Mae Chaem area. Working as teachers in temple schools, researching area customs, and commenting on social practices, their voices are a small but a growing part of the make up of Thai Buddhism.

Other villagers often describe anicca in ways related to their exposure to the temple. Ex-monks, for example, often use their “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) to voice authority.
Two of the three ex-monks interviewed explained anicca with a more authoritative voice than others while orienting their discussions toward the temple. As Paw Fai, an 80-year-old ex-monk tells me, as we sit in his house with old Lan Na script texts around us, “Go to the temple and see the monk—the monk will explain. I thought of anicca at the temple, but not when I’m home, not when I became a householder. Impermanence is anicca—everything is nature, birth and death. When you die, you can’t take anything with you; this is anicca (Paw Fai, Ban Tong Fai).”

Villagers with less or little exposure to the temple will more explicitly refer to the temple as the keeper of knowledge. Nine of the lay interviewees (45 percent) directly refer me to monks as sources of information, and 13 (65 percent) mention monks or the temple as sites where they learn or learned about the idea of impermanence. Lay villagers, mostly educated up to the age of 12 and working as rice farmers, will in describing the idea of anicca talk about it with its more colloquial Thai terms, mostly khwam mai nae non (lit., the idea that things don’t stay the same) or some variant of plian plaeng (lit., change). Often before getting into personal perspectives of what the concept means to them they refer me to the more authoritative sources of monks and the temple.

Mae Daeng, for example, says: “I don’t know what to say about anicca, not like others who have high education.” Mae Kong Kam, a wealthy weaver with a daughter in America, agreed: “Anicca, dukkha, anatta. . . . I don’t know these holy words—the monk will know better. I don’t really know anicca because I did not study it.” In general, the response I got from many of the lay villagers was in line with what I was told by the farmer Chin: “Better learn and study from experienced people.”

At first appearance this deferral to authority lends support to a claim that there are more-correct and less-correct understandings of Buddhism, because those who have official authority also seem to have knowledge of Buddhism that others do not. I believe, rather, that this is a symptom of how we think about knowledge as residing in authoritative discourse. By asking people about their lives, looking at how they discursively employ certain concepts in their everyday experience, there is a different image of knowledge that emerges. To this point I continue with Mae Daeng: After telling me that she does not know about the idea of anicca at all, she proceeds to move from the interview mat to
her weaving loom nearby and continues talking for about 20 minutes on the subject as she weaves:

The impermanence means that you do everything, like wage labor, to get a lot of money—but you don’t get a lot of money. You do farming and earn a little, sometimes you lose. Sometimes we expect a large income from farming, but then we get only a small income. You have a good yield but the price is low ... we always lose in farming. Impermanence is when you want or need something but you can’t get it. Don’t think about it anymore. [Field notes, July 3, 2003]

As the example of Mae Daeng illustrates, although people were acknowledging the discourse of authority on the subject of anicca, that factor was just one among many influences shaping how people think about the idea. Although, as I show below, the construction of an authoritative account of Buddhism has been crafted from particular historical interests, authority is an important aspect of the religion. I am not claiming that a relationship to authority is a recent historical construction but, rather, that looking only at this relationship could lead to erroneous conclusions about personal understandings, of the type “those people, they don’t really understand Buddhism.”

Mae Daeng is talking about anicca, but she is using neither the Pali technical terms nor abstract phrases of the type I describe above, of the arising and passing away of conditioned phenomena. Rather, she describes anicca in regard to “when you can’t get what you want.” Almost all of my interviewees, both monks and laypeople alike, include this type of understanding in their descriptions of the idea (25 people, 93 percent of total). Thinking about anicca in the context of not getting what one wants seems a very straightforward explanation to many of my interviewees, but it may seem to a scholar of Buddhism to invoke more the concept of dukkha (suffering) than anicca. Dukkha, the idea that life is suffering (i.e., not getting what you want, getting what you do not want), is another one of the main tenets of Buddhism, and being equanimous in the face of difficulties is a Buddhist virtue. It could be argued that perhaps people are not really understanding anicca when they talk about it in this way.

In refutation of this argument the simplest explanation of an apparent confusion of ideas is to point to the artificial nature of isolating concepts. Dukkha, anicca, and anatta are intertwined, along with other tenets of Buddhism, and although isolating them for analytical purposes may be useful, extracting them from
practice is more difficult. A more nuanced explanation of an apparent confusion sees impermanence as a cause of dukkha. Phra Song explains it this way:

If you understand anicca you will know your life better. Hope and hopelessness, gladness and sorrow, these things pass in our life. Our life is up and down. Know deeply anicca. When we stick to anything the loss of it will come and this will bring suffering. The suffering won’t stay forever—some day it [a thing or a feeling of suffering for a thing] will pass. We will be happy if we understand anicca. [Field notes, July 21, 2003]

Phra Song and others invoke anicca when talking about suffering because to understand anicca means to be prepared for the vicissitudes in life, to suffer less through the ability to handle suffering with the understanding that everything in life changes. Again, this points to an understanding of anicca that is less about an ideal and more about aspiration toward an ideal.

In analyzing my interview data, a number of themes emerge in addition to the orienting force of one’s position within the Buddhist hierarchy. People overwhelmingly seemed to think about and articulate anicca in relation to situations in their lives, rather than as an abstract truth. Three of the areas that came up again and again in conversation had to do with livelihood, momentary concerns, and past experiences in life. By exploring the ways people are thinking about anicca in Mae Chaem it is possible to get a look not at whether they understand the concept, but how they understand it. I examine each of the domains commonly mentioned in turn.

Perhaps more importantly than deference to authority is the contextualization people employed in describing the idea of anicca in terms of their work—scholar monks, farmers, and business people all oriented their discussions in terms of their livelihood. Twenty-one (78 percent) of the people I interviewed mentioned their livelihood in some way in their discussion of anicca. Livelihood serves as a strong orientation for how people interpret the idea: more than any other influence livelihood was brought up in discussions of anicca with people of all social positions. The monks (some more than others) think about the study of Buddhism as their livelihood; their ideas about anicca revolve around thinking about it in a Buddhist garb, which is a large part of what they do. Others also think about anicca in regard to their perspectives of what they spend most of their time doing: farming rice, weaving, or working in business in town.
For the lay professor at Wat Jedi Luang, for example, a way to think about anicca is through the common trope of preparing for what is not certain. He sees novice scholar monks at school regularly, and he couches his discussion around an orientation of school:

When you sit for an examination, you should expect any result that will come—A, B, C, D, even F—because there is no certainty, there is no way to assure you will get an A. Sometimes you will get a B or C—so the best thing you can do is to prepare to face anything. This way you will accept anything that comes. [Field notes, July 25, 2003]

Six of the seven monks I interviewed (86 percent) discuss impermanence using technical Buddhist terms. For scholar monks often the Pali texts are part of the context of their lives, the things that concern them on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, the focus on philosophical concepts within the Tipitaka (the Buddhist canon) is not necessarily of a different kind of interpretation than the villager. Scholar monks and other monks as well as lay people do have personal lives in addition to their scholarly and meditative pursuits, and they often couch their descriptions of impermanence in terms of personal concerns. In describing the idea of anicca four of the monks I spoke with (57 percent) orient their descriptions around the personal issue of the coming and going of others. Sitting under a tree at Wat Gu at the edge of town one day, I talked with a number of monks about this topic. Wat Gu is one of the school temples in Mae Chaem, and novices and monks from other monasteries were passing through to borrow books and chat as I interviewed monk Phra Tepitak. A monk, as part of choice by ordaining, often leaves behind friends and family, and sees other monks coming and leaving the temple. Phra Tepitak says to me, “When I have monk friends that go away I feel sad. But the Buddha taught, let it go. If you like anything you must let it go—you will have love and have broken heart, all the time, because life is impermanent.” Others around him agreed, citing that this issue is one in which their awareness and mastery of the teaching of impermanence is often at the forefront. At Ban Tap, the village wat in Ban Tong Fai, an old monk focused in our discussion on the renunciation of possessions when he chose to enter the Sangha, the Buddhist Order of monks. This monk, although an old man, had been only recently ordained. He seemed to be thinking of the things he was learning in light of his new position in life. “If people go away,” he says, “I won’t feel sad or happy. I left my home to go to the temple; it means you leave everything behind, don’t think of anything.”
By contrast, village farmers commonly describe the concept in terms of the
issues salient to rice farming. As mentioned above, six of the six farmers I inter-
viewed about this raise the topic of their crop yields while discussing
impermanence. Farmer Chai Pin said,

We do have experience with impermanence—every year in farming in
Mae Chaem. Some years you make a profit, some years you lose. Do not
make high expectations. Impermanence means we can’t expect the price
for the harvest for next year. It’s better to think of the chance as just 50/50.
[Field notes, July 8, 2003]

Mae Kong Kam agrees: “Like when we’ve lost something. For example, sup-
pose the land is damaged or flooded, we feel sorrow. Or the thing we most love,
we feel sorrow when we’ve lost it. The idea of impermanence means we want
to take something but we have to stop our need.”

Farming is the activity that occupies the time and energy of most people in
Mae Chaem. Although chemical fertilizers are being introduced to the area,
the normal experience in this subsistence based valley is that the success of
farming depends on the weather and other unforeseeable circumstances. Somsri
and Inan, the couple I stayed with in Ban Tong Fai during my fieldwork, have
started up a business selling Samsung electronics in addition to their farming.
In talking about impermanence Inan says, “Do not hope for certain outcomes,
because sometimes you won’t get what you expect. For us it is not like the
employee who receives a salary every month. We have to make our heart/mind
stable (tam jai) with uncertainty.”

Although some see business as a more secure alternative to the uncertainty of
farming, five of the eight businesspeople I spoke with voiced their understand-
ings of anicca in terms of their work. Dala is the headwoman of Ban Tong Fai.
Although she ended her education at the age of 12, she is a successful weaver
who has turned her skill into a clothes-manufacturing enterprise, sending ship-
ments to Bangkok to sell at upscale markets. When I asked her to tell me about
the idea of anicca she said, “I don’t make high expectations in my business.
I keep some part of my mind without hope because of impermanence. If things
don’t work out I want to be ok. Don’t have too large expectations, because
something may happen at any time. I think about this constantly.” Oun Jai, a
poor owner of a stand selling fertilizer, told me, “If my business is good it’s
good for me; if my business is bad I try not to feel sad. What shall I do, I can’t
do anything. I can only think of innovations for selling things, and try again next time.”

There are ways in which past experience seems to shape views on the idea of anicca. Phra Jon, a Bangkok-educated monk placed in Mae Chaem by his Bangkok temple for a yearlong stay, views anicca in terms of the technical language he learned at the Buddhist University. Although he is an elite representative of official Buddhism in many respects, I often found him at Wat Gu watching television (an activity not condoned by the Sangha because it is seen as a sense pleasure), and noted his hesitation in discussing impermanence with me and other monks. He tells me, “Anicca is actually the highest teaching. The monks can understand this, the common people don’t understand. The monks understand because the monks have more free time for learning. Regular people can’t understand, because it is the highest teaching, it is part of philosophy.”

Whether Phra Jon’s experience at the more Pali-studies focused Bangkok education system directly influenced his perspective on Buddhism and anicca, this experience contributed to his personal perspective in some way, just as other monks who spent their formative years as wandering monks could be said to view anicca in particular ways as well because of that experience. The wandering forest monk I met at a temple in the hills surrounding Mae Chaem chose to couch his description of anicca in terms of the body. “The body is anicca,” he related to me, “our body is impermanent, where sickness dwells. If the body is healthy, it means there is resistance. When our body is weak then the sickness will come, such as headaches, toothaches, stomach aches, and so on. Our body is a house, and some day we have to leave it” (Monk at Wat Doi Gu, July 2, 2003). Although, as mentioned above, I was referred by 17 people (63 percent) to the temple as a source of authority, almost as many (14: four monks and ten laypeople; 52 percent) told me that a significant (if not the most significant) way to learn about anicca is through direct experience in life. In addition, five (19 percent) of the interviewees specifically attributed knowledge of anicca to elders because of an older person’s long experience in life. As Dala says, “The old men and old women know better than young people, because elders have more experience.”

Life events were noted to me as reasons why someone thinks about anicca in a particular way. Many, because of particular situations they have experienced,
think of the idea of impermanence in light of these significant events. Ten (37 percent) of the interviewees (two monks and eight laypeople) brought up specific past experiences in their discussions of anicca. Changes in fortune and unexpected changes in circumstance were mentioned, but the biggest influence stemming from life events was encounters with death. In Thailand, death and funerals are the most prominent occasions for monks to lecture about the idea of impermanence. Unlike in Christianity, in which the idea might be brought up as a side line of a different emphasis, in Buddhism impermanence is an ultimate fact of life, one that deserves attention and understanding to decrease suffering. It is the decreasing of suffering (nirvana being the escape from suffering) that is the common goal of Buddhists, whether ultimately in future lives or immediately in this one. Seventeen (63 percent) of the interviewees (five monks and 12 laypeople) specifically mention funerals as one of the most prominent occasions in which one learns about and reflects on anicca. People who have experienced the death of a close relative often discuss their ideas of anicca in terms of this experience (although, as noted above, they do not always spontaneously think of anicca when asked about a deceased person), and they tend to think about the idea more than their peers. Five (25 percent) of the laypeople mentioned a particular person or experience with death. Oi’s father passed away a year before I met her. She subsequently left Chiang Mai and came back to Mae Chaem to live with her mother. She told me this story:

I myself often experience anicca. The most unexpected and unforgettable experience was when I lost my dad three years ago. He was 47, not very old. He was very healthy, with no disease found in him. There were no signs, no warning. I was very sad. However, I thought of something from his death: everything is uncertain. Now we can laugh, speak, and breathe, but how about tomorrow? Can we do this tomorrow? No one can answer. This leads one to doing everything carefully. We don’t know whether there is time for us later.” [Letter from Oi, December 12, 2003]

Although Oi spoke with me about a number of examples and perspectives of anicca during our many conversations, the death of her father was the perspective that came up the most often. Oi, like others I talked with during interviews and in conversation around town, clearly couches her understanding of anicca in terms of a formative experience with death.

Finally, there are influences on understanding of Buddhism that I will classify under the rubric of momentary concerns. Certain issues were on the mind of
an individual at the time of our interviews, and anicca was often described in
terms of these salient concerns. For clarity of this point, I will mention just one
issue I found to be relevant to many of the people I interviewed, that of mod-
ernization coming into the area. In 23 (85 percent) of the interviews (with six
monks and 17 laypeople) modernization came up in the course of our general
conversations. It is a very salient subject for people, as technological and social
changes are greatly influencing life in the area. In eight (35 percent) of the con-
versations with people who discussed modernization, the topic of anicca was
raised. The head monk at the temple school of Wat Pah Det is probably the
most modernist of the monks I met during my time in Mae Chaem. That is not
to say that he embraces the modern trends of consumer culture but, rather, the
opposite; he is of the modern intellectual class like that of Oi and is working to
apply a modernist brand of Buddhism in refocusing Thai society toward itself.
He regularly invites the Engaged Buddhist activist–scholar Sulak Sivaraksa to
speak at his temple, and when I went in to talk with him I found books of
Buddhadhassa Bhikkhu and other modern reformist monks. Suthat is deeply
concerned about modernization in the area of Mae Chaem, but in part
through the perspective of anicca he accepts that change is inherent in life, and
that modernization cannot be reversed. He says,

Whether the change is good or bad depends on the factors of how people
change. At present, communication has strong influence on education.
Nobody can stop the change because it is anicca. But if we think and fol-
low carefully what is happening the change will slow down, and we can
stand up to the change. [Field notes, August 11, 2003]

Phra Song at Buparam is of the more traditional village order, but he also is
concerned about modernization:

Anicca means that everything has to change, things have to happen,
develop and change until they are finished and gone. One thing is good
and then it is gone—everything has to change. For example, the forest in
Mae Chaem in the past compared to the present was much larger: since we
have machines and modern equipment, the trees were cut and destroyed.
But there is now good transportation, good communication. I worry
though about the culture, the environment, about the people’s heart/mind
. . . the change is both good and bad. [Field notes, June 19, 2003]

Although some villagers like modernization in the area (better roads, trans-
portation, and access to goods were some of the benefits noted to me) and
some did not (people, I was told, have less jai dīi [good heart] than in the past, and living expenses have risen), most people I spoke with had opinions about it, many in conjunction with the idea of anicca. Arii, a woman in Ban Tong Fai, is a good example of the more thoughtful type of response on this issue. She is a moderately successful farmer in the village, with a younger brother and son in the monastery, but with no education after the fourth grade. In commenting on modernization Arii says,

We are not sure, we won’t stick to the idea that what we’ve done will be permanent. You have to adopt yourself to the environment. We have to run after the modern way, we have to change the idea of what we know because of good communication, for example, newspapers and television. But we don’t want to change too much—just improve what we apply. For example, this house here, in the past normally it would be wood, but the termites disturb it and so we have changed the posts to concrete. Technology comes fast. We can’t adjust ourselves so fast; we have to try and stop, just stand and watch, think for ourselves, balance. [Field notes, July 29, 2003]

Discussion
So how do people in Mae Chaem think about anicca? The influences on how an individual views the Buddhist concept of anicca can be summed up by looking at orienting dispositions. Some of these influences might be easily observable and expressible, such as the ones discussed above, and others might fall under the category of personality or predisposition. Theravada Buddhism has a rich theory on personality based on a complex interweaving of anatta (nonself, the idea that there is no such thing as the I), and the idea of the self as the center of experience (the self is the refuge, and the Buddha is only a teacher rather than a savior). Personality and predisposition are the sum total at a particular (and fleeting) moment of past and present experience, both within this life and as culminated from previous lives.1 Western psychologists see personality in terms of dimensions of individual difference, looking at differences in such areas as genetic code, cognitive abilities, interpersonal styles, and emotional reactivity. Regardless of the perspective taken regarding how to understand the unique phenomenological culmination of past experience and social constituency, I would argue for the importance of the individual for understanding Buddhism as a multifaceted and contextualized system of thought. There were not numerically large differences between monk and lay
perspectives in the domains I discussed above, other than the authoritative voice that different people referenced or appropriated. Education, occupation, and experience did influence understandings of anicca, but these differences can be explained by different orienting perspectives in the proximate environment, rather than by radical differences in fundamental understandings. Tetpitak, P’Oi, Aree, novices and monks at Wat Ban Tap, the forest monk at Wat Doi Gu, the Head Monk at Wat Pah Det and others all mentioned to me the role of individual experience in understanding what anicca means.

Phra Tetpitak comments, “You have to know yourself, know and understand life. People do not all have the same idea of anicca. Do not compare it with science” (Field notes, August 4, 2003). An individual, Tetpitak is saying, understands anicca through his or her experience in life; for a scholarly understanding of anicca in northern Thailand, then, examining personal orientations and understandings are crucial for a formal perspective of what anicca is. The same is true, I argue, for Buddhism in general.

How do these personal understandings of impermanence, then, fit in with high Buddhist understandings of textual abstraction? Official textual accounts come in many forms: there are the Sutras and Commentaries (in a number of languages, including the Pali Text Society’s English translations) and the authoritative accounts of Buddhism (as found in scholar monks like Payutto’s Buddhadhamma [1995] or the popular Western version of Rahula’s What the Buddha Taught [1974]). These later accounts attempt to summarize the teachings in abstract terms, often positing a rational, coherent, and objective system. Often, as I mentioned earlier, these accounts privilege abstract explanations over lived experience, and in the course of doing so, the practices of Buddhist practitioners in Buddhist countries are seen as embodying a lower form of Buddhism, one that does not embrace the true teachings of the Buddha. Are the modern accounts describing a Buddhism that is identical to, as Rahula (1974) suggests, “what the Buddha taught”? Or are they reflecting a particular emphasis in interpretation in which certain ways of thinking are given prominence over others?

In suggesting that, say, Buddhism is a rational religion for which an elaborate cosmos of gods and magic has no place, a quick look at any Buddhist sutra exposes a very different picture: gods and magic; two areas of supposed Brahmanic, animistic, or superstitious roots, are frequently mentioned. How did this modern
Buddhism emerge as a type of understanding that has been hierarchically con-
trasted with the Buddhism of Buddhist people? I describe this process, and then
tentatively raise the issue of how one might identify the understandings of peo-
ple in Mae Chaem in relation to the modern interpretation.

One of the reasons scholars have been so successful in establishing a dichotomy
of correct and incorrect Buddhism involves the Western creation of an object
called Buddhism seen as having an analytic existence separate from lived expe-
rience. Philip Almond, in *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988), traces the
Victorian fascination with the newly encountered religion as interests grew for
the enlightened texts of the Buddhist canon, increasingly appropriated and
interpreted by the British scholars. In a manner parallel to that of the British
process of constructing a Middle East identity in Said’s *Orientalism*, the British
created the idea of “Buddhism” as an analytic object that could more or less fit
the activities of living people (Anderson 1988; Said 1978).

For a long time the Weberian concept of views shaping behavior was assumed
to apply to Theravada Buddhist countries, but when ethnographers (and mis-
ionaries, diplomats, etc.) first entered Southeast Asian countries in the early
1800s they were shocked that the behaviors observed did not match the sacred
texts of the people who propounded the religion, for example, people in
Buddhist countries didn’t act as if there was no I. In response in part to a need
to create the “savage” to justify colonization, Almond (1988) argues, certain
aspects of Buddhism came to be understood as right (seen in the clear textual
light of the rapidly translated Pali texts) and others wrong (usually practices
or attributes of the Indochinese and Sri Lankan practitioners). In the late
19th century there were a number of additional Victorian issues that influenced
the creation of an abstract Buddhism. These influences contributed to and also
help to explain the growth of an objectively “true” Buddhism discontinuous
with observed practice. Darwin’s new theory of evolution, discontent in the
Christian Church, and a scholarly dislike of Hinduism are just a few issues that
framed the construction of Buddhism as a rational, ordered religion. For these
reasons and more, Buddhism was seen by the Western elite to exist as a separate,
abstract object in juxtaposition to the lived experience of people in Buddhist
countries. Scholastic ethnographic work on lived Buddhism has for the most
part assumed the authority of this objective voice, analyzing Buddhist cultures as
corruptions distinct from the Canon. This has led to a tendency to label certain
activities as “real” Buddhist activities and others as less so. Abstract ideas such as
nonsense, impermanence, and detachment were seen as more authentic whereas merit making, karma, cosmology, and narrative birth stories were seen as superstitious and not representative of official normative Buddhism.\(^2\)

Within Thailand this wholly new concept of Buddhism as an analytically distinct, rational object was, through the process of ideological colonization (Thailand was never militarily colonized), taken up by the ruling class. The Bangkok court was anxious to appropriate Western concepts to create and modernize the country and escape colonization. In doing so it revolutionized not just the political workings of the country but also the structure of Thai Buddhism. I trace how this occurred to demonstrate that the dichotomy between different “systems” of Buddhism is not simply a Western attitude but, rather, one that has been appropriated and integrated within a Thai politic. To illustrate the similarity between Western academic views such as Spiro’s and a typical Thai elite view of lived Buddhism, I offer this excerpt from a conversation with a teacher at one of the Buddhist Universities in Thailand, the same teacher who told me about having appropriate expectations in exams (above). He says:

> For some people Buddhism is part of their life, their village life, they think that’s our temple, that’s our abbot, there will be a wat fair so we’ll go there tomorrow . . . it’s everything even though they don’t know anything, and they don’t want to know. Because Buddhism is so profound, so philosophical. The practice of Buddhism is very difficult. Have to follow the Noble Path. But if you don’t want to you don’t have to do anything, just be reborn from kammic energy. The hope in Buddhism is not to be reborn, but cut the chain of samsara (the continuous Wheel of existence). [Professor at Wat Chedi Luang, Chiang Mai, July 23, 2003]

The professor here is invoking a dual system of Buddhism, one system as revolving around kammic accrual in the world and the other as seeking nibbana outside of it. Although people generally are following the first kind of Buddhism, he is saying, Buddhism as understood and followed correctly is the second.

As the colonial powers were making their presence felt in the region, the kingdoms went through a process of changing their ideas of how power was conceptualized. Siam started to consolidate its borders between British Burma and French Indochina, drawing under its reign kingdoms that in the past had been left almost alone as tributary vassal states (Winichakul’s Siam Mapped
[1993], following the theory of nationalism of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* [1991]). Before the intervention of France and Britain in Indochina and South Asia the area known as Thailand was made up of a group of individual kingdoms. Siam, centered at Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, and finally Bangkok, was one such kingdom, influenced by and often in conflict with the Khmer of Angkor in present-day Cambodia. Siam during the course of the 19th century gained in power and soon began creating present-day Thailand. The process of making outliers into a part of the official national politic is a very active agenda in Thailand with a long history, an agenda intricately connected with the spread of official, national Buddhism and one that continues today. The concept of an analytically distinct “pure Buddhism” was thus spread from central Thailand to the entire country. Although the Sangha and the ruling party are officially separate, authoritative Buddhism has been interwoven with politics (e.g., Jackson 1989; Kamala 1997; Keyes 2002).

The new Bangkok court had to answer to both military and ideological threats from the West. At the foremost were the threats of Christianity and Western science; to counter the colonial powers, official Thai Buddhism came to portray itself as a rational, nonsuperstitious religion. Many of the folk beliefs (emphases on the past lives of the Buddha, intermingling of gods and spirits within Buddhist rituals, etc.), therefore, came to be seen as crude or backward, in much the same way Western (and Western-style-educated Thai) scholars have highlighted (as noted above). To appeal to the rationality of the West, certain aspects of Buddhism were extracted as representative of the “real” religion: the parallels of the Buddhist doctrine with science, the scholastic study of Pali language, and the decontextualized philosophical aspects were some of the emphases chosen.

The Sangha Acts of 1891 and 1910 were instituted to revolutionize the country’s Buddhism, serving both to take into the fold outlying principalities by taking control of local wats and to purify the religion as an ideological tool of power of the Thai court. One of the points of the Sangha Acts, for example, decreed that all new monks must be ordained by an officially appointed representative from Bangkok, rather than the normal custom of ordination by the Head Monk of the village wat. This effectively stripped power from the mostly autonomous village temples, reorienting villagers’ focus to the capital of Bangkok. In addition, King Mongkut, influenced heavily by the rational science of Western foreigners, established a sect of Buddhism called the
Thammayut in 1836, whereas all other ways of conceptualizing Buddhism were seen as belonging under the title of Mahanikai. The Thammayut sect was a royally connected order founded as a reformist sect. Today, although monks of the Thammayut sect are outnumbered ten to one in the population in Thailand, they exert as much if not more control than the majority of the Mahanikai. The Mahanikai are seen as more superstitious and primitive, although the power distinction between the two sects is not as strong as in the past.3

The distinction today between the Thammayut and Mahanikai sects is not a black-and-white issue; for our purposes, I describe the two to illustrate the tangible awareness of tension between modernist interpretations and traditional interpretations of Buddhism within an official discourse, a tension that endures today. Perhaps more important has been the reorientation to Bangkok as ecclesiastical center of Buddhism in Thailand. Most villages have a local wat, housing any number from five to hundreds of novices and monks. These village wats have wat schools, where the novices are trained in elementary education (in the past these were the only schools available, but with education reform there are now parallel secular schools for everyone). Further, Buddhist education is then available at the high school level in large towns such as Chiang Mai, and for the gifted and determined, the Buddhist Universities of Mahamakut or Maha Chulalongkorn in Bangkok. Pali studies at these centers confer title and position into the hierarchy of the Sangha. Many young monks today have these career paths as goals when they become monks; even if they choose not to follow the path to its culmination these young men (mostly from poor families) often seize the opportunity, otherwise unavailable to them, to learn English, computing, and other skills that will make their position on exiting the order a prosperous one. As in the past most males in Thailand ordain into the order for some period of their lives; most stay for only a few months, although some stay throughout their lives. This system of career monks, as they have been called, does not imply the corruption of the order per se. Monks in the past as well as today have ordained for a number of reasons; religiosity and nirvana are only one part of a greater scheme of the social structure of Buddhism in Thailand. Merit making for one’s mother, for instance, is commonly known as one of the most prominent reasons for ordination.

My point here is simply to draw attention to the way in which Bangkok as a center of Buddhist culture has appropriated the rationalist, context-free Buddhism of the West and disseminated this idea through authoritative channels to the
people in rural areas at the edges of the Thai nation. Whether the elite Buddhist is a modern reinterpreter of the new middle class (such as Sulak Sivaraksa [1992] or Buddhadasa Bhikkhu [1989]) or a conservative elite scholar protecting the teachings of the elders (the literal translation of the word *Theravada*), people within the elite often make the comment that “the villagers don’t know anything about real Buddhism” (as a monk told me at Buddhadasa’s forest wat Suan Mok, and as commented on in Gombrich 1991 and Southwold 1982). Although they might glorify the simple peasant as the keeper of the religion (such as the professor at Wat Jedi Luang, above) this is often a cry of nostalgia rather than respect.

Given the socially constructed nature of the modernist interpretation of Buddhism, how can I make sense of villagers’ understandings of anicca in relation to this interpretation? My experience in Mae Chaem was surprising to me for two contradictory reasons. On the one hand, entering the field with the assumption that people I encountered would espouse the kind of Buddhism I learned about in books was idealistic, and I was met with disappointment. People do not seem to explicitly think about or clothe their ideas about the concept of impermanence in terms that are explicitly Buddhist. That is, the idea of impermanence (and by analogy possibly other Buddhist ideas as well) was not spontaneously generated in a way that would suggest a radical departure from the psychology of people anywhere. The textual accounts often suggest that ideas such as nonself, suffering, and impermanence, as Buddhist ideas, are fully embraced by those who are Buddhist. People I spoke with, as shown above, do not seem to be detached from life in a way that the textual accounts suggest a Buddhist should be.

On the other hand, I was also surprised to find that the discontinuity between the high, correct Buddhism of textual abstraction and the low, corrupt Buddhism of the folk understandings was not clearly distinguished. Although people did not seem to articulate in Buddhist terms an abstract understanding of the idea of impermanence, it did seem that they were thinking about the idea as a way to make sense of life’s events, especially when brought to mind in some salient way.

What I found, rather than either a high Buddhism or a low Buddhism, was something in between. Buddhism in Mae Chaem, it seems, is a kind of ideal system of aspiration, to be employed in taking into account experiences in life.
If a man says to me that he feels distraught when his daughter leaves for Bangkok, the textual accounts might claim that he does not understand the Buddhist idea of impermanence because if he did he would understand that nothing is permanent, and he would be calm and unemotional. This conclusion seems problematic at best, because if someone truly understands impermanence he or she will have attained release from the very thing that the Buddha said was the core of human suffering. The person would not just be Buddhist, he or she would be enlightened. Often, as is shown above, people did not employ the idea of impermanence to explain why they were not moved by emotion when something changed around them, but they did employ the idea to explain why they should try to not let themselves be moved.

In Mae Chaem, then, Buddhism seems to be a cultural model of aspiration. To say it another way, the textual accounts of high Buddhism posit Buddhist conceptual abstractions as defining Buddhism, whereas for most Buddhist people Buddhism is a system of ideals toward which one should strive. People in Thailand often will readily admit that they are not perfect Buddhists, but I have never heard from talking to villagers that there is a complete system of “right” Buddhism that one cannot or is not interested in practicing. If there is a true Buddhism that declares that there is no such thing as the self or that everything is impermanent, one might ask, how can people act as if there is a stable, permanent self? This question, although it seems impractical now, was at the forefront of scholastic inquiry during the early Western encounters with Buddhism in the 19th century. The most obvious answer is that Buddhism is a religion of ideals rather than easily achieved norms. People must practice to understand Buddhist truths, and only an enlightened person will fully understand them. For the rest, the Buddhist truths serve as emotional and social aspiration. Functionalist or social accounts may come into play, but the most important point I want to emphasize is the personal nature of Buddhist ideals. People in Mae Chaem seemed not to want to abstractly talk about an objective definition of impermanence; rather, they thought about the idea as it applied to situations in their lives.

Although in analysis and interpretation concepts are thought about in abstraction, few ideas exist in the mind in this way. It is only when particular situations make ideas salient that concepts are created as unitary and bounded ideas: for example, at a time when an experience stands in need of explanation, or when a researcher asks questions. Instead, more usually ideas are expressed or couched
in terms of the world of the individual. As Kant said, “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (1968:93). There is an ethnographic analogy to this: Buddhist concepts when expressed in abstract, textual terms do not show what it means to live them; but mere lived experience available to all human beings does not show what is distinctively Buddhist about living in a Buddhist cultural setting. People in the West and in Thailand say that only the elite (educated “virtuosos”) understand Buddhism (which includes the concept of anicca), whereas the uneducated are stuck in partial superstition and corruption, and because they do not couch their understandings of Buddhism (and anicca) in the terms of the scholar, they therefore have different understandings, even different goals in life, because of the way they think about or interact with these ideas. But by looking at different perspectives, we can see that all people are filtering the idea of anicca in terms of personal relevance, revolving around a similar theme: that conditioned life is impermanent. As one monk, Phra Song, from Wat Buparam in Mae Chaem said,

Everybody has to think about anicca in their lives. They think about it all the time, maybe when they get up in the morning, and before they go out. The people here, they understand. They know, but they don’t know how to explain about anicca. If the person is a teacher it is their job, they can explain, but not the common people in the field. I think everybody thinks the same about impermanence, more or less. They get this understanding from the wat and from their experience in real life. From the wat they learn the preaching and teaching of the Dhamma, but Dhamma is nature. We can apply our understandings from life. [Field notes, July 10, 2003]

Phra Song raises the point that I want to make in this article: from contextualized experience one interprets Buddhism in personal ways according to social positions and individual perspectives.

Just as a cultural model influences the interpretation of events, culture also influences the way that this process of interpretation occurs. In Theravada Buddhism there is an emphasis placed on the self as the center of experience, even as theoretically there is no real self at all. The Buddha was a teacher, and is one of the three gems of Buddhism: people “go to the Buddha for refuge.” Yet at the same time he reprimanded others who simply believed in his teaching, saying that one should only realize from experience: “Be an island of yourself, be a refuge of yourself, do not seek refuge in others” (Digha Nikaya 16: Mahaparinibbana Sutta [Last Days of the Buddha] 1988). I do not want to claim that
the process by which people are thinking about anicca is directly tied to Buddhism as a specific cultural model; rather, I would like to claim simply that Buddhism is one such influence among many.

There are two potential conclusions that could be drawn from this study. One, that the emphasis on the self that I encountered is influenced by the culture of Buddhism, because Buddhism emphasizes the experiential self as a locus of meaning making. Two, that although one’s own culture may influence the way one interacts with that culture, the incorporation of a multiplicity of personal perspectives, rather than the extrapolation of a single voice, is integral to a cultural psychology. Both of these conclusions warrant attention. To this end, the process I have outlined above seeks to place agency with individuals in constructing and interacting with culture, even as culture shapes and crafts what these interactions are. In examining a particular Buddhist idea as it is thought and understood by individual people in a northern Thai community, I have sought to emphasize the contextual and experiential nature of psychological cultural concepts. To understand Buddhism as a phenomenon that exists in the world, it is necessary to examine the lived expression of it. To this aim, I have sought the creative locus of meaning at the interaction of cultural ideas and particular minds.

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Notes

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1. As stated in the commentary of the Upali Suttanta (#56 of the Majjhima Nikaya), “The word agent may mislead the reader- it is well to insist here that Buddhism recognizes no ‘performer’. There is only a ‘performance’, and every individual—man, god, or animal—is only a being, a becoming, consisting of present fresh performance added to the sum-total of that particular being’s past action,—the whole constituting a coherent flux that is conventionally called ‘an individual.’”
2. There does exist a distinction within the canon of Theravada Buddhism between life of the “householder” and life of the one who “goes forth” into homelessness, distinguishing those who focus solely on the Path and those who do not. Ostensibly, monks during the Buddha’s time were explicitly the former whereas all others were lay householders (although there were women and men lay followers who became enlightened), but in the time since then, and even during it (Collins 1982), these categories have been blurred. Village monks concerned with the welfare of their keep, for example, are today more common than the forest recluse in Thailand, and modern interpretations by prominent Thai activists and scholars such as Sulak Sivaraksa (1992) and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1989) have claimed the possibility of nirvana for even the lay practitioner.

3. The emphasis on the Thammayut as holders of the “real” Buddhism and the tension between the Thammayut and Mahanikai has been noted by some scholars, for example Stanley Tambiah writes:

In dealing with non-establishment figures such as forest saints and popular practices such as the cult of amulets, attention needs to be paid to the histories and paradigms of alternative and repressed Buddhist traditions that were once prominent in Southeast Asia—what Bizot calls the “unreformed Mahanikai tradition,” a non-official Buddhism . . . which still persists at the popular level as the core of religious customs and beliefs. [1984:102]

4. See Richard Shweder’s discussion of cultural psychology (2003). See also the Russian school of Cultural Historical Psychology’s emphasis on lived experience (e.g., Cole 1996). As Shinobu Kitayama points out, personal values are not simply “cultural values writ small” (2002:14).

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