

Thai Traditional Salutation

THAI CULTURE, NEW SERIES No. 14



THAI TRADITIONAL SALUTATION

BY
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Preface

Thailand is very rich in precious arts and cultural heritage which represents a long-lasting independence, prosperity and stability of the country. These various fields of heritage have been preserved, accumulated and inherited throughout generations until the present. This legacy brings pride, dignity and prestige to Thai people. Therefore, it should be shared with the world so that Thai wisdom can be appreciated.

The Fine Arts Department is responsible for the preservation, promotion, transmission and dissemination of arts and culture of the Thai nation. As such it has compiled and published a book series of 25 volumes written by experts in their respective fields. Their areas of knowledge include artistic works, architecture, music and dramatic arts as well as language and literature. Each series has been reprinted from time to time. In this publication, there are no alterations to the contents* although some illustrations have been added for the benefit of the readers.

The Department hopes that this series of books will be a resource among the international community to help them understand Thailand better through its unique arts and culture.

(Mr. Borvornvate Rungrujee)
Director General,
The Fine Arts Department

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PHYA ANUMAN RAJADHON

D.Litt. (*Honoris Causa*), Chulalongkorn University, was one of the greatest scholars and writers of Thailand. Not to be classified specifically as a historian, an ethnologist, a philologist or an archaeologist, he typified that race of scholars with an unquenchable spirit of enquiry and encyclopedic range that is fast dying out. His writings, mostly under the pseudonym of “**Sathira Koses**” which has become a household word, amply reflect his catholic tastes and wide interests embracing the whole gamut of the humanities. He had a long and distinguished career of government service as Assistant Director General of Customs, Director General of the Fine Arts Department and Acting President of the Royal Institute. He taught Philology, Comparative Literature and Thai Customs and Tradition at Chulalongkorn University, and Comparative Religions at Thammasat University. He served as Vice-Chairman of the Thai History Revision Committee, and also heads of the Thai Current Dictionary Committee and head of the Thai National Gazetteer Committee, chief editor of Thai Encyclopedia and chief of the Philosophy Section, the National Research Bureau.





The "Wai" in a standing position between a senior and a junior (vide p. 5)



❖ THAI TRADITIONAL SALUTATION ❖

THE “WAI”

The Thai sign of salutation or mutual recognition is to raise both hands, joined palm to palm, lightly touching the body somewhere between the face and chest. The higher the hands are raised, the greater is the respect and courtesy conveyed. The person who is inferior in age or rank in the Thai social scale of precedence initiates such a movement of the hands and the person receiving the salutation immediately reciprocates. This formality is not strictly adhered to by individuals who are on intimate terms. The Thai salutation may be rendered while sitting, standing, walking or even lying in bed during an illness. In rendering a salutation while standing to a most respected person who is sitting, one, as a decorum of good manners, will stoop or bend the head at the same time. When taking leave, the departing person will offer a salute in the same manner, followed

in turn by a corresponding salute of the other person. Such a salutation is called a “wai” (ไหว้) in Thai, and is often seen in Thai society.

The raising of the hands to “wai”, and the lowering of the hands to a normal position after the “wai” are never done with a sharp movement but rather in a more or less graceful manner such as in slow motion. The upper parts of the arms remain close to the sides of the body, without the elbows extended. The hands, joined palm to palm, are not held far out from the body in an erect position, but bent slightly inward.





The “Wai” or salutation with different movements in a kneeling posture (male style).

The above description, though inadequately expressed in words, reflects more or less Thai traditional culture in pre-modern days, when the way of life of the people was essentially different from the present day. In the old day there was comparatively no rush and speed, and no din such as one has to experience every now and then, particularly in the hubbub of city life. Time in those days depended on the people, and not the people on time.

The Thai “Wai” in its idealized form may be often seen on the stage in the Thai classical dramatic performance, the “Lakhon” (ละคร). Here one is able to observe the artistic movements of the hands of an actor or an actress, who, before performing the “wai”,

will place his or her hands, joined palm to palm, with the finger tips draw slightly to each other, so as to form a conventional shape of a “budding lotus” (บัวตูม) as usually offered in worship to a monk or to a Buddha image. The hands in such a shape are called in Thai “phanom meu” (พนมมือ), literally meaning to make the hands like a budding lotus. One will sometimes notice such a “wai” among the cultured Thai, in conformity more or less with idealized movement.





The “Wai” with hands hold a set of flower, incense stick and wax taper. (Unconventional)



Thai etiquette implicitly requires that a junior in age or rank initiate a “wai” as a sign of respect to a senior accompanied at the same time with a slight bow. Also, as a mark of respect the junior, while in conversation with a senior of great age or rank, will place his “budding lotus” hands to his chest when sitting or standing, and every now and then, as circumstances demand, when the senior is explaining something to the junior, raise his hands as a respectful acknowledgment of what the senior is saying. A person sitting on a chair before a high personage bends his head a little and holds his hands in a “budding lotus” shape places somewhere at or below the chest. Or instead of having the hands posed in a “budding lotus” shape, the fingers may be clasped or the hands held one upon the other and rounded like a Chinese “wai” in the kowtowing fashion, or like a worshipful attitude of a Christian in adoration. If a person squats on the floor before a great personage, such as the King or Queen, in the Thai traditional fashion with the appropriate posture called “nang phab phiab” (นั่งพับเพียบ), that is, sideways with the lower limbs folded backward and inward, he must recline slightly sideways with the hands in a “budding lotus” shape resting on the floor as a support. A person will slightly raise his or her hands in such a posture every now and then, in the same manner as previously described. When a person is receiving anything from a senior, he will raise his hands as a “wai” to the giver as a polite gesture of thanks before or after receiving it as circumstances demand. When one is asking someone’s pardon or favour, one usually makes such a “wai” too.

During a Buddhist sermon, or while a chapter of monks is reciting ritual texts from the Buddhist Holy Scriptures, one will notice that both the monks and the lay members assume a solemn attitude of meekness and obeisance to the sacredness of the ceremony with hands raised all the time in a “budding lotus” shape. If the ceremony occupies a comparatively long time,

The “Wai” in a squat-like sitting posture.





the raising of hands in such an attitude will be somewhat tiresome and quite an ordeal for the inexperienced. This can be overcome partly if one's arms are held close to the sides of the body as a sort of rest or support.

Psychologically, if a person receiving a “wai” from a junior, is egotistically conscious of his superiority, will return the “wai” with the hands raised to position not higher than the chest. If, by virtue of his great age or rank, he is not obliged to make a “wai” in return, he may merely raise his right hand side-wise and with a nod, or nod only, as a favorable recognition or approval. This is called “rap wai” (รับไหว้). In Thai this literally means “receiving a wai”. In most cases a superior person seldom condescends to perform a “wai” first when meeting or greeting a person of inferiority. Normally a senior will return the “wai” of a child with a nod or other appropriate gestures only, as a sign of approval or goodwill. Of course there is an exception, if the child is a prince or an honourable member of a high dignitary's family. *As noblesse oblige*, a high personage will initiate a greeting to an inferior by extending his or her outstretched hand in a Western style hand-shake instead of a “wai”. The inferior one after a hand-shake will sometimes make a “wai” also, as if the hand-shake is incomplete without a “wai” as an expression of respect.

Buddhist monks by virtue of their holy yellow robes, will not return the obeisance of “wai” to a layman however old or great in rank, not even to the king. This is not, in Thai etiquette, presumption on the part of the monks. The appropriate way for a monk to respond in such a situation is by a gesture of acknowledgement either by speech or a facial expression of goodwill. At least he should assume a serene face as befitting a monk.

The “Krap” in various stages of performance. Male style.
(vide the “Krap” pp. 14-18)





Traditionally, when country folk or any other simple people meet someone whom they consider a great personage, such as the King or Queen, a high prince or princess, a prelate, or a dignitary of importance, who commands the highest respect, they will instinctively sit down on their haunches, with the hands raised in a “budding lotus” shape, as a sign of great respect. Not until the high personage has passed or departed will they assume a normal position. While passing a Buddhist temple, a devout person will make a “wai” before it as an act of reverence.

To write something on a subject such as the “wai” which is intimately known more or less by everybody who is Thai, is metaphorically like drawing a picture of a dog or a horse, which is a well-known animal, rather than drawing a picture of a mythological animal which is real only in imagination. Any shortcomings of description in delineating the former, even in certain unimportant details, may instantly be detected even by a boy, but not with a description of the latter. What has been written here, therefore, is perhaps incomplete, because there are variances, in differing degrees, among the people of different classes of society in different localities and social surroundings of the country. The best thing to do for a person interested in such a study is to observe in real life how it is done; the description which has been written here is a generalization which serves as an outline and a guide only.

The Thai manner of salutation is similar to that of most races on the mainland of South-east Asia. Fundamentally they are all the same. The difference lies in the details peculiar to a race due to many cultural factors. The Hindus and the Chinese have not only their own forms of “wai”, which are allied to the Thai “wai”, but also other symbols of respect which pertain to their cultures and which will be reviewed in a succeeding chapter. No doubt the “wai” in its origin is ancient and worldwide, and may be found among many races in one form or another. It was originally perhaps a form of submission based upon the stronger over the weaker. Through the process of time it has developed into the mere form of salutation of the present day.

The “Krap” female style note the kneeling position of the girl resting her haunch on her soles instead of resting them on the heels as a man does.





In pre-modern days, a Thai would not greet a foreigner with a “wai”, nor would a foreigner “wai” to a Thai. This was due probably to reluctance on either side through misunderstanding or other reasons. Whenever, Westerner, or a “Farang” as he is called, adopted the Thai form of greeting, as an expression of goodwill and friendliness, there would often be joking remarks such as “Farangs know how to wai too”. On the other hand a Farang would seldom greet a Thai, though his equal, with a “wai”, for what reason one can only conjecture. Happily such a thing is now of the past, as people now understand each other more closely and sympathetically.

To most of the Thai, the “wai” is preferred to hand shaking for the reason that, the “shaking of one’s own hands” is hygienically better than the shaking of other people’s hands. A firm cordial hand-clasp sometimes gives the Thai a somewhat painful sensation, if the hand which is clasped is a sizeable, big one, compared to the slim hand of the Thai, particularly a woman. Confronted, sometimes with a large number of individuals which requires an endless process of hand-shaking, it is sometimes a trying experience though not an impossibility. In such a dilemma, if the function is not of a formal nature, the Thai has recourse to another kind of “wai” by raising the hands to a “wai” in the “budding lotus” position and slowly turning in a sweeping manner to all the persons present thus making a “wai” to all of them. One will observe such a “wai” at a boxing ring, when a pugilist makes a sweeping motion of “wai” to the audience, before a boxing match begins.

In making a “wai” in the traditional style to the King or the Queen, one has to kneel down with the body erect and the haunches resting on the heels. The hands are raised, joined palm to palm in a “budding lotus” shape, to a position a little below the chest, and then instantly raised to one’s forehead with a bending upward of the face. This is done once only at an informal occasion, but at a formal royal ceremony, it is always done three times.

Nowadays Thai girls mostly prefer narrow short skirts which do not permit them to kneel in their traditional position even if they want to.







THE “KRAP”

Allied to the “wai” as a sign of respect is the “krap” (กราบ) or the kneeling down and bowing to the floor in reverence. In fact the “wai” is part of the “krap”. One kneels in an erect position with the haunches resting on the heels. The hands in the shape of a “budding lotus” are held just below the chest, and then raised to the forehead in a “wai”. Successively the palm of the right hand is placed on the floor in front of the right knee, followed by the left hand which is placed about a foot in front of the left knee. The right hand is then moved up parallel to the left hand, but with an ample space between the two hands. The forehead is bowed until it touches the floor at the space between the index fingers of the two hands and then raised to the former position and repeated three times. This process of movement should not be done in a hurried manner, but with a comparatively graceful slow motion, avoiding the raising of one’s haunches when bowing in a seesaw like fashion. Such a style of “krap” is seldom seen nowadays particularly in Bangkok, but still survives, I am told, among the folk in up-country Central Thailand.

Another style of “krap” generally done is to part the hands from a “budding lotus” while kneeling, depositing the palms of both hands at the same time on the floor instead of depositing them one

at a time as in the afore-said description. The rest of all the movements is the same. Sometimes a small stand with a cushion is provided for the purpose, but the process of movements of the “krap” is identical, save one obvious minor difference in the bow. In the former one has to bow low to touch the floor, but in the latter the bow is comparatively less. There is not much difference in the movement process of the “krap” between a man and a woman, save that in the kneeling position, a woman rests her haunches on her soles instead of resting them on the heels as a man does.

The “krap” as described is called in technical language, “benchanga-pradit” (เบญจางคประดิษฐ์), a Thaiized Pali word meaning “a revered salutation with the five members of the body organs”, i.e. the forehead, the two palms of the hands, and the two knees touching the floor. Such a salutation is called “pancha pranam” in Sanskrit. A complete prostration as expressed by devout people in India and else-where does not enter into the Thai social scheme of worship.

Kneeling with hands raised in the shape of “phanom meu” (vide p. 6) before the altar.
An initial stage of prostration (vide the “Krap” p. 14)





Note the position of either hands as described on pp. 14-18



The “Krap” in various stages of performance. Male style, (vide the “Krap” pp. 14-18)



Originally the “krap” was meant as a sign of profound worship to the “Triple Gems” of Buddhism, i.e. the Buddha, his Law and his Brotherhood of monks only. Hence the “krap” is expressed thrice in repetition. Later on such an expression of reverence was extended, through a misconception in certain cases, to other highly respected persons or other sacred symbols as well.

Now we come to another kind of “krap” called “Mop krap” (หมอบกราบ) in Thai. “Mop” means to sit in a crouched position. A person in the act of paying high respect to certain persons, such as the King and the Queen, a high ranking prince or princess, one’s revered parents, teacher or mentor, kneels before the revered person with raised hands to his or her breast in the shape of a “budding lotus” and instantly lowers the hands, still in the described shape, on the floor and bows with the fore-head resting on the “budding lotus” hands at the thumbs. The movement is done once only, not thrice as one sometimes sees, which is due to a false analogy of paying a homage to the “Triple Gems” of the Buddhist religion.

There is another style of “Mop krap”. A person sits in a crouched position, but inclined slightly side-wise either on his right or left hand with the lower limbs draw slightly inward. He then raises the hands, joined palm to palm, in the shape of a “budding lotus”, resting the elbows as supports on the floor, and bows reverently until the forehead touching the thumbs of the “budding lotus”

These two allied styles of “Mop krap” were originally a mannerism peculiar at the royal court and practiced by the royal pages and attendants, when in the presence of the King, the Queen or other members of the royal family on an informal occasion only. It was later adopted by outsiders when they wished to express highest regards to a prelate or other respected person. Obviously these two styles of paying respect are adaptations of the afore-said Buddhist salutation of “benchanga-pradit” as performed to the “Triple Gems”.

Parenthetically, sons or daughters when meeting their parents after a long absence or saying a good-bye, place their hands in the shape of a “budding lotus” at the feet of their parents and bow in the “mop krap” fashion in an affectionate and reverential manner. If the parents are standing, the children will place their “budding lotus” hands on the parents breasts and bow. As an extension, this mode of expression may be used by a pupil or student towards his or her teacher as an affectionate mark of the highest respect equaling the parents. This application for girl students’ only does not extend to a monk, even if he is the teacher.

When the corpse of one’s parent is to be removed from home to a “wat” or monastery for religious rites and disposal, the children of the deceased will make a “mop krap” as a final act of filial duty to their parent. If such an act is amiss, it is a popular and superstitious belief that the corpse will be unduly heavy for its bearers. Once the children of the deceased have filially done the “mop krap”, the bearers will feel, in their imagination of course, at ease carrying the cumbersome burden of the corpse.





“Mop krap” (vide pp. 18-21)



The “Wai” in the “Mop krap” position.

What has been described of the “mop krap” salutation shows it to be a personal and an informal one. If it is done ceremoniously one has to offer a fresh flower, a wax taper, and three incense sticks. Having lit the wax taper and incense sticks and placed them with the flower on an appropriate place at the altar where a Buddha image stands prominently with articles of offering, one can then make a movement of “mop krap”. By an analogy this may be extended to the king if one knows beforehand that the king will pass by. As to royal offerings there is a special gold tray containing such articles of offerings and divided into a major or minor gold tray according to the importance of the occasion, about which we need not go into details. H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab had written a monograph on royal offerings which may be consulted by any interested person. When attending a Thai cremation a person will place a taper, an incense stick and a flower at the coffin as a last final act of respect to the deceased, and then light a piece of wood for the funeral pyre. Nowadays the flower, instead of a fresh one, has degenerated into a flower made of wood shavings which stands also for the chip of wood for lighting the funeral pyre. The paying of final act of respect to the dead and the cremating of the corpse blend completely into one whole as one may have seen frequently.

In ceremonial “mop krap” on special occasions, such as when a person is going to enter the monkhood; when a newly married couple is paying formal respect after the wedding ceremony to the parents or other highly respected persons; when one is apologizing to someone whose reputation one has slandered or injured; the first step is to prepare a salver containing, in groups of five, sizeable big incense sticks and wax tapers, arranged in two rows with the wax tapers placed above the incense sticks and tied artistically with ribbons at both ends. A banana leaf cup with a sizeable flower or a bunch of flowers placed above the wax tapers, and covered by a conic cover also made with banana leaf. Such a set of flowers, incense sticks and wax tapers is called in Thai “dawk mai dhup dian phae” (ดอกไม้ธูปเทียนแพ - flowers on rafts of incense sticks and wax tapers). One places the salver, after taking off the conic cover, in front of the person to whom one wishes to express ceremonial

respect. One then hands the salver of offerings with both hands to the appropriate person, who ceremoniously receives and places it in front of him or her. One performs the movement of “mop krap” three times, and solemnly addresses the person concerned in formal language, giving the reason for paying such respect. The person concerned says something appropriate to the occasion. One makes another “mop krap”; and then takes leave, bringing back with one the salver.

I may add here that in Thai common parlance “krap” is called “krap wai” i.e., the “krap” and the “wai” combined. In an extension of meaning, “krap” means “to ask kindness of” in polite and intimate terms of speech. A conventional term of address to the royal family is “krap thoon” (กราบทูล), literally to inform or tell with a “krap” to an official as one’s superior who is not a member of the royal family, and to a dignitary it is “krap rian” (กราบเรียน) which has the same meaning, the different words bearing relation only to the ranks of the persons addressed,

It is not out of place here to say something on the propriety or manners of the Thai as traditionally observed. The Thai deems his head to be sacred; probably because the head is the seat of an individual “khwan” (ขวัญ), that is, one’s vital spirit which gives strength and health to the individual owner. The “khwan” is very sensitive and when subjected to any undecorous behaviour it will feel injured and leave the body, its abode, to stray somewhere in a forest, and will return only to its abode after a more or less ceremonial cajolery. During the time before the “khwan” returns, its owner will suffer a weakening of his “dignified splendour” (สง่าราศี) followed by bad luck and ill-health.





With such an idea, handed down from one generation to another from a remote period of time, the sacredness of the head lies deeply in the popular mind. The bending low of one's head to a person or thing in the form of a bow as a sign of obeisance or as a respectful attitude has survived to the present day. A Thai will not suffer anyone to pat his head, unless on very intimate terms. If the hand that touches the head is that of woman, though his dearest one, the man will instantly lose his "dignified splendour", for a woman's hand is sensitively adverse to the "khwan". A conservative person will frown distastefully if he sees a young man allowing his sacred head to be touched by his young wife, or lying his head on the wife's lap. A man will not pass under a clothes line, where women's clothing is hung to dry. Woe to man's "dignified splendour", if his sacred head is touched by a woman's clothing. All his sacred endowments and powers appertaining to magical arts will be weakened or gone.

When sitting, standing or passing before a high personage, or elder or any other persons of equal standing, one should assume an attitude of meekness by stooping or bending down one's head or body so that it is not on a level or above the head of the personage. If a high personage is sitting on a rug or mat in the Thai traditional style, he should be approached on the knees or in a crawling position. If the personage is sitting on chair, one should stoop low when passing. This attitude applies equally to a personage who is walking. If one is to speak with the personage, the first thing to do is to "mop krap" and repeat it when departing. Here is then the reason for assuming the attitude of a crouched position or for reclining slightly side-wise as mentioned.

I may add here that the placing of one's hands in a "budding lotus" position or "wai" is never higher than the forehead. In the ordinary way of life, a "wai" in such a manner is done mostly by a prisoner, who is asking for quarter or relief, or a beggar asking for alms. Acting in such a manner, is called idiomatically "to raise the hands (in worship) overwhelming the head, as "pret" (เปรต - a class of hungry ghosts) asking for a share of "boon" (or merit) to be ritually transferred to him, thus relieving him of his intense hungriness, for a "pret" has a mouth only as wide as a needle's eye.

The "Krap" before a small stand (vide p. 14).



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