



Lao Buddhists

AND HEALTH CARE

WHO THEY ARE

Laos (pron. Laa-os) is a landlocked country surrounded by Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. **People whose origins are in Laos are called “Lao” or “Lao people.” Lao Buddhists form the dominant majority.** They arrived as refugees in the United States from Laos, starting in 1976 after the fall of the Rightist government. **After the Vietnam War (1963-75), the Pathet Lao (Communists) took over Laos and formed the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. The Pathet Lao persecuted Lao Buddhists who had supported the United States. Forced to flee from Laos to neighboring countries, such as Thailand, these Lao lived in refugee camps until they were brought here by the US government.**

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES¹

The **Lao Buddhists** constitute half the population of Laos. They **speak the Lao language**, live in the lowlands, and are not to be confused with the Hmong ethnic group who used to inhabit the uplands of Laos until the fall of Saigon. Lao Buddhists’ cultivation and consumption of sticky rice, for example, marks their culture from other ethnic groups in Laos. They generally **practice Theravada Buddhism** which has played an important role in shaping Lao life for nearly 600 years.

The **Lao Buddhist temple or wat is the vital center of village life.** The village, for its part, has sustained monastic communities. In return, the monks of the *wat* provide social services. The *wat* is at the same time a community and recreation center, school, hospital, dispensary, and refuge for people with psychiatric disabilities and older people. It is also the location where religious ceremonies and major religious festivals occur many times a year. The core Buddhist belief of *anatman* (literally, no-soul) denies that any eternal, unchanging self exists. Despite the strong presence of Buddhism in Lao culture, animist beliefs

¹Please see Introduction for a caveat against stereotyping members of any group at all.

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

(see below) are widespread among all segments of the population.

Theravada Buddhist society consists of monks and lay people. The lay people supply food and shelter to the monks who, in return, provide teaching and merit-making ceremonies, and act as moral role models for the community. Buddhism is believed to command celestial power to dispel evil spirits from human bodies, homes or lands. Some monks are respected in part for special abilities, which some of them possess, to exorcise evil spirits from a sick person or to keep them out of the patient's home.

Lao Buddhist culture sees suffering (*dukkha*) as the ultimate truth about life. All living creatures fall ill, grow old, lose or depart from loved ones, and eventually die. Buddhist philosophy has taught Lao people to live and accept suffering as the fundamental truth of life. Indeed, the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha are all about suffering, its arising, its cessation, and following the eightfold path to overcome suffering. Meditation is proposed by Lao Buddhist culture as the one way to deal effectively with suffering. Freedom from suffering comes through non-attachment or not clinging to anything.

Lao Buddhists believe in reincarnation or transmigration (*samsara*). *Nirvana* is the ultimate goal to which the Buddhist way of life aspires. It is the definitive ending of *dukkha* which plagues human existence. Lao Buddhists also believe in *karma* which is the sum total of all actions that an individual has done, is currently doing, and will do. According to this belief, one is responsible for one's own life, including joys and sorrows.

Study of the Pali language, in which all Theravada Buddhist texts are written, is a fundamental component of Lao Buddhist monastic training. The Buddha's original words are believed to carry spiritual power. One popular healing technique is that of monks' pouring water over a sufferer while chanting Pali incantations. Holy water is prepared and poured at a funeral or at the blessing of a new house. Holy water is also used to ward off epidemic and disease.

Monks are consulted to help interpret bad dreams, bad feelings, or strange behaviors. Some monks are involved in magical practices and astrology.

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

Most significant in the life of a Lao Buddhist is the naming ceremony which is celebrated shortly after birth in the household in the presence of relatives.

Lao people greet one another by saying “Sabaidee.”

They “nop” each other instead of shaking hands. Nopping means raising both hands gracefully, palm to palm, fingers together and close to the body, and bringing them to the head while bowing slightly. They are honored when westerners return the polite gesture. They address others by their first name.

All Lao Buddhists respect their elders. They use the term “Ai” for big brother or “Eeuw” for big sister in front of the name of an elder to show respect. A prime responsibility among Lao Buddhists is **to take care of parents in their old age. It is a prominent feature of the Lao concept of family.** There is no concept of placing parents in nursing homes. Similarly, there are no psychiatric clinics in Laos. People with psychiatric disabilities are cared for at home for life when there are no other options, such as institutionalizing those so disabled.

The father is the leader of the family, but the mother also plays a prominent role, particularly in family finances.

Living with their parents is culturally acceptable for unmarried Lao Buddhist children even if they are old enough to leave their home.

Lao society is highly hierarchical. Thus, belonging to a wealthy or professional family brings respect.

Lao people are described as gentle, easy going, and cultivating harmony. Compromise and tolerance are essential to Lao communal lifestyle. The Lao concept of “saving face” indicates their refined sense of public image. They go to great lengths not to embarrass themselves or others. The “Lao smile” serves to ease even adverse situations.

The Lao language has been called the “true language of love,” thus challenging a similar western claim made about French and Italian. Lao Buddhists claim that their language brings a feeling of warmth and connection in the respectful and loving way it is used to create good will. For example, even when addressing total strangers, they use kinship words such as “Ai” (older brother), “E’euw” (older

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

sister), “Mae’pa” (aunt), and “Pu’Ing” (uncle).

On visiting a Lao family, one should remove footwear outside the house despite being told otherwise. If an older person is sitting on the floor, it is impolite for a visitor to sit in a chair.

The head is the highest part of the body, hence one should not touch another’s head. Similarly, one should not pat another’s shoulder. It is also impolite to point one’s feet at another or sit with one leg crossed over the other so that the bottom of the foot or toe is pointed toward another. Objects are passed and received with the right hand only.

Lao people do not look directly at the eyes. They tend to keep more physical distance from each other than westerners do.

A widespread Lao belief in *Phi* (spirits) is blended with Lao Buddhist beliefs especially at the village level. Such belief colors the relationships of many Lao with nature and the community. For example, they believe they are protected by *Khuan* (thirty-two spirits). Illness occurs when one or more of these spirits leaves the body. This condition may be reversed by the *Baci* or *Soukhuan* (invitation of the soul). In this ritual, all spirits are called back to bestow health, prosperity, and well being on the afflicted participant(s).

In general, sick persons will turn first to the family and/or Lao Buddhist community for understanding of an ailment and its treatment. **Traditional treatments are very likely to be tried first.** If loss of spirit is thought to be the problem, a ceremony is performed by a community healer, or if possible, an *acharn* (teacher or monk). The last resort is to seek treatment at a clinic or hospital. **Traditional practices are usually continued while utilizing western medicine.**

Lao people have great respect for their Buddha images. They never touch, point their feet, or turn their back on the images. It is acceptable to wear shoes in the compound of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the principal Buddhas are kept.

Women should not touch a monk or a monk’s robe. If a woman wishes to give something to a monk, she gives it to

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CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES (CONTINUED)

a layman and he presents it to the monk by placing it on a table or on the ground in front of him.

Generally Lao Buddhists cremate their dead. They collect the bones and place them in a *stupa* (a Buddhist monument commemorating the Buddha's achievement of enlightenment).

CHALLENGES TO HEALTH CARE²

Most Lao Buddhist seniors are not English speaking.

Physical suffering, illness, and death are viewed by Lao Buddhists in light of the Buddha's fundamental teaching about suffering as unavoidable. Following the route of meditation, they seek to free themselves from pain and suffering through non-attachment.

In keeping faithful to this tradition, Lao Buddhists' first response to pain or illness may be to not access western medicine at all. **They may not seek medical care quickly. Or they may view medical care as an inappropriate response to physical pain.** Western medicine deals with pain as a symptom which needs to be relieved. Health professionals may therefore tend to view Lao Buddhist attitudes to illness and death as "fatalistic." The approach of Lao Buddhists thus seems to be contradictory to the approach of western medicine. **Of those few traditional Lao Buddhists who do seek western medical care, the vast majority do not return for follow-up health care.**

First generation Lao Buddhists, who came to the US from rural Laos, generally distrust western medicine. Many seek western health care only after trying traditional techniques in vain. Delay in receiving care might mean that Lao Buddhist seniors approach western medicine too late.

BEST PRACTICES FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Health care facilities do well to make provision for a Lao interpreter, especially when treating first generation Lao Buddhists. **It certainly helps when a health care professional learns a few basic words and phrases in the Lao language to greet and put patients at ease.**

²Please see Introduction for elements which are of common concern to all five new immigrant groups of the HCWR series.

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BEST PRACTICES FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS (CONTINUED)

Some common words and phrases follow:

Hello	= <i>sabaidee</i> . Pronounced: sir-bye-dee (lit. Do well/good/easy). Used to greet all persons at all times.
Bye	= <i>saukdee</i> (lit. good luck/karma).
Thank you	= <i>kop'chai</i>

If a Lao person says “Yes,” it doesn’t necessarily mean that they understand what is being said. **It is important to check with them what they have really understood.**

Lao Buddhists appreciate it when those who serve them are **respectful toward their beliefs, symbols, and practices, especially toward the Buddha and the monks.**

Importantly, health care professionals must **avoid touching or patting a Lao Buddhist patient on the head or shoulders.** During physical exam, if one has to touch those parts of the body, one does well to request the patient’s permission.

Respect for their culture includes allowing Lao Buddhist patients to wear amulets or wrist strings (called *katha* or *katout*). Some of these cotton strings have been tied around the wrists of patients to keep the thirty-two spirits in place.

In light of Lao Buddhist cultural practices, respectful medical professionals do not point their feet at anyone or anything. **Such professionals are also careful to avoid stepping over anyone. Instead, they walk around them.**

For successful outcomes with Lao Buddhists, **it is essential to be a “patient listener.”** Modesty is an important cultural value for Lao Buddhists.

Raising one’s voice or losing one’s temper is not acceptable to Lao people. It occasions embarrassment as it goes against the vital Lao concept of “saving face.”

It is advisable that Lao Buddhists’ **preference for same-gender physicians** be respected.

It is important to **explain procedures and medicines carefully to Lao Buddhist patients.**

For successful patient outcomes, it greatly helps to **provide educational materials preferably in the Lao language.**