

**LESSON PLAN**  
**Created in partial fulfillment**  
**For the requirements**  
**Of the Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad**  
**The Exploration of the Great Mekong Economic Region Countries**  
**July 4 – August 3, 2003**  
**Submitted to**  
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**Executive Director, Thailand – U.S. Educational Foundation**  
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Title of the Curriculum Project: *The Medium Is The Message: Religious Culture and Environment*

SUMMARY: The human person is self-expressive by nature. The artificial, physical constructs of each civilization's environment are revelatory of that society's ideological climate. All cohesive, homogeneous, human units concretize the various dimensions of their distinctive conceptual realm, be they political, philosophical, scientific, or religious, in the art and architecture that surround, demarcate, and identify that cultural body. Thailand is a nation predominately Buddhist; and it is in myriad manifestations that the people of Thailand write their belief large in self-proclamation for the casual observer. So pervasive is the influence of this religious phenomenon throughout the spectrum of Thai society that the nation's present reigning dynasty, itself the object of the people's most sincere and exemplary devotion, maintains, according to tradition, in one and the same complex of buildings both state apartments and private, royal chapel. This majestic artistic and spiritual achievement is commonly known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha; and, apparently, no higher praise can be marshaled for this architectural grouping than that of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in her designation of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha as "the repository of the spirit of the entire Thai people" (*History of The Temple of The Emerald Buddha, Foreword*). It is this architectural complex of buildings, then, collectively known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, that forms the point of inception for my class project.

Regarding the project's position within the semester's curriculum, the class will come to study the Temple of the Emerald Buddha at the completion of the units on Hinduism and Buddhism. Thus, the students will be prepared to see the eclectic composite of the temple complex. It is important for Western students, academically trained in systems of exclusive dogmatism, to grasp the facility of the Eastern mind in assimilating and integrating elements from diverse religious and cultural traditions. Moving beyond this initial orientation, the students will examine how the multiform components of the temple complex reflect and reinforce indigenous religious perceptions. The knowledge acquired of Thai religious culture in this portion of the project will serve as a vehicle, transposing the class from the exotic to the quotidian, that the students might tackle the succeeding segment of the project. The students next will be required to examine elements within their own local houses of worship to discern how these features too function to reflect and reinforce the personal faith tenets of the individual student's religious community. This second phase of the project will furnish the student with data from her own religious tradition parallel to that gained in her study of Thai Buddhism. It is at this point in her

research that each student will be asked to consider a number of key questions relative to the nature of the human spirit and the culturally transcendent manifestation of religious belief.

**GRADE LEVEL:** This project is designed for twelfth graders of St. Joseph Hill Academy, a relatively small, Catholic girls' high school. The title of the course is World Religions; and it is offered to qualified students in their senior year as a college extension course for which they may receive three college credits applicable at participating institutions.

**KEY QUESTIONS:**

- 1) How is it that the human spirit seeks transcendence?
- 2) How is it that the human spirit universally constructs religious systems?
- 3) How is it that human beings project their culturally shared psychic world extra-mentally?
- 4) How does environment impact consciousness?
- 5) How is it that independent and diverse religious traditions manifest foundational similarities?

**BACKGROUND NOTES:** The instructor will draw from his copious notes garnered during his visit to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha as well as from those accumulated from lectures, conversations, and questionings throughout his Fulbright stay. Visually aided by personal photos burned onto a CD and a "photo memorial" CD purchased at the temple's gift shop, the instructor will provide explanations of such architectural features as the guardian statues at the entrances, the presence of the garuda on the peaks of roofs, the mythical naga extended along flights of stairs, the brilliant stupas, the narrative murals, the various accessories adorning the sanctuary, the enshrined Buddhist scriptures, the symbolism of the ubiquitous lotus, the profound reverence of worshippers before the Buddha image, and, of course, the history the Emerald Buddha itself. These will form the materials of the preparatory lectures.

**STANDARDS:** The students are conversant with collaborative projects and the composition of Powerpoint presentations. Detailed rubrics will be given the class both to guide the students confidently throughout the process of their research, facilitating the analytic and synthetic phases of their work, and to communicate to them the instructor's expectations of quality, originality, and creativity. Such standards are more precisely delineated in the STRATEGIES section of the plan.

**OBJECTIVES:** The main objective of this project is to bring students to the realization of the universality of the sacred environment. The student will come to appreciate not only the value of an alternative religious *Weltanschauung* and the concomitant merit of its aesthetic expression, but also, through exposure to this foreign, religious phenomenon, to return with fresh eyes to an analytic reappraisal of her own personal religious tradition. The upshot of the project is geared to induce awareness of pivotal commonalities within the human spirit vis-à-vis yearning for the transcendent and concretizing that supernal realm within human dimensions.

**MATERIALS:** Materials for the orchestration of this project are multiple. First, there will be lectures and chalkboard presentations based on the student text. Supplementary notes derived from M.C. Subhadradis Diskul's *History of The Temple of The Emerald Buddha* will broaden these lectures. Relevant passages from Buddhist scripture will illustrate key

lecture motifs. These initial presentations will be augmented by a Microsoft Windows' showing of a CD-ROM disc purchased at the temple itself and entitled *The Emerald Buddha and Grand Palace*. Additionally, a CD comprising selected photos taken during the instructor's visit to the temple will be offered the class with appropriate and anecdotal commentary; and, lastly, a number of artifacts acquired during the summer seminar in Thailand will be exhibited and discussed. (Since St. Joseph Hill Academy vigorously integrates technology into the curriculum, the students are responsible for securing for their projects, in addition to written sources, suitable data from the World Wide Web.)

#### STRATEGIES:

1. The students are first divided into group of four. The establishment of such teams, in the initial phase of the project, will benefit the individuals both through shared discussion and synergistic supplementation of private weaknesses through others' contributory strengths.
2. Since each of our students is required to purchase a laptop computer and bring it with her to all classes, students must, in addition to library material, secure online data, primarily visual, relevant to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.
3. Each group must select: a) five (5) architectural features from the temple complex that reflect or reinforce Buddhist beliefs. These may include statuary, rituals, or accessories, such as prayer fans, tiered umbrellas, or incense; b) three (3) Buddha images in various postures (*mutra*). These may exceed the confines of the temple complex; and c) one (1) narrative from the life of Buddha as recorded in the sacred writings of Buddhist scripture. (This is an attempt to expand the scope of the project through an integration of plastic art and literature.) To insure that each member of the group engaged herself responsibly, each student will "tag" her contributive data for the instructor.
4. Each group must then construct a Powerpoint presentation wherein the members relate to the class how each of the items they have selected both reflect and reinforce Buddhist faith tenets. This public presentation both shares the fruits of private group discussions and stimulates further interest and inquiry. (This segment of the project will terminate the group dynamic.)
5. The students, now acting as individuals, will visit a local house of worship. She may choose her home parish or a church that may command her attraction. Here, the student is to follow the same procedure as in her initial study of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. From her own house of worship and religious tradition she is to select: a) five (5) architectural features (including furnishings, accessories, sacramental elements) that reflect and reinforce Catholicism or her own religious heritage; b) three (3) artistic depictions of Christ within the Western tradition; and one (1) pericope treating an incident in the life of Christ as recorded in the Christian New Testament.
6. The culmination of the project is the production of an individual paper wherein each student, having gathered and assimilated the necessary data, responds to three (3) clearly proposed considerations: 1) What has your research revealed to you concerning the impact of environment upon consciousness?; 2) How would you describe objectively the interrelatedness between the religious philosophies of Thai Buddhism and Catholicism as exemplified in the construction of their respective religious environments?; and 3) How would you account for this underlying interrelatedness between the two religious traditions and their artistic representations. Answering these questions within the format of an individual paper balances well the earlier communal activity of the Powerpoint composition.

The latter has prepared the student for the production of this final, private reflection by actively stimulating her investigative faculties while the former mobilizes the student's resources of synthesis and insight.

**OPTIONAL CHALLENGE:** St. Joseph Hill Academy does not "track" its students. Accordingly, my class displays heterogeneity of academic talent. Teachers with classes of such composition are asked to provide those students of superior intellectual ability with projects of commensurate challenge. For those girls suited to undertake an increased degree of difficulty in this assignment, I propose the following. Research the monasteries of Medieval Europe, especially those of the Cistercian Reform of the eleventh century, with an eye toward examination of the complex of buildings as a whole in relation to their ultimate purposefulness. The guiding question during the course of this investigation will be: To what end or ends was the environment constructed? After an adequate presentation has been made (via Powerpoint) illustrating the success (or failure) of matching edifice to ideology, the student is to relate (via individual paper) the "functionality" of the European monastic complex to that of the series of buildings comprising the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

**ASSESSMENT:** This project is based on a two-fold assessment: the collaborative Powerpoint and the individual paper addressing three distinct questions. I will assign an equal weight of 75 points to each of these two project components, permitting each student the opportunity to gain a total of 150 points toward her semester grade. Since the project is somewhat elaborate, demanding focus, investigation, and creativity, so high a possible scoring was allotted. In an attempt to be fair to those students less gifted with intuitive insight, sheer dint of labor in collecting pertinent data, of course, will be rewarded generously, as well as the demonstrated virtues of sincerity, pluck, and enthusiasm. However, this project is designed to lead students to a ledge and invite them to leap. Those who successfully secure that foothold in that universally common and intangible dimension of the transcendent to which this project invites them will receive the higher score.

**FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES:** At the conclusion of the project, one class period will be devoted to discussion of the students' experience as individuals and groups. To foster participation each girl will be asked to keep a journal chronicling her intellectual and spiritual growth during the course of her project activities. In her journal she is to record such questions as: My initial response to the project; Questions that arose during the course of the project; Insights I acquired during my work on the project; Summary of my thoughts at the conclusion of the project; My assessment of the project; and, of course, any personal reflections deemed appropriate for entry into such a journal.

A further activity that might be orchestrated with considerable merit would be an interdisciplinary lesson unit or project devised with the cooperation of the Social Studies or History instructor, such as relations between Thailand and bordering countries and the role of Buddhism relevant to those relations. Still another idea might be collaboration with the English teacher in the study of epic poetry. Whereas I would develop the social and religious ramifications of the *Ramakien* in my class, that instructor would analyze the work from the viewpoint of literary history and composition or in comparison to epics of the Western literary tradition. (Since I also purchased a music tape representative exclusively of Thai instruments, I might approach the music teacher to discern the possibility of yet another interdisciplinary enterprise.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: Such valuable resources include, of course, Buddhist scriptures and the *Ramakien*. For those students attempting the optional challenge, two exceptional resources would be Chyrogenous Waddell's Cistercian Symposium delivered at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, and Louis Lekai's classic work, *The Cistercians: Ideal and Reality*.

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