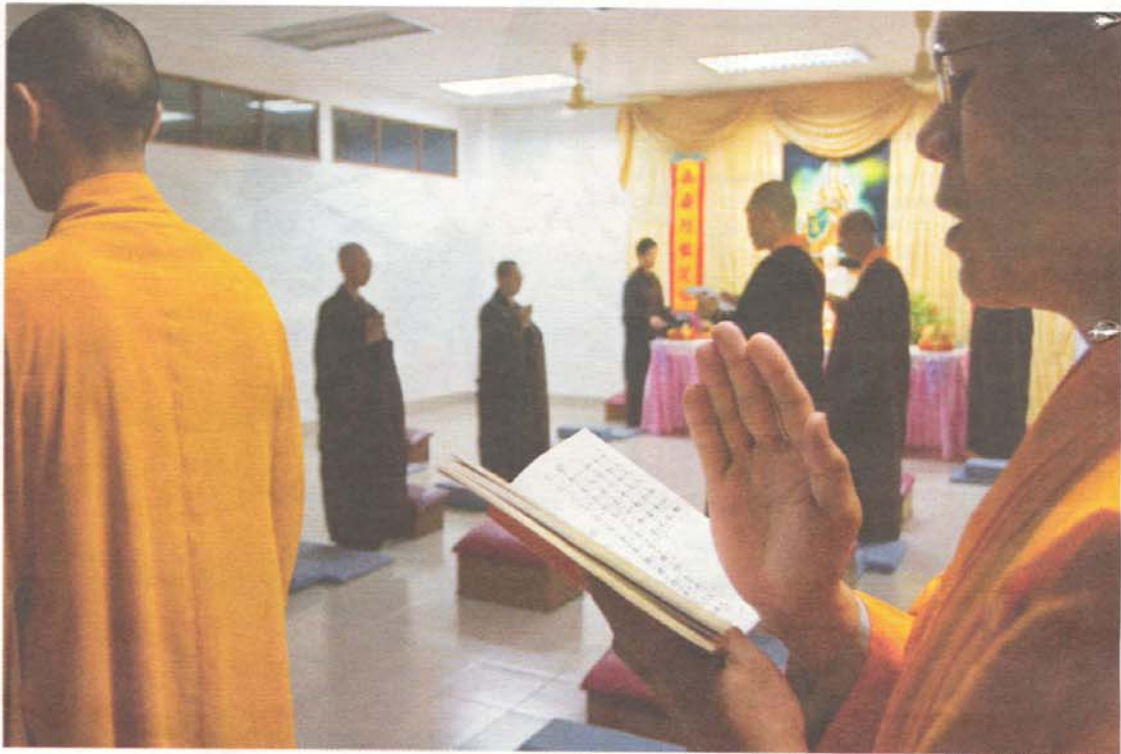


## INTERNATIONAL

<http://chronicle.com/international>

Students at Thailand's International Buddhist College gather for prayers daily at 5 a.m. The students, most in their 20s, come from nearly a dozen countries.

STEVE SANDFORD FOR THE CHRONICLE

## Peace Amid Violence

A tiny Buddhist institution in an increasingly unstable region trains monastics in matters both spiritual and practical

BY MARTHA ANN OVERLAND

**W**HEN the doors of the International Buddhist College opened in this southern rural province after nearly a decade of hard work and planning, the founders praised the achievement as the culmination of devotion, faith, and, of course, good karma.

With its rare combination of secular academics and monastic life, the college is a place where monks and nuns, as well as lay people, can pursue Buddhist studies. Not one, but all three major traditions of Buddhism—Mahayana, Theravada, and Tibetan—are taught. And with no single language spoken by the religion's multitude of followers, English is the medium of instruction.

The timing could not have been worse.

Not long after the college welcomed its first students in October 2004, a bomb tore through a column of monks and the soldiers guarding them in the neighboring province of Narathiwat. Buddhist schools were burned and teachers were gunned down on their way home. Several were shot and then beheaded.

This month attackers lobbed explosives into a school dormitory in a nearby district,

killing three Muslim children. Several Buddhists were shot in the days following the children's murders in what were widely believed to be revenge attacks. Since the onset of the insurgency here in the Muslim-majority south three years ago, more than 2,000 people have been killed.

The district of Sadao in Songkhla province, where the college is located, has not been a target of separatists, yet it has felt the blasts' reverberations. With stories circulating about monks in southern Thailand wearing bulletproof vests (not true) and Buddhist teachers being guarded by village patrols (true), the college's administrators concede that it has been hard to attract students and professors. The campus has only some 40 students, although it could easily accommodate several times that number.

From Sri Lanka to China, relatively few Buddhist monastics have had access to higher education. Most countries simply have no universities, or even programs, that are designed for monks and nuns or that offer Buddhist studies. Thailand has been the exception. The country has several Buddhist universities, yet courses are largely conducted in Thai, and focus on the Theravada

school of thought, making it difficult for non-Thais to attend.

And an increasing number of religious orders realize that poorly educated monks and nuns are neither equipped to manage large temples, nor particularly effective at spreading the teachings of Buddha to the faithful. Since it is impractical for most to attend college because they live according to strict monastic codes, this college was envisioned as a place where they could get a liberal education while staying true to their vows. Because it conducts most courses in English, the college is not limited to students from a single country.

The attacks on Buddhists, particular Buddhist teachers and schools, have come as a shock to the founders of the college, the Than Hsiang Buddhist order in neighboring Malaysia. They say they were unaware of the hatred simmering in southern Thailand when they were searching for a building site. To date, the order has invested more than \$4.5-million in the project.

"We chose southern Thailand for IBC from a financial point of view because land is very, very cheap compared to Malaysia," says Leong Kok Hing, the assistant rector for

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administrative affairs. "Six years ago it was very peaceful."

In truth, six years ago, Thailand's Muslim-majority provinces were quiet, but they were not exactly peaceful. The provinces once bequeathed to an independent sultanate, which Thailand annexed in 1902 from what is today Malaysia. Since that time Muslims here have complained of being second-class citizens and victims of Bangkok's assimilation policies. There has been violence before, but never on this scale.

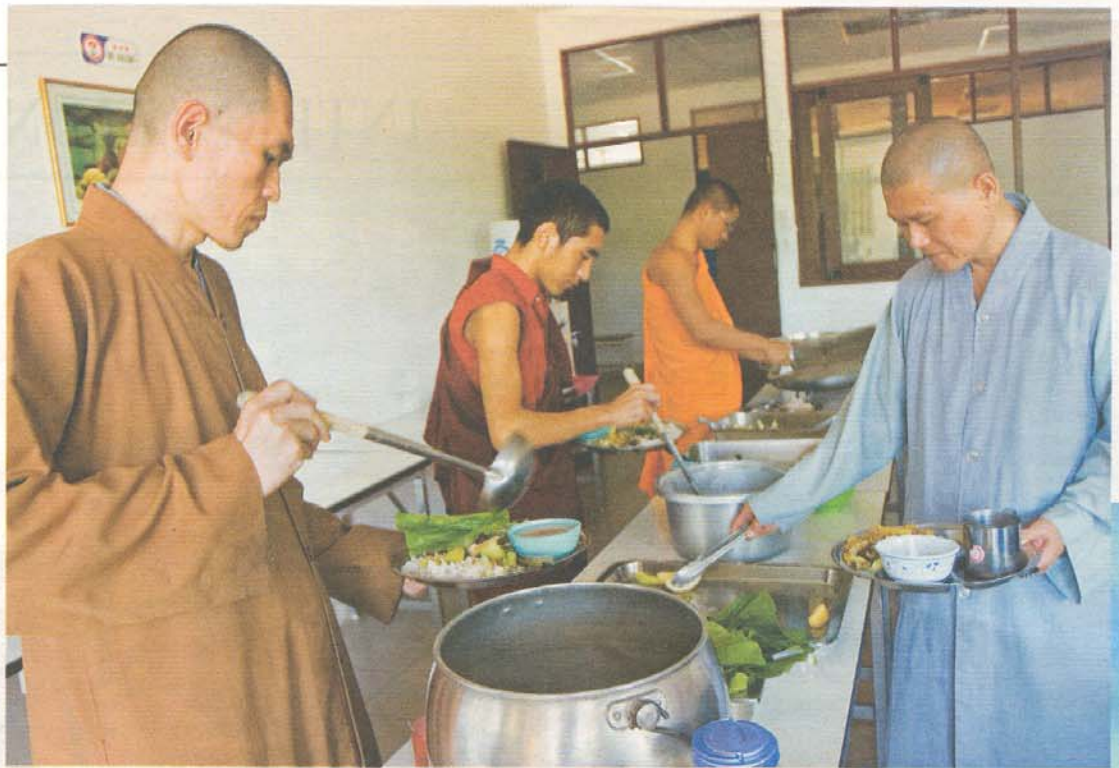
Who exactly is behind these latest attacks is difficult to say. Criminal gangs and even the Thai military have been blamed for some of the killings, particularly revenge attacks on Muslims. But most of the violence stems from a separatist insurgency against the Buddhist-dominated Thai state, says Srisompob Jitpiromsri, a professor of political science at Prince of Songkla University, in Pattani.

"This was once a Muslim kingdom, with its own culture, its own language," says Mr. Srisompob, a Buddhist who has lived in southern Thailand for 30 years. "Pattani used to be the center of Islamic studies in Southeast Asia." Since annexing the region, Bangkok has pursued a program to make the ethnically Malay Muslims into Thais, he says.

"The Thai state has had a policy to assimilate them and make them a minority group, forcing them to accept our Thai language, our Thai education system, and our Buddhist culture," Mr. Srisompob says. "This is why the Thai schools and the Thai teachers have been specifically targeted. This is a symbolic war."

MONASTIC LIVING

Carved out of a 110-acre rubber plantation, the International Buddhist College seems a world away from the troubles. Though this is



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE SANDFORD FOR THE CHRONICLE

a Muslim neighborhood close to the Malaysian border, there are none of the military checkpoints and gun-toting Thai soldiers that are familiar sights in other districts.

The campus is surrounded by a high fence and patrolled by a watchman, but it would keep no serious intruder out. In fact, the fence appears more effective at keeping the Buddhist students in.

Whether ordained or not, the students, most in their 20s and from nearly a dozen countries, are expected to live in the monastic tradition. There are no televisions playing, no radios blasting, no one drinking alcohol. (Though many of the students do have

*Students at the International Buddhist College eat simple vegan meals, but some monks spice up their food with hot chili paste. Meals are taken in silence.*

their own laptops.) Lodgings are spartan, and there are, of course, no co-ed dorms.

Students rise for prayers at 5 a.m., when a lone monk walks the campus ringing a small bell. Soon a rhythmic chanting in ancient Pali echoes across the campus. The words of the sutras, Buddhism's holy scriptures, sound as if they are coming from deep within the earth.

Mandatory chanting and meditation are



*Bong Chui Lian (left, front), acting dean of the faculty of liberal arts at the International Buddhist College, sits with students during an exam. Venerable Zhen Chan (right), a student, works in the vegetable garden.*

followed by a simple vegan meal, which is eaten in silence. Several monks discreetly stash a jar of hot chili paste under their chairs to spice up the food. After plates are washed, there is time for contemplation or study before the first classes begin at 8.

Students carry a full course load, and most pursue a bachelor of arts in Buddhist studies. (Several are working toward their master's degrees.) All bachelor's-degree candidates must take traditional courses in science and the humanities in order to meet government requirements.

"In Buddhist seminaries, they concentrate

book library, computers with Internet connections, a dining hall, and student residences. And all of the nine full- and part-time professors, most of whom are lay people, have master's degrees or Ph.D.'s, a claim that few colleges or even universities in this part of the world can make.

Not surprisingly, most courses, with perhaps the exception of statistics, reflect upon the Buddha. In "Buddhism and Science," an orange-robed student gives a PowerPoint presentation called "Emptiness, Relativity, and Quantum Physics." In English, the class practices writing business letters that ask prospective donors to give money to their temples.

involve myself in education. We can help others through true knowledge."

#### 'THE LUCKY ONES'

Temptations do exist. A sign in the computer room reminds Internet users to "Keep one's mind pure." Lay students have been known to sneak out to drink. Students sometimes skip chanting to cram for an exam. Though exceedingly rare, there have been cases of cheating.

"We sent them back to their own country," says Mr. Zhen, who is warden of the men's dormitory. "To live here you have to be prepared for a life of learning and self-discipline."

Yan, a nun in the Chinese-language graduate program, who says she wants to teach people so they understand more about Buddhism. "The masters didn't know the importance of study. But if you want to walk the path you must have the knowledge."

Designed to be a refuge from the outside world, administrators admit they are disheartened to find the college on the periphery of what some say could turn into an open war between Buddhists and Muslims. But without television, they are not buffeted by the daily news reports of the beheadings and bombings. Surrounded by farms and rubber plantations, often the first they hear of a large attack is when they get a telephone call from monks in Malaysia who are worried about their safety.

"Most people here don't have the slightest concern," says Greg Allen, who teaches English at the Buddhist college. Mr. Allen, a Canadian who has spent his career teaching abroad, settled in Thailand with an eye to finding a place to retire, but he and his wife found the campus instead. "Fear? Nonsense," he says dismissively. "Worry about looking both ways when crossing the street, not about the risk of a bombing!"

The Buddhist students are more philosophical about the violence. They know that no fence and no number of guards could really protect them if someone was intent upon attacking the college. Ms. Shi, like many others, believes that the collective good karma and merits of the people here will keep them safe.

"Our mind doesn't worry about all those things," says Ms. Shi. "This is a deep feeling for us. We do our work without disturbance and hope that we have the energy to stop it. Our job is to practice Buddhism and bring good merit and happiness to everyone."

When pressed, however, administrators acknowledge that because the violence has hurt the college's ability to recruit staff members, as well as students, standards are looser than they might like. Not every student who is admitted is academically qualified to do college-level work. Many have to do remedial English training before they can officially enroll in the bachelor's program.

"At the moment, their enthusiasm is greater than their capabilities," says Charles Willemsen, vice rector in charge of academic affairs and professor of Chinese. "There are too many courses and not enough qualified teachers."

Despite the insurgency, which has intensified and moved much closer to the campus in recent months, the college plans to expand. Construction workers are laying the foundation for a new residential building. The college hopes to double enrollment in the next few years. Administrators seem unfazed by the possibility of violence, or the fact that it is discouraging people from coming to their campus.

The International Buddhist College has never been about a business plan, says Ms. Bong, the liberal-arts dean. It is about achieving purity of mind, working toward enlightenment, and spreading the teachings of Buddha. For the students and faculty here, the success or failure of their college will be determined not by the insurgency, but by destiny.



wholly on the scriptures," says Bong Chui Lian, acting dean of the faculty of liberal arts. "It's not structured learning. When the master is free, they read the sutras together."

There is a growing recognition, however, that monks and nuns need a quality secular education, she says. An understanding of computers and technology is necessary to communicate traditional Buddhist teachings in the 21st century.

"No other is structured like ours," says Ms. Bong. "Ours is a modern liberal college with the application of the monastic code—a hybrid of modern and tradition."

Students here have the benefit of a 10,000-

Extracurricular activities here are limited. Since tending to the mind is the highest duty, nonacademic pursuits are mostly restricted to contemplation while weeding the garden or feeding the carp in the pond. The sole sporting venue—a ping-pong table—gets little use.

Many of the students here hope to become teachers. Being a monk and being a teacher are intertwined paths, they explain.

"Monks are supposed to be spiritual friends—teachers to others," says Venerable Zhen Chan, a master's-degree student from Malaysia, pausing after tossing bread crumbs to the fish. "Since I was young I wanted to

Female students live under far more restrictions than the men, but not because of fears for their safety. Venerable Dhammanandi, the women's warden, is more worried about their virtue. After whispers of fraternization, she recently banned all female students from leaving the campus unless on a field trip.

A similar decision elsewhere might send protests raining down on an administration. Here, the students grumbled among themselves but accepted it. The nuns consider themselves fortunate just to be at the college. Most women in monastic orders are rarely given this kind of educational opportunity.

"We are the lucky ones," says Shi Zhen