

"BOUN KHOUENG" MEAN

As the rains fall in Laos, they fall steadily; in some places they fall for months and months. The roads become muddy. It is not the season for travel, and it is time for Boun Khao Vatsa, "the coming of rain."

Boun Khao Vatsa has been existing for more than 2,500 years--since the birth of Buddha. It begins on the 8th day of the Buddhist calendar. On the first day of this festival, the Chao Khoueng (chief of the province) leads a procession around his town showing a piece of white and yellow cloth with candles so that the population will remember the occasion of the festival. At night, there is a procession of candles and flowers at every pagoda.

On this occasion, monks have to remain in their own temples out of respect for the 207 laws of the Buddhist order. If monks travel, they may tread on one of the insects, and to do this is to disobey Buddha's first command: "Thou shalt not kill." The monks are, therefore, advised to desist from travel. Moreover, three months ago also the planting season and the country folk believe that if monks do not do their newly-planted ricefields during this season, the harvest will be small.

During this three month period, the local followers, mainly of the older generation, have to spend their weekends (the 8th and the 15th days) at the temples and follow a special set of rules which include these eight:

1. Do not kill
2. Do not steal
3. Do not covet thy neighbor's wife.
4. Do not tell lies
5. Do not imbibe alcohol
6. Do not eat in the evening
7. Do not dress in colorful fashions. Do not throw anything harmful. Do not take interest in any form of amusement (music, theater, etc.)
8. Do not sleep on beds, e.g. try not to be comfortable.

On the first day of Khao Vatsa, the followers take white cloth to the monks as gifts so that they can use these as bathing clothes. This particular about the white cloth has a special meaning according to a legend...

Once upon a time, in a certain city on this special occasion, a princess named Visakha, after having taken the gifts to the temple, on her way home saw five hundred monks bathing naked in a river. Feeling sorry for them, the princess bought white cloth in order to give it to the monks so that they would have something to put on while bathing. The monks would still be bathing naked today if that princess had not given the white cloth to them.

Several times during the Vatsa period, a huge wooden drum will sound with muffled booms to summon the people to give food offerings to the keepers and teachers of their faith, the monks who strive for the great peace the Buddha promised.

The Khao Vatsa begins on July 13, lasts 3 months, and ends sometime in October in a ceremony called the Boun Ok Vatsa, or "the leaving of rain."

Boun Hokhaopadapdin

During this festival, all Lao people start to send food, clothing, drink to their father, mother, friends and cousins who have died. They take these things to the temples, or to their burial sites, the 'thats'.

On the 9th Buddhist month of the waning moon (August), the Lao living remember the spirits of their dead, spirits whom they feel roam the air unseen, yet to be reincarnated. While still alive, these dead lacked the industry to collect merit for their after-life by good deeds, and so, at death, as they await re-birth into a new form of life, they must be fed by the living. The human 'phi' is the one to be most wary of, especially if the person met death violently.

Especially for this occasion, people invite the monks to come to their places for meals and to pray so that they can have a better life for years to come.

Sources: Festivals of Laos by Jose Fuentesilla, Operation Brotherhood Publication Series, August, 1965.
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