

## The Mother of All Candle Processions

In the Theravada world, *Asala Puja* is the holiday that commemorates the Buddha's first sermon to his disciples, and also marks the beginning of the three-month period —*vassa*, the Pali word for “rains”— when the sangha is obligated to remain in their monasteries and focus on meditation, copying manuscripts, and teaching. As the days become shorter, and monsoonal skies further limit natural daylight, a practice has evolved for the donation of candles to facilitate reading and writing. Most temples include in Asala Puja the repeated circling of the main image hall by congregants bearing lit candles.

In Thailand particularly, the holiday's solemnity is furthered by the nationwide prohibition of alcohol sales throughout. Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand's ninth most populous city, is notable for having carried the Asala Puja candle tradition to a degree —while not necessarily excessive, in that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of robed monks participate, and general public sobriety clearly prevails— which is nevertheless extraordinary, even breath-taking!

In many of the temples, temporary workshops are erected for devotees to carve, erect, and rehabilitate elaborate mobile wax sculptures from the Buddhist and Brahmanic traditions: the largest such “floats” being 25m long by 5m high; constructed on tractor-drawn articulated trailers.

Over three days and nights, as many as thirty of these juggernauts —to mix cultural metaphors— parade through Ubon's downtown district, with hefty cash awards going to the awesomest in scale and detail. In July-August, 2016, we archived in several digital formats the Ubon International Wax and Candle Festival, including the main event parades and exhibitions, but also lead-up preps and the post-facto partial float demolition and wax peeling/recycling.

*Asalha: The Buddhist Rains Retreat... Usually [in North India] the rain begins sometime in June or July and continues until sometime in September or October. The incessant downpour didn't just make travel difficult for the Buddha and his monks. Small animals that come out in the rain —leeches, snails, worms, frogs— could be crushed underfoot. And occasionally monks traveling in the rains damaged newly planted rice paddies. To spare animals and crops, the Buddha established a rule that monks and nuns would not travel during the monsoon rains. Instead, they would dwell together and practice as a community. This practice proved to be beneficial, providing more time for teaching and guidance for younger disciples.*  
<http://buddhism.about.com/od/theravadabuddhism/fl/Vassa.htm>



*The Buddha's first sermon: Wat Hong Rattanaram, Thonburi, Thailand*



[http://www.traveltheworldaround.com/images/Thailand/Thailand\\_Festivals/Asalha-Puja-big.jpg](http://www.traveltheworldaround.com/images/Thailand/Thailand_Festivals/Asalha-Puja-big.jpg)



*Asalha Pujah: Vat Phan Tao, Chiang Mai (fisheye lens, time-lapse video).*



[www.lauramdavila.com/thailand](http://www.lauramdavila.com/thailand)



<http://www.shutterstock.com/video/clip-4443377-stock-footage-chiang-rai-thailand>



# Hindu gods, avatars, vehicles, devotées, and iconography in modern Buddhist Thailand: are the Jagganath Rath cars inspirational to the Ubon Ratchathani Wax and Candle Festival?

The Kingdom of Thailand effectively accepts Hindusim as its second national religion —or at least the object of popular worship— although only a small minority of the followers of the Vedic cults there are not ethnic Thais: most of whom would certainly consider themselves as Buddhists.



Indeed, the man-bird Garuda (*Krut* in Thai), the vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu, is in many variegated forms, the national emblem of Thailand.

<http://www.pattayaunlimited.com/why-is-thailands-national-emblem-hindu/>



National Emblem of Thailand, depicting a dancing Garuda with outstretched wings. The Garuda symbolizes the government and people of Thailand, as Lord Vishnu symbolizes the King of Thailand. (Garuda Emblem of Thailand: Royal Warrant.svg)



Jagganath Rath in Puri (Orissa/Odisha), India: left, the three essential cars; above, the great Puri Jagganath temple, (access only to Hindus); below, CVS video Ratha Yatra 2015



Garuda and Vishnu vehicle, Wat Thun Sri Muang ISKON (?) Jagganath Rath Yatra, Bangkok: most devotées in Indian dress! wax stripping underway (August 2016)



Left, ISKON Ratha Yatra, Kolkata; right, stereoscope image pair, Tanjore, 1903; below, Thai dance troupe Ubon Ratchathani wax + candle festival, 2014 (Richard Barrow Travel Blogger).



## Wax and Candle Festival, Ubon Ratchathani, Isaan (2016): final preparation of the floats

The great mobile wax sculptures here are at least partially rebuilt/re-created every year, usually on the armature used for the last year's wheeled vehicle. The pre-shaping of the armature may vary according to the materials entailed: e.g., if—as is often the case—the immediately underlying substrate is plaster, with most of the carved detail already determined and retained when the wax outer shell is stripped off for storage and recycling, “rehabbing” the sculpture annually may not require a tremendous degree of craftsmanship and artifice, nor major investment in additional new materials. Natural beeswax, rather than petroleum sourced waxes—which appears to still be preferred, possibly because of better color and workability, as well as Ubon historically being a wild-honey-producing center—is a relatively scarce and pricey commodity.

Also the outer layer of wax is evidently vulnerable to the high ambient temperatures; even during the intermittently cloudy monsoon: once the restored vehicles are moved out of the covered sheds erected at the larger wats to store them most of the year and are exposed to the full sun, the wax may soften, the carving details turning less sharp, and the aesthetic quality deteriorating. Some of the sculpture teams, which are in-fact in competition for prize money, prestige, and not-least merit-making, include members walking alongside equipped with hand-pump water sprayers to continuously cool down the outer wax skins during the hottest times of the day.

Worth considering also is that the élan, engagement and excitement of the wax and candle festival is contingent of mobilizing no small number of highly skilled and often quite gifted craftsmen, artisans, and floral decorators during the several weeks in advance of the Asalha Puja; many of whom will evidently be camped out at or near the monastery compounds.

Again, looking at possible similarities and contrasts between the Ubon spectacle and the *Jagganath Rath Yatra*, in India by tradition the Jagganath cars are constructed entirely from scratch, and from newly-sawn wood every year; and command of, and direct participation in the car-building enterprise is allocated by inheritance only to a few families. The amount of wood so consumed by these juggernauts is such that in Orissa/Odisha, orthodox Hindu forestry professionals are engaged to assure the resource sustainability of the religious practice. Maybe noteworthy too is that while very few people are entitled to work on Jagganath car construction, the completed holy vehicles are drawn through the streets by armies of men, quite literally, tethered to ropes: diesel tractors not allowed!



## Hitting the streets in all their raging glory

The Oriya variant of the sol-lunar Indian Hindu calendar (which includes leap weeks and leap months) and the Theravada Buddhist calendars don't necessarily correspond, with the *Jagganatha Ratha* determined by the "bright fortnight" and the *Asanha Puja* on the first full moon of the eighth month; corresponding in both cases with the arrival of the monsoon. In the Gregorian calendar for 2016, the Ratha Yatra in Puri, Orissa took place on 6th July and the Asanha Puja in Ubon on 18-20 July. (The 2016 Ratha Yatra in Bangkok and also in Phu Kewas 26 June).

The creation of the elaborate Ubon version of the puja evidently dates to the mid-1980s with the end, finally, of the Second Indochina War; with the political situation in Isaan stabilizing; and stemming possibly also from a vision of the Province's attraction of expanding tourism with its distinctive regional culture; with its improved domestic transport links; and maybe even with eventual international links to Lao itself and to Viet Nam (as has now partly proven the case).

Following the weeks of their reconstruction/rehabilitation (in most cases: although some floats were probably newly created this year), the vehicles emerged from their purpose-built shelters on the grounds of many larger temples in the city, and were towed or driven through city streets to Festival's focal venue, Thung Sri Muang Park, not far from the Mun River waterfront. They remained on static display the first day within and surrounding the park — which hosts the **City Pillar temple** and also an **iconic permanent monument** to Ubon as the nation's "candle and wax capital"; disconnected usually from their tractors— and on the second night, paraded under power in all their raging glory.

Once the festival closed, they were returned to their shelters, and in many/most cases immediately the work began there of stripping off the wax and storing it for re-use the coming year.



A lower profile aspect of the Asanha Puja spectacle is an international competition for artists and sculptors using beeswax as their media, with a candle motif central to most submissions. The winners then display their works outdoors in the courtyard of the Ubon Ratchathani National Museum (below).



Local officials open the events bearing the formal paraphernalia of the Royal City of the Lotus.