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PROSPECT HEIGHTS

## Even in Brooklyn, Signs of the Monsoon

By JAMES ANGELOS

THOUGH the moon was just a crescent and the monsoons were far away, Burmese Buddhists from around New York came last Sunday to the Universal Peace Buddha Temple complex, a four-story building on Bergen Street in Prospect Heights that is painted maroon like a monk's robe. They gathered to observe the full-moon day of Waso, a holy day during the monsoon season in their homeland.

Not everyone seemed sure of the real meaning of the celebration, but one clear authority was Sayadaw Ashin Indaka, the 67-year-old head monk, who explained Waso as he sat in a thronelike chair beside the tangled branches of a potted, sacred fig tree. The holiday, he said, marks the day of the Buddha's first sermon and the start of a monsoon season retreat, a time of contemplation during which monks do not travel.

"Here it's called summer, you know," the monk said with a laugh. Despite the seasonal differences, and although the festival was held over the July Fourth weekend rather than during the full moon later in the month, the temple monks still observe the retreat. "We have to respect the rules of the Buddha," he said.

As with any festival, much of the day was devoted to food. The monks ate fried rice and fried chicken while lay guests slurped a Burmese rice noodle soup called mohinga.

Contradicting the head monk's explanation, some participants said the festival marked the Buddha's birthday. That fallacy was supported by one 8-year-old, who, after breakfast, sat cross-legged on a maroon carpet, wearing a brown sash and a brown purse slung over her shoulder.

"It's Buddha's birthday every full moon," she said.

Her 11-year-old brother rebutted this theory for its obvious flaws. The young girl persisted.

"Yeah, but when it's a full, full, full, full moon," she argued.

Their mother, sitting nearby, offered her own idea about the day's significance.

"We see our own people, and speak our own language," she said. "That's why we come."

At the Waso ceremony itself, the monks sat cross-legged in front of a large gilt Buddha. Multicolored electric lights flashed from behind the statue, forming something of a psychedelic halo around the head. The monks began chanting, and scores of supplicants, kneeling on the carpet, chanted in unison.

The ritual lasted about an hour, during which some restless boys dressed in monks' robes amused themselves by building miniature tepees from envelopes used for donations to the temple.

After the ceremony, congregants offered the monks brightly colored boxes containing new monks' robes, a tradition intended to provide them with clothes to get through the monsoon season. And as if the heavens sought to accommodate the tradition, through the temple's windows, the sky darkened with the threat of rain.

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