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## The relationship of lotus to Thai lifestyle in terms of religion, arts and tradition

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**Sarayut Phonpho\***

Faculty of Agricultural Technology,  
King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Bangkok 10250 Thailand

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The objective of this study was to understand the relationship of lotus to Thai life style in terms of religion arts and tradition. The data were collected from primary data and secondary sources data and described analytically. Results show that the Thai's life style since the Sukhothai kingdom up to the present time is related to the lotus flowers. In Buddhism, lotus flower always remains as a symbol and represents innocence and sacredness in Thai culture. Besides this, the lotus is always depicted in Thai architectures, paints, sculptures, cultural traditions and various ceremonies as well as common decorations such as pots and containers. The lotus plant is being grown in ponds or in the pool all throughout Thailand.

**Keywords:** lotus, culture, arts, religion

### Introduction

Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*.) is a fascinating and beautiful flower. The lotus represents sacredness and power. All over Thailand, it grows in ponds, swamps, small canals, road side ditches, and in jars at homes and at Buddhist temples. The lotus is more than just a natural decoration. The lotus symbolize gorgeous flower that rises out of the mud of this world. It is also a symbol of purity and spontaneous divine birth. It is said to be the throne of Buddha (Gattuso, 2008).

The lotus is important in Thai religion and also plays a very important role in many aspects of the everyday life of the Thai people such as culture, arts and tradition (Kvunjai, 2003) It is useful in several other ways. The petals, roots, and stamens have medicinal values. They are also as ingredients of various prescribed by traditional herbalists. Almost every part of lotus flower is edible.

The history and relationship of lotus and Thai people started long time ago. It is interesting to understand this relationship. The objective of this

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\* Corresponding author: Sarayut Phonpho; email: [Kpsarayu@kmitl.ac.th](mailto:Kpsarayu@kmitl.ac.th)

research is to study the relationship of lotus to Thai life style in terms of religion, arts, and tradition from the Sukhothai period up to the present time.

## **Materials and methods**

The data used in this paper were collected from primary and secondary sources. The data were analyzed and described. Photographs were also gathered and the authors properly acknowledged.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Religion***

Buddhism had become the Thai religion at the time of Sukhothai, the first independent Thai kingdom which was founded in 1238. Subsequently, Sukhothai flourished as a centre of Buddhist scholarly works and reached its zenith during the reign of the fifth Sukhothai king, Lithai. In 1345, King Lithai authored a treatise on Buddhist cosmology entitled “Tribhumi Phra Ruang” which became an archetype for all subsequent works on arts and literature.

The Tribhumi can be described in three worlds: the world of love and suffering which included the human world, heaven and hell; the world of Brahma and the world of the formless Brahma. The treatise is concerned about the essence of man’s progress through gradations of reality to attain Nirvana, the aspiration of all Buddhist. The Traibhumi’s depictions of heaven and hell were so moving that one realized perfect bliss existed nowhere except in the total extinction of the self. This cosmology inspires toward perfection.

The Tribhumi’s religious teaching was complemented by the Jakata, or tales of the Buddha’s previous lives. The last life, Wessandon (Vessantara), in which the Buddha-to-be practiced the virtue of giving, made the deepest impression on the Thai people. It was probably first translated during the Sukhothai period. However, versions of this Jataka which are being recited today (called Mahajati) were written at the royal commands of the Ayudhyan King Boromtrailoknatha and Song Dhamma in 1472 and 1602 respectively.

Perities of PhraWessandon’s life was described in thirteen parts. When the Mahajati was preached continuously in one day, audiences were mentally purged of their sins and lusts. Particularly when PhraWessandon gave away his riches, wife and children, people had a sense of something refining itself into nothing. This was a taste of Nirvana realized in the artistic process.

It is due to such works of religious literature that literature has held primacy in Thai culture. Formerly, architects based their layouts of temples and palaces on descriptions of heaven, or better worlds, in the Traibhumi.

Continuing this tradition, Bangkok was constructed as the second Ayudhya by King Rama I with inspiration from poet's descriptions of Ayudhya before the riverine-island city fell to invading Burmese in 1767 (Temsiri, 1997).

### ***Lotus Flower representation in Buddhism***

The lotus represents the path of life as it emerges from the mud (samsara), grows clean and pure through the water (purification), and produces a beautiful flower (enlightenment). That the lotus flower can stand tall in the water can be attributed to the strength of the lotus stem a powerful analogy to the strength of one's beliefs in the Buddhist doctrine. The leaves of the lotus flower are resistant to water. Like water droplets that fall off the lotus leaf, the soul can be touched by material temptations but must remain untainted. According to Buddhist teachings, it is important that a person's existence be rooted in the world, in order to experience the reality of suffering thereby, need to do something about it. The blooming of the lotus flower is also symbolic. The flower, as a closed bloom, is like the human heart. When enlightened with the teaching s of the Buddha, it blossoms.

The lotus is one of the eight auspicious signs of Buddhism and Hinduism, and the eight-petaled lotus seen in Buddhist mandalas means cosmic harmony. (Mandalas are geometric patterns used as symbolic or metaphysical representations of the universe, the spiritual path; mandalas are often used as an object of focus to aid in meditation.) The eight petals of the white lotus correspond to the Noble Eightfold Path of the Good Law. This lotus is found at the heart of the Garbhadhatu Mandala, regarded as the womb or embryo of the world. The thousand-petaled lotus signifies spiritual illumination. In this case, each opening of the petal is the gradual unfolding of the consciousness on the path of enlightenment (Java, 2014).

The Eightfold Path is the means by which enlightenment may be realized. The historical Buddha first explained the Eightfold Path in his first sermon after his enlightenment, preserved in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. The Eightfold Path is composed of: 1) Right View, 2) Right Intention, 3) Right Speech, 4) Right Action, 5) Right Livelihood, 6) Right Effort, 7) Right Mindfulness and 8) Right Concentration. The Path is divided into three main sections: wisdom, ethical conduct and mental discipline.

**Wisdom:** Right View and Right Intention is the wisdom path. Right View is not about believing in doctrine, but in perceiving the true nature of ourselves and the world around us. Right Intention refers to the energy and commitment one needs to be fully engaged in Buddhist practice.

**Ethical Conduct:** Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood are the ethical conduct path. This calls us to take care in our speech, our actions, and our daily lives to do no harm to others and to cultivate wholesomeness in ourselves. This part of the path ties into the Precepts.

**Mental Discipline:** Through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration we develop the mental discipline to cut through delusion. Many schools of Buddhism encourage seekers to meditate to achieve clarity and focus of mind.

The Buddhists always give the lotuses to the monks or to the temple. They do it as a tradition. In fact, they can give any kind of flower to the monk. Monks are from various kinds of people with several of status. There are no classes or levels after ordination. Every monk respects each other. Buddha said that the monks were from many different places, so people can give them any kind of flowers.

Buddhist cosmology believes that the lotus flower was the very first creation of nature in the cosmic world. Five holy lotus flowers appeared at this time, prophesying the enlightenment of five Buddha in the human world. Of these, four were enlightened. The fifth is yet to come. The four are represented in Buddhist iconography by four lotus flowers; the fifth by a lotus bud, vibrant and filled with potential.

Buddha compared human as lotus in 4 positions. First is the under-the-mud lotus. That is, people who cannot understand anything, although the genius tries to teach them. Second is the under-the-water lotus. That is, people who must take time to understand something. Third is the lotus bud. That is people who can understand anything so fast, and they really need the teacher or the knowledge from anywhere. Forth is the full bloom. That is, people who are really bright. They can understand everything suddenly and exactly correct. Surely, the lotus that people can pick up from the water is the third or the forth. They think that monk must be bright people, because they are calm. When people are calm, they will understand everything well. This is the reason that Buddhists give monk the lotus (Eden, 2009).

### ***The origin of Buddhist Art in Thailand***

Thai traditional arts have numerous distinctive qualities which make them easily distinguishable from those of other neighboring countries in South-East Asia. Much of their inspiration and many of their features have been borrowed or adopted from other Asian sources, including the Indian, Mon-Khmer, Sinhalese, Chinese and other civilizations. Thai art mainly deals with Buddhist

religion and is known as Buddhist art, which formed the national ideal and conception of life. It is said that during the greater part of the kingdom's history, religious motifs predominated. Sculpture, metal casting, sacred architecture and the arts were employed for embellishing temples. They were for many centuries the principal modes of expression (Charuwan, 1981).

### ***Art of the Sukhothai Period***

Sukhothai period was the Golden Age of Thailand and the determining factors were national independence and religion. The culture and artistic activities with regard to Buddhist reached their zenith during this period. Buddhist art in the Sukhothai period is regarded as the most beautiful. Sukhothai is the name of the first historical powerful. Thai kingdom has capital which was of the same name Sukhothai or Sukhothai (literally meaning "Happiness of the Thais") (Dumrong, 1959). The Lankavong or Sinhalese Hinayana sect of Buddhism from Ceylon was first introduced in the Sukhothai kingdom. The strong influence of Sinhalese art was imbibed by the Thai artists of the Sukhothai period in their artistic production and workmanship. The archaeological objects, however, point to the existence of some Brahmanic deities also during this period.

In architecture, the original Sukhothai Chedi has three super imposed rectangular pedestals supporting and small and redented central part on the top of which is a finial in the form of a lotus-bud (called Phum-Khao-Bin in Thai language (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Chedis and stupas of Mahathat Temple, Sukhothai province, were decorated in the "Phum Khao Bin" style which is shaped like a lotus bud.

Photo by: Rudeerat (1997)

Such a Chedi exists at Wat Mahatat in the centre of the old town of Sukhothai and at Wat Chedi Chet Thaew (the seven rows of stupa) in the town of Sisatchanalai. The identification was suggested by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, a great Thai scholar, on the basis of the figure of an ancient

Chinese stupa indicates that this ancient Chinese stupa closely resembles in style the original Sukhothai Chedi. In other words, the Sukhothai stupa is an imitation or copy of ancient Chinese stupa, which was probably introduced by King Ramkhamhaeng, who in the course of his visits to China brought back with him the style of Chinese stupa along with the art of ceramic ware and its Chinese style to his empire. The original style of the stupa, first imitated from an original Chinese source, was later perfected by Siamese artists.

**Sculpture:** The Sukhothai sculpture is closely linked with the Dvaravati, which derived its model from the Gupta art of India as well as the influence of Dvaravati shadow art. The conception of Sukhothai sculpture represents the image of the Buddha after his Enlightenment. The body of the Buddha is in complete rest, the muscles are relaxed and the face is serene with a faint smile reflecting a state of deep inward contentment. After his Enlightenment, the Buddha belonged more to the sphere of Nirvana than to the Earth and therefore, the Thai artists conceived the image in which this ethereal quality is perfectly realized (Silpa, 1968). The Buddha is usually seated in a folded-leg fashion (samadhi Rob in Thai) in the posture of subduing Mara (Mara Vijaya Mudra). The pedestal is in concave shape. There are two types of pedestal which are plain pedestal and with few lotus petal pedestals. The pedestal of Buddha image in Chiengsaen and Pra Puttha Chinarat are composed of few lotus petals pedestal (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Lotus petal pedestal of Pra Puttha Chinarat in WatPra Sri Ratana Mahatat in the Pitsanulok province of Thailand. Photo by: Rudeerat (1997)

**Mural Paintings:** The style of paintings in this period was two dimensional arts, in contrast to the three dimensions of Western paintings. Much of its beauty depended on the expressiveness of the line. Mural paintings are at the ceiling of a narrow stairway at Wat Sri Chum, Sukhothai. There are several stone slabs incised with Jataka scenes and identifying inscriptions in the

Sukhothai script. These mural paintings show the influence of the Indian style in the form of Indian zed figures. The linear style and the detailed representation of jewelry and ornaments leads one to believe that they were derived from illuminated manuscripts brought by the Sinhalese monks, who had settled down at Sukhothai (Fig.3).



**Fig. 3.** Stone-Slab-Engraving: This drawing on slate is from the Sukhothai period from an unknown artist at Wat Sri Jum, Sukhothai Province. Photo by: Rudeerat (1997)

**Art of the Ayudhya Period:** The art of Ayudhya in this last period covered the reign of King Boromakot in 1732 A.D. down to the end of the Ayudhya Kingdom at the hands of the Burmese in 1767 A.D. The Buddhist art of the Late Ayudhya period, though covering the period of only 35 to 40 years, witnessed the new surge of evolution of real Ayudhya art.

**Architecture:** Architecture of the bot and vihara of the Late Ayudhya period was very interesting. Their architectural features usually have a curved basement and roofs. They also use the brick pillars in the inner part of the structure. The capitals of those brick pillars are in the form of lotus buds, which are probably derived from the Sukhothai style. Some of the Ayudhya's capital pillars, however, are in the form of a stylized blooming lotus that points toward the Bangkok style of a later time (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Capital pillars in the form of lotus buds in Viharn Noi in Maha that temple, Ayudhya. Photo by: Rudeerat (1997)

Sculpture: The outstanding sculpture of this period was the production of Buddha Images with the most peculiar characteristics. They were the crowned or decorated Buddha images, called Pra Song Khrueng in Thai. The Crowned Buddha Images were very popular during this period. They are either profusely decorated (called in Thai Pra Song Khrueng Yai) (Fig. 5) or they were adorned with only a diadem and ear-rings called Song Khrueng Noi. In the latter type, lateral protrusions of diadem above the ears mark the main characteristic (Fig. 6). There are very few of lotus petal pedestal of both Crowned Buddha Images.



**Fig. 5.** The Crowned Buddha Image: “Song Khrueng Yai” Sculpture of the Fourth or Late Period of Ayudhya Art. Photo by: Charuwan (1981)



**Fig. 6.** The Crowned Buddha-Image, Song Khrueng Noi Sculpture of the Late or Fourth Period of Ayudhya Art Photo by: Charuwan (1981)

Mural Paintings: The characteristics of figures were rather stiff and heavy, and the colors used were black, white and red with only a few spots covered in gold. The color of painting, according to artist, belongs to the family of monochrome color or single color which was used in the first and second period of Ayudhya art in the composition of figures. One of the best examples



of mural painting in Early Ayudhya period is the mural painting in the crypt of the main Prang of Wat Ratburana in Ayudhya built in 1424 A.D. The mural paintings from the crypt in the Prang of this monastery show the new stage in the evolution of Siamese painting, because for the first time the artist painted the figure on the Fresco surface, which looks fresh and bright (Fig. 7). The style of the use of monochrome composition and sketching of outline in the form of independent work is not to imitate an old mural example. An old mural example usually represented the repeated figure in narrative story of the parallel line.

### ***Art of the Bangkok Period or Ratanakosin Period***

The Ratanakosin art of present Bangkok is from the time of the foundation of Bangkok as the capital of Thailand by King Rama Tibodi I. Regarding the style and essence of artistic inspiration and workmanship of the Bangkok Period, the scholars believe that the brief art in Dhonburi period of 15 years and the reign of the first three Chakri kings of the Bangkok period can be considered as a continuation of traditions established centuries earlier in Ayudhya or Sukhothai (Lyons, 1967). The second phase of Bangkok art begins in the middle of 19th century A.D. under the leadership of King Mongkut or Rama IV. In the field of arts during this period many changes were introduced which gradually led to the modern and international style of the present day architects, sculptors and painters.

Architecture: Bangkok religious architecture can be characterized as follows: the Prang and redented Chedi were quite popular during the first reigns (1782–1851). The architectural features of Pra Prang in the first three reigns of the Chakri kings were the body of Prang built on the lotus-basement and lion-basement, the body of structure attached with the four porches facing in four directions. Important example is the Prang at Wat Arun or the Temple of Dawn which was begun in the reign of King Rama II, but was completed in the reign of King Rama III (Fig. 8).



**Fig. 7.** Assembly of angels: Fresco in the crypt inside the big Pra Prang of Wat Ratburana, Ayudhya, Ayudhya Period. Photo by: Charuwan (1981)



**Fig. 8.** The Pra Prang at Wat Arun or the Temple of Dawn Architecture of the Bangkok Period.  
Photo by: Wat Arun Ratchaworamahawihan (2014)

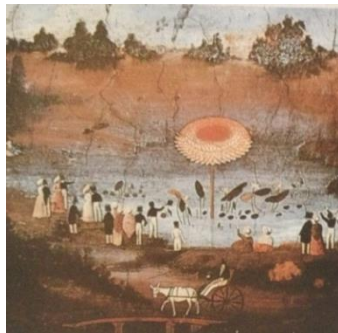
**Sculpture:** Sculpture during this period represents a very interesting feature. During the days of King Rama I, few Buddha statues were made. Instead, he commanded that about 1,200 bronze Buddha Images from war devastated areas in central and northern Thailand be brought to Bangkok. These images were then restored and distributed to many Buddhist monasteries in and around Bangkok; some became the principal Buddha Images in the Ubosath and Vihara, some were installed in galleries. Most of them belong to the Sukhothai, U-Tong and Ayudhya styles. From the reign of King Rama VI onwards the Buddha images were more and more humanized though they still kept some important characteristics such as the flame-like halo on the skull-protuberance, the ushnisha, long ear-lobes and the monastic dress. There are very few of lotus petal pedestal of Buddha Images. The best example is the large Standing Buddha Image created in 1957 A.D. by Professor Silpa Bhirasri, an Italian man, one of the greatest contemporary Thai artists, in order to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism (Fig. 9).

**Mural Painting;** in the reign of King Rama IV the western painting had their effect on Thai artists. Examples can be seen in the mural painting in the Ubosoth of Wat Bowornniwet where there are figures of Europeans as well as western perspective and technique. The most famous painter in this reign was Khroa-In-Khong (Fig. 10).

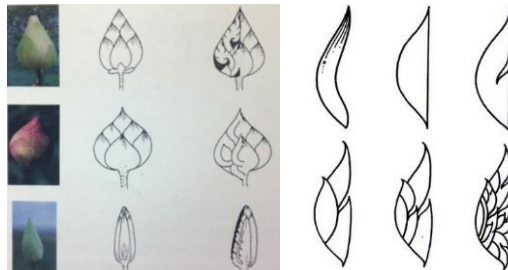
Thai ancient art work culture of lotus; Thai Art was born from the national object, and develops to standard pattern. Lotus in many generations is adapted to the pattern in Thai ancient. This is basic of lotus in Thai art (Fig. 11).



**Fig. 9.** Standing Buddha Image, Sculpture of Late Bangkok Period (20th Century A.D.)  
Photo by: Charuwan (1981)



**Fig. 10.** Lotus painting in the Ubosoth of Wat Bowornniwet, The painter was Khroa-In-Khong.  
Photo by: Kanita (1992)



**Fig. 11.** Lotus Lai Thai is stem from real lotus figure. Photo by: Rudeerat (1997)

### ***Traditional and Culture***

The art of the wai: For Thais, the wai is everything. It's a beautiful way to greet people, to say thank you or goodbye. To wai, place the palms of your hands together and hold them close to and in front of your chest. Then slowly lower your head. There is a saying that making a wai is like making the shape of a lotus bud. The lotus is the most important symbol for Buddhists (Rungtip, 2014). There are three basics of wai. (Fig.12a-c)

1. This wai is used by an older or superior people in response to the wai of someone younger or of lower status. It is also used by people of the same age or social status when they wai each other.

2. This wai is used towards an older or superior person. For example, a student will wai this way to a teacher, or a child to his or her grandmother.

3. The last type of wai is used for showing respect to a monk or a Buddha image, whether you are standing or sitting. You may also see Thais waiing monks by half-lying down, placing the hands on the floor in a wai, then lowering their head to their hands.



12a



12b



12c

**Fig.12.** The three basics of wai.

Loy Krathong; Loy Krathong in Thailand originated in Sukhothai period. The twelfth month was marked by the royal Chong Priang and Loy Phra Pratip. Chong Priang means blessing the candle used to light the lantern which will be hoisted to the top of the post as homage to the Lord Buddha, Phra Chulamani and Phra Buddha Bat. This ceremony was influenced by the Brahman practice of worshipping the three Hindu gods of Brahma, Siva and Vishnu. Since the king was Buddhist, the concept was changed to pay homage to the three Buddhist objects of reverence instead (Sujit, 1999). It is a festival of Thai people. After that, Noppamas the most favorite concubine of the Sukhothai king created krathong, a lotus-shaped figure for floating in the river instead of floating lantern. Thai people still keep form suitably; on the full moon of the twelfth, people usually prepare natural materials to make krathong. For example, they use banana trunk and lotus to make beautiful krathong then stick candle, incense stick, and flowers in krathong (Fig. 13). They always ask for good luck in the future and forgiveness Pra Mae Khongkha. At the temples and tourist places, they held contests of making krathong and Noppamas beauty pageants. There are many entertainment shows at night. Moreover, they set cautiously fireworks. The materials, used for making krathong, could be easily decomposed.



**Fig. 13.** Krathong Photo by: Kesinee (2011)

**Rab Bua : The Lotus Throwing Festival;** The Lotus Throwing Festival's roots are thought to have been sewn by the Mon people who settled in Samut Prakan province, just south of Bangkok, after fleeing their war-torn homeland in what's now southern Burma during the 1700s. In the old days, Bang Phli residents received festival-goers by offering them the freshly picked lotuses that thrived in the area. Rab means "to receive", though the festival has also become known as Yon Bua, or "Throw Lotus", for obvious reasons. In front of Wat Bang Phli Yai Nai along the Samrong Canal in Bang Phli district, the festival still takes place each year. Rab Bua coincides with Awk Phansa (literally: "Out of the Rains"), a Thai holiday marking the time when monks are free to travel again after spending the monsoon months in study and meditation. Wat Bang Phli Ya iNai houses Luang Phor Toh, a sacred Buddha image that is said to have miraculously floated down the Chao Phraya river centuries ago. During the festival, a replica of the image is taken for a morning cruise along the canal, symbolizing the re-emergence of the monastic community after the rains. Three days of festivities includes folk theatre, beauty contests, a boat decorating competition, boat racing and a row boat tug-of-war among other activities. The main event is an elaborate floating procession that gets under way early-by 07:00 -on the final day and features intricately decorated wooden boats rowed by local people in traditional Thai costumes. Thick crowds throw lotuses at all of the boats, but everyone makes sure to have a handful ready as the one carrying Luang Phor Toh gets close. As the golden Buddha approaches, the faithful pause to hold lotuses up to their foreheads while making a wish or prayer (Fig 14). It's believed that if your lotus lands on Luang Phor Toh's lap, your wish are bound to come true. Any direct hit means good luck is on the way.



**Fig. 14.** Thick crowds throw lotuses at all of the boats.  
Photo by; Stamboulis (2013)

Lotus for decoration: The lotus plays a very important role in many aspect of the everyday life of Thai people and is held sacred because of it close association with Buddhism. Since Sukhothai period to present, lotus were grown for paying homage to Buddha and natural decoration. At present time, there are many styles of containers and ponds for lotus growing. The styles of the containers and ponds will be chosen to popper the styles of the gardens and to keep it within the desired area (Fig. 14). Lotus is not only used for garden decoration but also used for flower arrangement for many ceremonies.

## **Discussion**

Buddhist art related to lotus in Thailand was a composite art. The various influences of the art forms of different nations were imbibed by the Thai artists into their own artistic work. The Thai artists never lost the individuality and sense of national integrity in their works of art, clearly indicating the real independent character and artistic workmanship of the Thai people all through the ages (Charuwan, 1981). The Thai artists introduced new elements of art side by side with the adaptation of the old style, which makes Thai art one of the most interesting Buddhist arts of south-East Asia or of Eastern art generally.

## **Conclusion**

Buddhism had become the Thai religion by the time Sukhothai, the first independent Thai kingdom, since the king was Buddhist. The lotus occupies a very special place in Thai life because Thailand is a Buddhist country and the lotus is the traditional flower of Buddhism. Legend has it that the Lord Buddha was able to walk on his birth, and that when he took his first seven steps in this mortal world, lotus blooms opened up from underneath to support the tender soles of his feet.

However, Buddhism may be the one religion that has truly popularized the lotus flower. As Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia and China in the early centuries A.D., lotus flowers were increasingly used to represent the Buddha arts. In the architecture of Buddhist pagodas, lotus flowers are frequently depicted with petals turned both up and down. In Buddhist iconography, the Buddha is often depicted as sitting cross-legged on a lotus seat, or occasionally, standing on a lotus pedestal. Beside all this the Lotus is also associated as a part of Thai's architectures, mural paints, sculptures, cultural traditions, and variety of ceremonies including the decoration the place by planting in containers, grown in ponds or in the pool.

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