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Local Asian Buddhists putting down roots with help from 'traveling monk'

LAURA STETSER Jan 26, 2012



EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP – The local Asian Buddhist community was busy preparing this week for one of its largest celebrations, the Lunar New Year.

The smell of vegetarian dishes wafted through the home of Phuong Nguyen's house on Tuesday morning in the Cardiff section of the township.

"We do all of our cooking and cleaning before the new year," Nguyen said. "Then on the new year, we don't cook or clean. We spend time with family and friends."

A native of Vietnam, Nguyen has been hosting Rev. Thich Hang Dat, an abbot of two Buddhist centers in Indiana and Kentucky, who is working with the community to find a location for a Buddhist temple in the township.

Dat, who describes himself as a "traveling monk," has been offering prayer services and special gatherings for the followers of the faith. He said this week he is in the final stages of securing land in the township for a future temple.

"We still will need the support of the community to build it," he said, noting good will as well as financial support will be required.

Until the temple can be built, Nguyen has been hosting the services in her home. Some special events such as this Friday's new year celebration are held at the Lion's Blind Center located at 100 Crestview Ave., Absecon.

The religious celebrations of Buddhists are deeply interwoven with Asian culture, Dat said.

"You cannot separate the two. It's a time to come together. For children it is a time to understand their Asian roots," he said. "It gives them the best of their culture and tradition. It is so important to assimilate, but also to have identity."

The celebration includes a traditional dragon dance, performances and sharing of vegetarian dishes, he said. Children also receive red envelopes from relatives containing cash.

New year celebrations observed in the United States are abbreviated compared with those in the native countries, Nguyen said.

“Back in Vietnam when I was a child, we would get the whole week off from school,” she said. “The whole country would take three days off of work to celebrate.”

Dat explained that marking the new year is focused on the act of forgiveness and renewal so followers can enter the next year with a clear mind.

Buddhists prepare for the new year by cleaning their houses, taking additional showers, purchasing and wearing new clothes. “We go shopping for the new year,” Nguyen said with a smile.

Dat sent a letter out to his community and others inviting them to the event.

“This is the year of the dragon, a creature of myth and legend that represents an emperor and power,” he wrote. “It is also the ultimate auspicious symbol signifying success and happiness.”

The symbol indicates it is a good year for positive physical, material and spiritual changes.

Dat is the current president of the Buddhist Charities in Louisville, Ky., the Ten Thousand Buddhas Summit Monastery in Corydon, Ind., and the Pure Buddha Temple in Dacula, Ga. and is frequently published in articles on Buddhist matters. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of the

West in Rosemead, Calif. He teaches Buddhism and Meditation at University of Southern Indiana, Bellarmine University, Indiana University of Southeast, and University of Louisville. His website is www.thichhangdat.com.

For information on the weekly services or the new year celebration, call (609)741-8289.

IF YOU GO

Open to the public

2012 Lunar New Year Celebration

Friday, Jan. 27

6-9 p.m.

Lion's Blind Center

100 Crestview Ave., Absecon

(609) 741-8289