

Plumaria flowers and Buddhism

by Margaret Elizabeth Johnston ND

The Plumaria or Frangipani flower has many diverse meanings in many cultures. I first came across this beautiful flower when living in Hawaii and as I am now, 25 years later, moving to Laos and have spent much time in Thailand, it has once again resurfaced in my life. It must be a magical flower for I was only contemplating doing a painting of this flower when I learned that it is one of the main flowers that hold devotional value among Buddhists and I have also felt drawn to paint Buddhist temples with flowers weaving around deities and growing through the cracks! A lot of the plants I portray with my watercolours are of medicinal value and needless to say I was very surprised to find that the Plumaria holds this quality also so how could I resist painting this flower in combination with a Buddha!

There are separate species of Plumaria and it is mostly the different shaped leaves that makes them definable, some with narrow and corrugates leaves and others with elongated glossy dark green leaves. Some retain leaves throughout the winter and others are evergreen. I won't go on about deciphering the different species for there are also over 300 different types of varieties! One of the more interesting facts is that the flowers are so fragrant they are pollinated at night by the sphinx moth strictly due to their overpowering scent, which is strongest after the sun goes down. The nectar that these moths are looking for doesn't exist but the pollen gets from one flower to another via the moth's legs and body. The Plumaria is also related to the oleander, Nerium oleander, and both have an irritant, a sap that can be harmful to the eyes and skin so please use care when snipping off stems and flowers.

In Thailand, there has been much misunderstanding about this flower that has lead it from being a flower people wanted to avoid to being one that is desired and thought of as protection. The old name is "dook-lan-tom" which sounds similar to "ra-tom" which means gloomy, sad and depressed. However, as linguists have studied the name it surfaces that "lan" means "finish" or "abandon" and "tom" is from "ra-tom" which I mentioned means "gloomy, sad and depressed" so in actuality, "lan-tom" means "to abandon the sadness". Nowadays, the Thai use the name "lii-laa-wa-dii" In other cultures the Plumaria represents charm, grace, new life, beginnings, beauty and spring. Particularly in the Buddhist religion the Plumaria symbolises immortality and is considered sacred. They are planted outside every Buddhist temple and with the constant blooms there is everlasting life being represented on this beautiful tree and scent of the flower.

The Plumaria is the official symbol of Laos and is called "Dok Champa" or "Shampa". The flowers come in white, yellow, red, orange and combinations of these and represent sincerity and joy. This was another amazing coincidence for me with this flower for I have been keeping my eye on a particular botanical garden that is having its grand opening this coming November/December 2016. The garden's name is Pha-Tad-Ke and is located on the Mekong River in Luang Prabang. Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and was originally colonised by the French so there are a lot of old French colonial buildings in combination with Buddhist temples so the architecture alone is a reason to visit. The





been used as an aphrodisiac for centuries. The essential oil is made from the flowers and has been also used medicinally.

There are a number of compounds as an antibiotic, namely Triterprenoid Amirin, Lupeol and Fulvoplumierin. These substances are fever lowering, helps to overcome inflammation and pain relieving. As a massage ointment, using essential oil of Plumaria in a carrier oil like grapeseed or almond oil can be very calming and soothing to a client or spouse, and also can be of use as an arousal in combination with Ylang-Ylang and Gardenia! I began a 13 year massage therapist career in the Hawaiian Islands and this flower has been a major part of my life there and now with the beautiful meaning in Asia like Thailand and Laos I feel blessed to be going "home".

As most of you expats know, sometimes when we move to new homes and learn new cultures, it is always interesting to see how sometimes our past life has led the way forward. I hope you enjoy my new style of painting with the Buddha in the background and will be working on more images like these along with continually enjoying the expat lifestyle in our beautiful world that is ours to savour! Hope to see you at the Pha-Tad-Ke and please don't hesitate to email me if you would like a personal tour along with some of the Laos staff! mej@mejcreations.com

Pha-Tad-Ke is forming a regional research centre that will provide opportunities with international botanical institutes and is being developed with educational programmes for all age groups. Plant reintroduction, horticulture, ethnobotany, medicinal plants, addressing critical problems from management of local resources to conserving biodiversity are just some of the topics the garden is focusing on. There will be publications, outreach, dedicated scientists and more than 30 Lao staff to offer a beautiful landscape for visitors so keep your touring ideas focused on this place for a next travel holiday! There is lots to see in Luang Prabang and it is just a short flight away! I plan to be there for the grand opening and staying on studying and portraying the medicinal plants of Asia for a year or more so there shall be some more articles from me in Expat Life in Thailand!

I mentioned before my association with this flower in Hawaii, the island women indicate their relationship status over the right ear meaning "available" and over the left ear meaning "taken". The name in Hawaiian is "melia". Leis are also made with this flower as a way of welcoming people new to the islands, welcoming them home or for celebrations. I have also found the name Temple Tree which coincides with the Buddhist beliefs and offerings. One may look upon this flower as a new beginning or birth, everlasting life and growth. The essence of the Plumaria is intoxicating and has



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Living in Thailand for the better part of 2015 she is happy to be living back in Asia after a stint in the USA to dedicate

some time to the Pha-Tad-Ke and to continue with the study of Asian medicinal plants. Her journey can be followed on www.mejcreations.com