

*Soul*   

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*Connections*

## **MONKS, MOSQUITOS AND MOBILES**

### **A volunteer's tale**

**'Look!' exclaimed the saffron robed young man, pointing to his hand held camera mobile phone. From where I was sitting in the pick up truck with Maha Suphachai the abbot, I had a good view of the four monks crowded into the back. I thought monks were meant to give up all such worldly things but I smiled as he took my picture and proudly showed it to me.**

A GSC volunteer, I was in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, a town some 80 miles west of Bangkok. Built around the river Kwae, Kanchanaburi is set amidst lush vegetation and densely wooded hills. The home of the JEATH War museum, Kanchanaburi attracts tourists eager to view the infamous 'Death Railway' built by prisoners of WW2 and immortalised by the film 'Bridge over the River Kwai'. Though I paid a visit to the to the railway and War museum, tourism was not the purpose of my visit. I had been engaged as a volunteer to teach English to monks at one of the many Wats (monasteries) dotted all over Thailand. During my four-week stay I lived with a local Thai family, ensuring total immersion in the culture and customs of Thailand. My host mother Somsung spoke fairly good English since she taught it at the local school so communication was good enough, though her two sons spoke none. However, we got along well and lived harmoniously together with their tiny dog 'CD' in a modern (by Thai standards) ramshackle house in a leafy suburb of Kanchanaburi.

My first morning I woke early (7am) and after a cold shower (you get used to that, it's a welcome relief from the relentless heat) was offered a breakfast of rice and pork dumpling soup (Thais eat rice three times a day at least) which I declined in favour of a fresh mango from the garden and a mug of hot water. Then it was off to the Wat some 45 minutes away. We piled into the car with me clutching my bag of goodies, teaching aids, water and most importantly my mosquito repellent! Somsung would carry on to the school and I would meet her there at noon after having taught the monks for a couple of hours. Some afternoons I taught at the school also, a task I found less stimulating than the monk teaching, probably because of the relentless heat, humidity, and the ever-present mosquitoes who defied all repellents in their pursuit of me!

When I arrived, Suphachai was waiting patiently in his study, and after announcing the class on his loudspeaker to the monks spread around the grounds of the Wat and gathering a few dozen copybooks, he led me along to the open-air school (hence the prevalence of



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mosquitoes who, judging by their numbers seemed to enjoy English!). Soon about 20 saffron clad monks ranging in age from about ten years to middle age were all seated in front of me.

Not being a teacher and having no curriculum or plan, I found the teaching daunting at first. Then I relaxed and just taught simple things like days of the week, greetings and so on. I gave them all an English name and there was much laughter and amusement as I did the roll call each day. I found the monks warm, humorous and very willing to learn from the 'falang' (Thai for foreigner) who had come from Ireland to teach them. And learn. I learnt a lot about Thailand, about its people and its customs, and most of all about Buddhism. This is why I had come. To be so close to and made part of the Buddhist rituals and life, was for me, probably the highlight of my trip. And it was not simply the monks from whom I learnt. Living with the people I learnt how their religion is not just a formality, it is a way of living, it permeates the way they relate to each other and themselves. The Buddhist principles are strong here, Karma is something all Thais are not only aware of but live by. The knowledge that every action brings with it an equal reaction perhaps in the next life is something Thais take to heart. 'If we have sinned, we cannot have these washed away by a priest as in your religion' explained Suphachai. This means each individual has responsibility for his or her own spiritual health. I think this is something we Westerners can learn from. Additionally, there seems to be a community spirit many say we have lost in the West. This community spirit and sense appears to be inherent to Buddhism I noted, as I joined in the many festivals and celebrations during the month of August.

I showed them maps of Ireland and they were amazed that it rarely snowed but nonetheless it could be cold. They asked about religion and wondered if we believed in reincarnation. During my time there I was taken by Suphachai who liked to keep me near him so as to practice his English, to many Buddhist rituals such as ordinations and funerals. These rituals are steeped in symbolism, which appealed to my Jungian mind. Most rituals involve threes; turning three times around the Buddha, the temple or the funeral pyre whilst unravelling a white thread for example. This symbolised the line of life and three cycles birth, death and karma (rebirth).

One day Suphachai asked me to meet him at a local roadside restaurant of which there are many in Thailand. Thais love to cook and are excellent at it. Of course, not being allowed too much proximity to a woman, he sat as usual, at a different table. Even during class times, since it is forbidden for a monk to touch or be touched by a woman, copy books and such like that passed between myself and my students had to be placed on a nearby table. This was something I also got used to though I found it rather silly to be so obsequious to a ten-year-old boy even if he was a monk! Especially since I learnt too that



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almost all Thai males at some stage in their lives enter a monastery, usually for a period of study and Buddhist immersion. This stay can be brief or extended. It is again, part of the culture and though females I was told also can become nuns for a time, this is not viewed with the same reverence or importance. A hangover from the Lord Buddha's time?

But back to the roadside restaurant. After lunch, Suphachai took me to the monks College (the seminary) in Kanchanaburi where he taught. Standing in front of a large room with fifty odd monks of all ages, he introduced me, gave me a microphone and asked me to talk about my country, my religious and moral views, and myself. There followed a most interesting question and answer session between these learned monks and myself: about reincarnation, about karma, about life and about love. They asked questions about my work (psychotherapy) and wondered what I thought were the reasons for human suffering. I told them I had lost two babies in pregnancy and asked them where they thought these little souls were and why a baby chooses to come for such a short time. They asked me if I believed in the principles of karma and decided after one hour of discussion that I had many Buddhist ideas. Their warm invitation for me to return and join them ended with a ten-minute blessing in the form of chanting which I found very moving. I sat quietly with my hands together in a 'Wai' (traditional Thai greeting) and received their blessing. I left the college and later Thailand, full of gratitude, love and felt truly blessed. I also felt I had made a contribution, whatever that was.

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