

### BUS TRANSPORTATION IN THAILAND

Due to the impact of my lectures at Mahachulalongkorn University, at both the Khan Koen campus and the Roi Et campus, I was invited to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Buddhism, held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. Out of delegates from over sixty countries, there were only six Americans in attendance. I was greatly honored to be one of those six.

Getting to Bangkok is not easy. I got a ride from the village where I am living to the city of Maha Sarakham, and from there took an overnight bus ride to Bangkok. On this eight hour journey, there was no bathroom on the bus and only one scheduled stop for a bathroom break. I cannot for the life of me figure out how Thai people can go for such long times without going to the bathroom, but this pattern is common on Thai buses. How parents can travel with small children, whose small bladders require more frequent urination, or how elderly or disabled people who are in the same situation can wait this long, I cannot understand. Yet, on buses crammed to the hilt with Thai people, they make such journeys every day without any complaint from Thai people.

### DISABLED PEOPLE IN THAILAND

I do not think Thailand is an easy place for disabled people to live, with the long bus rides, terrible sidewalks, and lots of steps to climb up and down. Whenever I make a complaint about this, Thai people invariably respond "This is Thailand, not America." As if that is an answer as to why Thailand should not be just as considerate of its disabled people as America is. This is one thing I am proud about the United States; and that is since the 1980s Americans have made many adjustments to make life easier for disabled people. All of us will at some point in our life become disabled, unless we die quickly while young, so this change is ultimately in all of our self-interest. I hope the next generation of Thai people will make this change that Americans made in the last generation.

This bus was the most crowded bus I have ever been on. It was two stories, and after each person took their seat a folding seat was opened in the aisle for a person to sit in the aisle. Every square inch of space was utilized. Though this is good for saving gas and energy, I think it is very unsafe. If there were a fire on the bus, it would be impossible for people to exit the bus quickly.

### THAI ATTITUDES TOWARD AMERICA

What is most notable is my role as an American. At one point on the trip, in the middle of the hot afternoon, the bus engine suddenly stopped. The driver tried again and again to get it to crank up, but without success. The bus was fortunately on the lane next to the curb, but there was no way to move it off of the busy street with lots of traffic. With no engine, there was no air conditioning. The bus rapidly heated up. It was sweltering. People were uncomfortable, but no one moved or said anything. At last I could stand the heat no more, and I stood up and in a loud voice said "Ba Ba" [Let's go!] People looked

surprised when I said this, but with me standing and motioning for people to get out of the bus, they started exiting. I kept motioning for people to get up and move out, which they did, following my direction. Then one of the aisle folding seats got stuck, and people could not exit easily. Each person had to laboriously climb over the open seat. When I got to it, instead of just stepping over like each of them did, I tried to get the stuck seat to open. At first I could not get it to budge, but after trying a bit I got it to open. I heard people behind me saying how resourceful farang are. They said this about me in an admiring way, and afterward several people smiled at me in appreciation.

What is interesting is that the Thai people were appreciative that I had initiated this movement to get out of the hot bus, but they themselves were not prepared to take this initiative. After we were outside, and several people expressed their appreciation to me, I asked each one of them why they themselves did not do what I did. Each person gave the same response “Oh, I am shy.” As we talked it became obvious that what they meant by this is that they did not want to stand out as a potential troublemaker. I said that, as an American, Americans don’t mind being the troublemaker, that we protest loudly when something is not right. Thai people admire this about Americans, but cannot bring themselves to act like that.

Thai people admire Americans. When I ask why they say things like “America Number One” and “America rich.” They admire American material success and wealth. I point out that there are many poor people in America, and they acknowledge that but still like America. The thing they like most is American movies “Hollywood” and music. I do not think most U.S. diplomats realize the extent to which American popular music and movies create a favorable image of America in the world. If we would stop our military blundering, and use our musicians and celebrities as goodwill diplomats, America’s reputation in the world would improve a hundred percent.

The United States government should establish a program for American pop music groups and movie stars to travel to other countries and give concerts paid for by the government. This idea is what the government now does with academics. U.S. Senator William Fulbright wisely sponsored a program to take American professors to virtually every nation in the world, and let them teach their subject in local universities. This aptly named “Fulbright Scholar” program is in my opinion one of the most important means of exerting American influence in the world today. When I was fortunate enough to win a Fulbright Award, and was paid by the American government to teach American history in Indonesia in 1987-88, I know I had a huge positive impact on my students. Professors in Indonesia are paid very little, and as a consequence academics does not attract the best people. Most professors have to take other jobs besides teaching, or they teach at several universities, thus having little time to devote to their students. And, I learned when I was there, that Indonesian professors tend to be very haughty toward their students. When I came there, I told my students that I was there to serve them, and that I was their servant. That shocked them, because they had never heard a teacher talk like that, and especially a professor in a high position like I was in.

For a year and three months I lived in Yogyakarta, a college town in central Java, and taught at Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia's oldest and largest institution of higher learning. I was very happy there, and it was one of the happiest years of my life. Javanese culture emphasizes taking a relaxed and carefree approach to life, avoiding stress and strife. I adopted this lifestyle, while also feeling that I was doing something of importance in teaching the next generation of Indonesia's leaders.

In my graduate seminar on American History I was prepared to focus on the modern period because I thought students would want to know about America today. But to my surprise the students were most interested in the early national period. They wanted to know how America was able to form its new government and get the country started on an era of growth and political stability. They especially liked the "Era of Good Feelings" in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and wanted to use that as a model for how to develop Indonesia in its early nation-building period.

When I gave some speeches on campus, and was very critical of the Reagan administration policies, people were amazed that the American government would pay a professor to come to Indonesia and criticize the government. They were quite admiring of the American government for allowing this criticism, which was in sharp contrast to the policy of the Suharto government which prohibited criticism. Thus, my very criticism of America made America more popular among the students.

When I was in Indonesia, by far the two most prominent Americans were Madonna and Michael Jackson. Young Indonesians adored these two superstars of pop music, and they were our most effective ambassadors. This kind of "cultural politics" is what makes America popular in the world today. If the U.S. government would give as much emphasis to our cultural ambassadors as it does to demonstrating American military might, I think it would make America stronger than all our fighting forces combined.

Getting back to the bus, this incident shows the positives and the negatives of American reactions to problems. In my own behavior and attitudes I am American to the core, being the first to initiate a challenge to the situation. Americans protest when they don't like something, and that can be the basis for beneficial changes. However, the negative side of this American trait is that Americans are always getting upset over so many things. I see how Thai people just do not let little things bother them, and they don't want to stand out as a protestor. This trait leads to more harmony in society, and I like that more calm and less-prone-to-take-offense attitude among Thai people. Americans are always getting bent out of shape over this or that. But this very same trait of protesting loudly when something is not right is also at the base of a lot of progress in America. So I am both chagrined and proud of that American trait. Everything has its positive and negative sides. What is that statement saying that true wisdom occurs when one is able to appreciate two contradictory positions at the same time?

#### THE CONTINUING SEARCH FOR A TRANSLATOR

I think the most difficult thing I have had in Thailand has been to find a good translator. First, when I went to Chiang Mai, the person that accompanied me refused to live in a

Wat. He felt uncomfortable around all the monks and novices, because he respected them so much that he could not see himself living with them. He left after only a few days. Later he told me he was wrong to leave, and he wished he had stayed with me. Then I used Nate in Chiang Mai, and he did a good job. I asked him to accompany me to the village near Maha Sarakham, and he agreed to do so. But he started having terrible tooth pains, and went to the dentist. The dentist said two of his wisdom teeth were coming in at the same time, and needed to be removed. That would cost nearly 5,000 baht. I felt sorry for him, with the pain he was in, so I loaned him 5,000 baht as an advance on his salary. He promised he would come to Maha Sarakham as soon as he recovered. One week went by, then two. I emailed him and said I really needed him to work as my translator, because work was beginning on my house and I could not communicate with the contractor who spoke no English. He then told me he had decided not to come, but he promised to return the 5,000 baht. I accepted that, and waited for the money. Despite numerous emails and phone calls, he never sent me one baht. My friend in Chiang Mai said she had had so many people ask for loans and then make promises to pay her back, and never did, that she now refuses to loan anyone anything no matter how desperate they are.

I was left only with Lek to do translation, and Lek hated doing it. Lek often misunderstood what I was saying, and would say things to the workers that I did not intend, then would tell me things that I do not think were accurate. But worse, Lek would often try to second-guess me, and even though Lek knew absolutely nothing about house construction would often argue with me about so many details. A lot of time and money was wasted because of that. Then I went to Maha Sarakham University and found a student who was an English major. He came out to my house construction site and was terrific. When I said something to the workers, he translated exactly what I said and then he told me what they said in reply. It was so easy having a good translator, and the work improved a hundred percent. But then he had to start classes again, and did not have time to continue. I was very sad to lose him, and I know that he enjoyed working with me because he told his friends that he wished he could continue.

After I lost him I went to Bangkok and met another person who spoke good English, and he and I got along well so I asked him to be my translator. He came to the village, did a fairly good job translating, but did not have much patience and got frustrated when he did not know the correct words to use. After three days he took off when I was busy working, and took my computer, digital camera and mobile phone with him. I was in shock. I went to the police and tried to find him on a bus out of Maha Sarakham, but he escaped. I called him, and told him that the only updated copy of the book I was writing was on that computer, and so he not only stole my computer but also my book that I had been working so hard on every day. After several conversations he broke down and said that he felt very bad to have stolen these things from me, but he was in desperate need of money and he saw no way to get it except to pawn those items. I asked if I had done anything to make him want to take those things, and he said no, I had treated him nicely, and he was very ashamed of stealing from me. I went to Bangkok to try to get my computer back, and after a harrowing meeting with him, in which I suspected he was trying to lead me into a trap, it turned out that he was being straightforward with me and

he took me to the pawnshop where he had pawned my computer. I had to pay the pawnshop to get it, and so I lost that money, plus all the time and worry in the process.

Now I was back in the same situation again, and was again forced to use Lek as translator. The same problems happened with Lek again, so I had to look for a translator again. Once more I found a translator at Maha Sarakham University, and he was also excellent. It is so easy when a translator just does his job, and there were no arguments as with Lek. After he had worked for me for a couple of weeks, he said he was in desperate financial situation and would lose his apartment if he did not pay his rent right away. He asked for an advance on his salary, of 5,000 baht. After what I had gone through earlier with Nate, I said I was sorry but I could not do that. He then said that if he was thrown out of his apartment he would have nowhere to live and would have to move back to his parents' house in another town far away. So, with his many promises that he would work for me every day for free until the loan was paid. With great misgivings I relented, and loaned him the 5,000 baht. After that he worked several days as promised. Then he suddenly did not show up. No phone call. Nothing. I tried calling him and there was no answer. Then a week later, after I had sent him several emails telling him either to work as promised or pay back the remaining money, he called to tell me he was in Bangkok. His sister had an emergency with her business and needed him right away. I was upset not only that he gave her higher priority when he still owed me money, but also that he did not contact me. He promised to do so in the future, and that he would soon work for me or repay me. That was two months ago, and I did not hear from him after that. Two weeks ago I sent him an email, saying I expected repayment. He said he had so many requirements to pay that he was sorry he did not have any money left to repay me. I said that is not acceptable, and that when someone is nice enough to loan money you should repay them as top priority, and I felt like I was his last priority. He apologized again and promised to pay the money by Friday. Of course he did not pay the money, nor did he call to explain.

Since that time I have struggled on without a translator, even though I have been quite limited in what I can communicate and understand. I now speak enough Thai to be able to get along with my daily needs of getting food and the necessities. But I do not speak enough to do substantive interviews for my research. So, when I went to Bangkok recently I continued to look for someone to be my translator and assistant. Of the two people that I met and liked, and who also liked me and said that they would be willing to come to my village and live with me here, both of them turned out to be Isan. I did not know this when I met them. Why am I so attracted to Isan people? It may be partly because I like darker skin color, and Isan people tend to be darker than other people in Thailand. They think this darker color is not good, but I am blessed to find it attractive, and so they are grateful that I like them. But I also think I am attracted to the friendliness of Isan people. Of the two that I met, one is age 26 and wanted to become a medical doctor but he did not pass the medical school entrance exam. So he wants to go to nursing school instead, and his dream is to become a nurse. He is very sweet, and extremely attractive, but I do not like that he smokes tobacco. He said he would stop smoking for me, but I have found that Thai people will promise anything to get a job, and then later do differently.

## NEW TRANSLATOR YECK

The other one, age 28, is from Si Saket, but he also lived near Roi Et. Yeck is good looking but I think he will look better if he grows his hair longer and gets a more stylish haircut. What most attracts me to him is that I think he has a good heart. He had a boyfriend from Sweden for three years, and that is how he learned English. From what he tells me it sounds like they had a good relationship. He was a computer major in college, and I like the fact that he is more educated and is skilled with computers. So I chose him over the other one. I am sad to have to reject one of them because I know that both of them really wanted strongly to come live with me. The one I did not choose lives in a very tiny room, that is in a basement with such a low ceiling that I could not even stand up inside. I know he would be much better off with me here, but I had to choose one. I decided on Yeck, and on June 7 I took him with me to the Thai Cultural Center. I wanted to see the Thai classical dance performance Siam Niramit, which I had heard so much about. It was very expensive, and I decided as a favor to Yeck that I would purchase a ticket for him also. I am glad that I did, because he appreciated and enjoyed the performance very much. This Siam Niramit was spectacular, probably the most incredible dance performance I have ever seen in my life. We both had a great time there. On the next day Yeck came with me on the bus to Maha Sarakham.

Yeck is very sweet. But he has some drawbacks: I realized after a couple of days that his attention span is very short. I diagnose attention deficit disorder, which I am familiar with from some past students. Sometimes he does not understand my questions, and he gets perturbed when I try to make him understand. He can only work for awhile, then he has to take a break for at least a half hour.

I worry that he will not have the patience to conduct long interviews. Today when I wanted him to translate something to someone here in the village, he told me it was not important and I should not talk about that. I cannot work with someone like that. I am afraid that he might become just as difficult as Lek, who was always interjecting his own opinion about everything. All I want is an efficient translator: when I say something in English, he translates it into Thai or Lao, and then he translates the response back to me in English. It is very easy when I have a good translator, but I have discovered that some people (perhaps most) do not have the personality to do translation well. I pointed this out to Yeck this evening, and he said nothing but nodded his head that he understands. I hope he will be able to do that from this point onward, because I really like him and would like to be able to use him. Only the future will tell if he will be good as a translator.

Yeck tells me that he enjoys being with me, and said he would commit to be here for the next two months before I return to America. But then later he said he is not sure, so I do not know with certainty what he will do. He sleeps more than anyone I have ever met. The way he describes life with his Swedish boyfriend, it sounds like he did little more with his time than eat, sleep, have sex, and watch TV at their apartment in Bangkok. But his Swedish boyfriend was also a writer, so that is good that he knows how to occupy himself when his boyfriend was busy writing.

When Yeck arrived at my house, he liked the design and décor of the house and garden, but he was shocked that I did not have a second floor. He said that he does not feel safe sleeping on the ground floor, and wishes the house had a second floor. He is so typical of Isan people in his attitudes. He was even more shocked to find out that I do not have a television. When I explained that I hardly ever watch TV in America, and I certainly do not watch TV in a language that I only speak a little. Game shows on Thai TV stations are even more demeaning and inane than game shows in America. Despite my suggestion that he could better spend his free time reading in the many books that I have here at the house, Yeck said he wanted to use his first two weeks of salary to purchase a television. I do not look forward to that, because a TV blaring away is very unpleasant and jarring to me. But I will agree to do that, and put up with an unpleasant TV, if Yeck does a good job.

June 21, 2007

I have not written fieldnotes in awhile because I have been doing many interviews with my new translator Yeck. He has worked out better than I initially thought, but he still is not of the quality that I need. He sometimes misunderstands my questions, and then gets quite perturbed when I try to explain the question again and again. I have talked to him about the need to be patient if he does not understand me, and he agrees to do so. But his basic personality is not to have much patience. So, I would say that his work is mixed. He understands that I need to interview many people, which is more than Lena can fathom. Yeck is OK, but not as good as the two translators I briefly had from Maha Sarakham University.

Lek came to visit, and does not like at all that I am bringing people to the house for interviews. Lek does not understand my research at all, and thinks me hiring a translator is a complete waste of money. He complained that Yeck does not keep the house clean enough [though I think the house is cleaner than when Lek is doing the cleaning], and that Yeck is lazy. But then after Lek returned to Bangkok he phoned Yeck and seems to trust Yeck not to bring people to the house. When I said I wanted someone to come here for an interview, Yeck told me Lek would not permit anyone at the house. I told Yeck firmly that I paid for the building of this house, and I am the one paying his salary, and he will take directions from me and not from Lek. Like Lek, who suspects everyone of wanting to steal from me or hurt me, Yeck also has taken this attitude. I do not like this attitude in the least. They endlessly bring up my bad experience with Leg, the person I hired as translator who stole my computer and camera. I point out that this was the only bad experience I have had with someone stealing from me, and that he did not harm me with physical violence. I point out to them again and again the lack of crime in this village, and the fact that I feel so much safer here than I do in crime-ridden Los Angeles [where I have lived for over three decades without any physical violence against me]. Still, for reasons that I cannot fathom, Isan people seem obsessed that someone is going to hurt me or steal from me.

Despite his lack of patience, I am convinced that Yeck does have a good heart. But he is so negative. He is suspicious of my motives when I offer to do something nice for him.

He says I do not care for him, when I repeatedly have done nice things to show that I do care. He says I do not believe him, right after he told me something and I acted based on his statements to me. I interviewed him, partly to demonstrate how an interview works, and discovered that he has a fascinating life history even though he is only 28 years old. He was in the Thai Army, and saved the life of an important general during heavy fighting with Cambodian soldiers over a border dispute.

For reasons he himself does not understand, Yeck mistrusts everyone. To show him that I want good things for him, I volunteered to drive him to visit his two grandmothers and his father, who live in a village not far from Roi Et. He had not seen them since he was fifteen years old, and it took us a while to locate the village after driving over tiny dirt roads that I was fearful the car might not make it through. I was afraid also that his elderly relatives might have died in the decade and a half that he was gone. Nevertheless, when we finally found the right village we were both very happy that all his relatives were in good health and happy to see him. His father, we were surprised to learn, has become a Buddhist monk. Yeck told them about me, not knowing how they might react to him working for an American, but they were all quite polite and welcoming to me. The reason he was so fearful of their reactions was because when he was a teenager they realized he was feminine and they criticized him severely. His father hit him repeatedly, and when he cried the father told him to toughen up and be a man. His father was very critical of ladyboys, and did not want his son to become one.

Yeck was so afraid of his father's reactions that he invented a story about me, telling his relatives that I was married to a Thai woman who was living in Bangkok now. He said that the woman was very busy with her business and she did not have time to take care of me, so she asked Yeck to be my translator and to take care of me. When his father asked him if he had a girlfriend Yeck said, "Not yet." The father did not ask further. Yeck did not tell me any of this at the time, and only afterwards was I surprised to find out he constructed this false story about me. One of his grandmothers looked at me rather suspiciously, and I think she might have guessed that I am gay. The others were all very nice to me, but she was strangely cold toward both me and Yeck. I am starting to think that his father's and grandmother's homophobic reactions may explain his rather pessimistic attitude toward everything.

He tells me that I am too trusting of people but I say he and Lek are too distrustful of people, and that I would rather have a more positive attitude than just being so suspicious of everyone. I think that a lot of the most wonderful and enjoyable experiences of my life are due to my trusting attitude. Though I have had negative experiences, as everyone has, I feel that the positives outweigh the negatives. I hope that I can continue to have this positive outlook on life throughout the rest of my life.

#### BELIEF IN SPIRITS

Like most Isan people, Yeck believes strongly in spirits. This is part of the animist heritage that is alive and well in Isan culture. All these beliefs have been incorporated into Thai Buddhism, despite the Buddha's particular admonition not to believe in spirits. Yeck says that he is Buddhist, and he treats a Buddha image with great respect. His



father gave him a large round Buddha medallion, and Yeck will not do certain things without first taking off the medallion and hanging it on a high hanger. Yet, like many Isan people, Yeck knows practically nothing about the actual teachings of the Buddha. When I explained the Four Noble Truths to him, Yeck was not familiar with even those basics of Buddhism. I told him that I thought Thai people had a tendency to bow to the Buddha IMAGE, and make it into a god, even though the Buddha specifically stated that he was not a god and he rejected the idea of gods.

When Yeck first arrived at my house he did not like the fact that the house is all on the ground level. I explained that I like everything on one level because with my bad knee going up and down stairs is not comfortable for me. He could accept that explanation, but he still feels more safe when sleeping on the second floor. When I fixed a room for him with a door that can be closed and locked, he felt much more comfortable sleeping. He said you never know when a spirit will come, but they usually come when a person is asleep. They might appear in a dream, and sometimes they might touch you and wake you up. Some spirits can be good and some can be bad. Like a Dracula, they can come at night and suck someone's blood and make them sick, or stay inside them and eat away at their body until the person dies.

When Yeck heard the baby crying next door, he said the baby cries a lot because it can see the spirits present, that adults cannot see. Sometimes spirits come to look at people, and they are particularly attracted to babies. Maybe it is an ancestor wanting to play with the baby, and the baby is scared. The parents might throw a can or something small to make a noise, to get the spirit to go away.

This is why Isan people so often have a little spirit house near the entrance to their house. They want good spirits to reside there, especially if their ancestors lived in this house in a previous time. People want their ancestors, or other good spirits, to be there in order to protect them from bad people who might try to enter the house. The spirits might attack and cause the illness or even death of the bad person. The spirits might cause that bad person to have an automobile accident. We never know what they can do. If a location of a house had persons who died violently, then the spirits might be disturbed. Providing a nice little house provides a comfortable place for the spirits to reside, and they will not roam the big house and cause problems for the residents. People will make offerings of water and food to these spirits, and pray for the spirits to come and eat or drink, and to protect the residents. If the spirits are happy, then they will protect the people and bring good luck.

When Yeck first visited my office, he was alarmed to see a very large gecko on the wall. This gecko, which somehow got into my office despite the screens on the windows and doors, is about the size of a large rat. Yeck was afraid, but then he saw the gecko run to hide behind the large Buddha statue that I have in the corner of the room. After he saw that, he changed his mind, and considered my office to be blessed by the presence of the gecko. Yeck believes that only a good thing can be near the Buddha, and if the gecko was a danger it would not be able to hide behind the Buddha.

Since Yeck did not feel comfortable sleeping in the living room that is open to the yard, because of the presence of spirits, he brought a blanket and mat to sleep on the floor of my office. On the first night that he slept in my office, during the night the large gecko crawled into the blanket with him. He woke up and felt the gecko lying on his chest, and felt shocked and jumped up. The gecko ran to hide, once again behind the Buddha. Yeck decided that the gecko was trying to tell him that he should not sleep on the floor, so he moved to sleep in my bed. When I woke up the next morning and was surprised to see Yeck lying beside me, he explained that this was a lucky gecko. If the gecko had not gone behind the Buddha, then Yeck would have been afraid of it. But because he believes that only good things can be close to the Buddha, then this must be a lucky gecko.

Yeck recommended that I purchase a spirit house, so that he can feel more comfortable sleeping at my house. I agreed, and talked to Lek's sister who has a small business making these houses. She offered to sell me one for 1,000 baht [\$27.00 USD] which is a really low price considering how intricate they are to make. I asked a monk if I could put it in the back yard, so that I can enjoy looking at it. He said that would be OK, but another monk who visited me yesterday said that it must be outside the entrance of the house. I do not like that as much, since I would only see it when I was coming or going, but depending on which monks bless the installation of the spirit house I may have to agree to put it outside the entry. I was not surprised to learn that it cannot be installed until a "Lucky Day." Given my experience with the changing dates of the Lucky Day for my house dedication, it might be after I leave Thailand before this little spirit house could be installed! If that happens, I might as well wait until I come back at the end of December.

#### ANIMISM AND BUDDHISM

Despite Yeck's wish to get a spirit house installed now, I might wait on that purchase.. I really like the fact that Yeck is so comfortable living here. He said he would like me to design a house for him to live in, in his hometown of Si Saket. I really enjoy doing that, and am quite pleased with my house and garden now. The plants have really taken off, and every day I am amazed to see how much growth occurred since the previous day. If the plants can grow up and cover the bare concrete block walls surrounding the yard, then it will be totally beautiful. I could enjoy living in this house for a long time.

I have been very happy living here since the house was finished, but I worry that if I come back next year will I suffer the same heat rash and fungus infection that I have been having since the really hot weather began in late April. I talked to a doctor about this yesterday, and he said that if I come back again my body should adjust to the climate better next year than this first year. I hope so. I got several blood tests to make sure this rash is not an indication of a more serious condition, and all the tests came out fine. No HIV, no diabetes, etc. so it looks like I am healthy and this fungus infection is just that. The doctor gave me some more pills and cream to rub on twice a day, and told me to be patient while the medicine works. Ugh. At least it is not itching any more.

The weather continues to be hot, and it has not rained in some time. I had the image of the rainy season being deluged with water all the time, but Yeck tells me that this pattern is typical of the weather in northeastern Thailand. I can understand why northeastern Thailand is poor, with so little water. The Thai government has done some constructive work in the area by building a lot of lakes to provide more water year-round. The lack of rain is pleasant, though. Also pleasant is the almost complete lack of insects. When I told Yeck about all the thousands of insects that were here a month ago, he said the same thing happens in Si Saket. He said the swarming of insects occurs only at the beginning of the rainy season each year, and that the first rain prompts the emergence of the swarms. Yeck thinks this is a good thing, because everyone can gather insects and eat fully. For myself, I am greatly relieved to know this swarming happens only once a year. This is an example of the Buddha's wisdom that it is not an event itself, but our reaction to it, that makes it a pleasant or unpleasant experience. In the future, I will try to take a Buddhist approach, and consider the insect swarms as an opportunity for poor people to eat to their heart's content. The swarms of so many insects could be commercially developed as a source of high protein food for humanity. That is how I will look at the swarming in the future.

#### INTERVIEW WITH THE MAYOR OF THE VILLAGE June 25, 2007

For months I have been wanting to interview Niyom, the new mayor of this village, but since he speaks no English I have held off. Finally, I was able to schedule a time with him, with Yeck translating. Yeck did a great job, not getting perturbed when he did not understand something, and being patient as I asked questions. The mayor was great, which I expected since I have heard only glowing positive reactions about him from people in the village. For many years there was one mayor, and over time he grew arrogant and felt that he knew what was best and stopped consulting with others. He gave long monologues over the loudspeaker in the village, irritating people for interfering with their privacy. Finally he retired, to the great relief of the villagers. What people like is that the new young leader asks others their opinions, and tries to do what is best.

I asked Niyom why he wanted to be leader, and he said to help the people have a better life. He said some of his ancestors were mayors of this village, and he wanted to continue in that family tradition so he could also go down in the family history as a prominent person. He has been mayor for only six months, but he has many ideas how to improve life. He wants to set up a satellite connection so people can receive the internet here. He realizes English is important, and wants to improve English comprehension among the young people. He wants to establish a factory that can provide more jobs locally for people, and also to make a center for the old people in the village.

Niyom said the biggest problem in the village is that so many people are heavily in debt, mostly to government loan programs designed to help poor villagers, and they are stressed in worry about how to pay off these debts. Salaries are so low that they have little hope of paying off these large debts. The other big problem, he said, is the heavy drinking. I asked about drug abuse, and he said there are only a few people who take drugs. Niyom quit smoking tobacco twenty years ago, and he wants to promote a health

campaign, to encourage people to stop smoking and stop drinking so much whiskey. Since only a few women smoke or drink, these problems are focused on the men.

I showed him how I separate trash into items for recycling (glass, metal, plastic) and biodegradable food and paper for composting. I explained that burning trash, which is what most of the villagers do, is very bad for the environment, and so by recycling and composting I can avoid burning trash. When I showed him my compost box, he got it right away. He said he wants me to teach the villagers how to compost. I was very impressed with his intelligence.

## COWS

I agreed with everything the mayor said, except when he told me about a project provided by the local government to help poor villagers by providing them with a cow or buffalo. I told him this is not a good idea, and explained why cows in particular are so damaging to the environment. He heard my argument, but I do not think I convinced him. I said that the idea of helping poor villagers is great, but I think the government ought to help them by providing job training or seed money to start a business rather than just buying a cow for them. But cows and buffaloes are so integral to the economy here, I am not sure if my ecological views will be persuasive.

As I learn more, it is becoming obvious that cows and buffaloes are not useful to the economic development of this area. People want a cow or buffalo because they can breed them and then sell the parent, then raise the offspring and later sell them. They can sell these animals for a large amount of money. What I was surprised to learn is that the value of the cows has little to do with their value as meat. Relatively few of the animals are sold for food. Mostly they are sold to another person who also wants to breed them. It is prestigious to own as many cows and/or buffaloes as possible, just so people can see the total. Some of the cows look so skinny that I wondered how they could even be sold for meat. Now I learn that these skinny animals are the old ones, and most of them live out their lifespan without being slaughtered for food. Once they die of old age, their body is then cut up and made into a stew. The ribs are considered delicious.

Knowing this new information means the cows are treated more humanely than I realized before, and I am happy to learn that most of them live their full lifespan. But what is evident is that the cows and buffaloes do not really help the economic development of the region. People buy and sell these animals primarily as a status symbol, and not for the wealth that they produce. A generation ago buffaloes were used productively to pull plows when the rice fields were plowed. But today Isan farmers use gas-engine tractors to plow their fields. So there is no real use for them other than as objects to buy breed and sell. Now I am convinced more than ever that longterm economic development of Isan areas means the need to move away from rice farming, with its attendant cow/buffalo pasturing, and to some other kinds of economic base.

I suggested to the mayor that it would be better for the environment for people to plant trees on their lands, and also to build fish ponds, and to raise chickens and fish rather than

large animals like cows, buffaloes, and pigs. I encourage people to eat small things (chicken, fish, frogs, insects, etc.) rather than beef and pork.

Except for this difference, the mayor and I agree on a lot of things. He wants me to come back next year to help him accomplish a lot of these projects. That is one more factor drawing me back to Thailand.