

SPIRITUAL HEALING AND MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

It is late at night as I write this, after a very busy day in the village where I am living in northeast Thailand among the Isan people. Today was a day in which I learned both positives and negatives. The positive thing that I learned was the impact of my Buddhist chanting on helping people get well. When Bunlut, Lek's sister's husband, got stepped on by a cow last week, the heavy weight smashed his toes, and one of his toes had to be amputated. I visited him in the hospital before the operation, and asked if he would like me to do a chant for him. He has known me for five years, and knows that I care for him very much. He said, yes, he would appreciate that.

I explained that chanting the Buddhist mantra "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo" had helped me in many ways over the last two decades of my life, but especially before my knee surgery. This phrase means "I give devotion to the Mystic Law of the Universe." The Mystic Law is the law of karma, which says that every action which one does to benefit or bring happiness to others will produce good results happening in one's own life, and for every action which brings suffering or unhappiness to others will bring about bad results happening in one's own life. I explained to him that I chanted for four hours on the evening before my surgery, and then again on the next morning as I was being driven to the hospital. I was chanting continuously, right up until they wheeled me into the operating room and gave me anesthetics to put me to sleep.

When I woke up after the surgery I looked up and saw a vision of a thousand Buddhist angels hovering over me. I figured they were Buddhist because they looked like Thai classical dancers of indeterminate gender, rather transgender looking, instead of Christian-style blond women in white gowns and with wings. Were they really there, or did I just fantasize the whole scene? I cannot answer that question based upon logic and rationality. All I know is what happened. They asked me if I was alright, and I said yes I feel fine. "OK," they replied, "we just wanted to make sure. Got to run now. A lot of beings are waiting on us. Be well." And then they disappeared. After that I had this incredible feeling of warmth and security spread over my whole body from head to toe. Even though I was recovering in a roomful of strangers, I felt totally protected and at peace.

I have had enough spiritual experiences like this in my life to be convinced that there is something out there in the universe (or inside our psyche) that we do not understand, something beyond our puny brains' ability to comprehend. I am convinced that these phenomena exist in reality as much as the rational logical world that we can perceive in our everyday senses.

A student once asked me what was the most important lesson I learned from my years of dealings with Native American shamans. I thought about it and answered that the most important thing I learned from them is an appreciation for understanding how very little

we know about what is really going on in the universe. Our brains cannot understand so many things, so many layers of reality. In our limited understanding of things, we are like ants trying to figure out what happened after an airplane crashed onto their anthill. Our ability to understand these extra-rational factors operating in the universe is as limited as the ants' ability to analyze airplane mechanics or human political differences that would lead to someone placing a bomb on an airplane.

The shamans taught me that we should not berate ourselves for this lack of ability, but it is important to keep the limits of our understanding in mind. Knowing how much we do NOT know, they taught me, is the beginning of wisdom. Ignorant people who think they know everything are not only arrogant, but also dangerous. This is why I feel that followers of dogmatic religions, who blindly accept every word of a particular written text as the word of this or that god, and think these words contain everything that is correct, are so dangerous for the future of humanity and the world.

I digress. For whatever reason, spiritual or otherwise, I told Bunlut, my knee surgery was a complete success. Even though it was a complicated operation with four incisions around my kneecap, I did not experience any complications afterward. Everyone I know who has had knee surgery told me how painful it was during recovery, so I was prepared for the worst. But I felt fine in the hospital, so the surgeon allowed me to go home early. The doctor gave me powerful pain pills, and told me to take one as soon as I started feeling intense pain. Friends helped me into a car, drove me home, and carried me into my bedroom. As I lay there with my kneed wrapped in a huge basketball-sized bandage, I continued with my chanting. I figured that would help me deal with the pain. I waited and waited, but except for a little discomfort, I never felt any pain at all. During the entire recovery, I did not have to take even one pain pill. My knee healed perfectly, and has been great since then.

I explained all this to Bunlut, and he listened attentively as I did the chants. I chanted for him for an hour. I did it again on the day after his surgery, and again for the next two days after he came home. The suture on his toe healed very quickly, and now just a week later he is out in the fields walking around like nothing happened. His foot is good again despite the loss of a toe.

The next person I chanted for last week was Lon's mother. She has been terribly ill for the past few years. The last time I had visited her in her house she looked close to death. I talked with Lon, trying to prepare him for the possibility that his mother might not survive. Last week I was not surprised to hear that she was in the local hospital at a nearby village, and I gave Lon's father some money to pay for the hospital bills. When I came to the hospital to visit her she managed a smile to me, even though she was very weak. I asked her if she wanted me to do the chanting for her benefit, and she said yes. As I did the chanting at her bedside for over an hour, I did not know if I was chanting for her to get well, or to end her suffering quickly and allow her spirit to be reborn into a better life next time. I just chanted for an end to her suffering. I could tell that she was really absorbing the energy from my chanting, because she started folding her hands together in a prayer form, just as I was doing.

On the next two days I went back and did the chanting again for her. Each time she really participated intensely, even though she had no understanding at all of the Japanese words that I was chanting. I could not come there on the day after that, but when I did get to the hospital on the following day I found to my surprise that she had improved so much that the doctor had released her to go home. Today when I went to visit her at home, she was smiling and happy. After the last few months of intensifying illness, she now seemed to be back to her former state of animated mental alertness. She told me that she was now in no pain at all, and she felt better than she has felt in the past year. She attributed this rapid recovery to my chanting for her. Lon phoned me from his sister's house, where he has gone to take care of his sister's baby, to tell me how much he missed me, and to thank me for his mother's recovery. I told him it is not me, but the combination of the medical doctors and the power of Nam Myoho Renge Kyo that has helped his mother.

I know from research done with the Navajo Indians by my former professor at the University of North Carolina, Dr. Dorothea Leighton, a medical anthropologist, that Native people who were treated both by medical doctors and by traditional Navajo shamans had higher rates of recovery than patients who were treated only by either doctors or shamans. If those people really believed in the power of the shaman, then that belief itself helped the people to get well. A lot of wellness is the result of the mental state of the person who is ill. If they see another person caring tenderly for them, doing things that they know are being done only for their benefit, then I believe that perception itself helps them get well. This is what I tried to do as I sat at the bedside of the ill woman, focusing all of my thoughts and energy as intensely as I could on helping to end her suffering. She has recovered amazingly, and I am so pleased to see this result.

After seeing how dramatically she improved, I decided to make the drive into the city to visit Lek's sister's daughter, who was just admitted into the public hospital. After getting there my translator told her what had happened with Lon's mother, and she already knew about Bunlut's quick recovery with his foot. I did not have to persuade her; she asked me if I could do the chanting for her. She has been very weak, and I do not understand exactly what has caused her to be in the hospital other than being told she suffers from "bad blood." I have no idea how serious her blood disease is, so I just chanted to draw out her suffering. As I did the chanting, I could feel the bad things inside her being drawn out and coming toward me. I felt like I was pulling on a rope, with a heavy weight attached to the other side. I cannot rationally explain this, but it seemed like I pulled some of this bad blood and it went inside me. I did not feel alarmed by this, but at peace with it. I felt good afterward. She said that she felt better after the chanting. Even my translator, who was sitting next to me, said that he felt the power as I chanted. He said that he believes I have healing powers, and that my doing this chanting really does help people get well. He is a spiritual person, he believes strongly that spirits are real, and he thinks that I am good to want to help to heal people.

That is indeed my motivation, to do everything I can to help others. Whether it is in my role as teacher, in helping my students learn, or in terms of healing those people I care

about, I get great joy and fulfillment in my life from these efforts. With this in mind, where my motives are only to help people, I am surprised when someone thinks I have different motives. This evening when I was at home, a boy I had not seen before came to my house. I am always surprised when I see someone I have not seen before, because after coming here for five years I thought I had met everybody in this small village. People are always coming into my house to see the way I have decorated the house and garden, and especially the fish pond. Though he does not speak any English, I was able to communicate with this boy in my increasing use of Thai. He said he is eight years old, and he lives with his parents as an only child. He was especially fascinated by the fish pond, and sat there for a long time looking at the fish. As I was typing on my computer in my office, he came to watch intently. He said he had never seen a computer before. Taking a break from my typing, I showed him how to use the computer to make art. I taught him how to do patterns and colors on the Paint program on my computer. He has a real talent for art, more than I would have expected for an eight year old. He got so intensely into the drawing lines and circles and squares, then filling in the abstract forms with various colors, that the time went by. Three or four times I asked him if he wanted to eat, or should he go home to eat, and he said no. I told him that he should go home and let his parents know where he is, but he just continued doing the paint program on the computer. He was really intent on doing the art, so I let him continue. Seeing the look of fascination on a person's face, as they discover new things in life that they never knew before, is what excites me about being a teacher.

As he was completing his fourth painting, suddenly a man walked into the house, saw him, and slapped him on the back of the head. I was shocked, first because I have never seen a man in this village hit another person (and especially a child). Then I found out that this was the boy's father, and he was worried about where his son was. I explained that he was so fascinated about doing the art on the computer that he did not want to stop. I showed the father the beautiful art that the boy had done, and the father settled down and said OK he now knew everything was alright. As a gay person, I am always on guard to suspect that a parent might not want their child to hang around a gay person, but that is so against the experience that I have had in this village that I do not think this is what led the father to be upset at his son being here. What I found out afterward is that this father was very worried because he looked for the boy and could not find him. He was worried that his son was OK. Once he found out his son was safe at my house he relaxed. He has been friendly toward me since then, so I do not think there are any hard feelings. But I was still shocked to see him hit the boy.

July 2, 2007

When some kids came to my house today, I told them that they cannot come here unless their parents know where they are and that the parents approve them learning on the computer. I literally made them go home, even when they did not want to, because I do not want a repetition of what happened yesterday. I do not want to do anything that would disrupt the good relations that I have built with people here over the last five years. I went and talked with the monk about this, and he assured me that people think favorably toward me. I was relieved to hear that.

COWS AND TREES

Today after visiting with the monk I went to check on Bunlut and see how his foot is doing. He has a missing toe, but otherwise is doing fine. The skin fold where the toe was amputated is healing nicely. He proudly showed me a new calf that was born to one of his cows a few days ago. We started talking about cows. He has the large white cows that are so popular now among Isan people. I found out that a small brown cow was typical of the cows in Thailand until less than a decade ago. About five or six years ago, these new white cows were imported into Thailand from Israel. Another person told me these cows are from Saudi Arabia, and still another said they were from India. So at this point I am not sure, but I now know that they are not native to Thailand.

I asked Bunlut why he preferred these large white cows rather than buffaloes or the indigenous brown cows. He said the white cows can graze in the hot sun all day without having to drink water, whereas buffaloes and the brown cows have to have some shade and water. Even more important, he said, he can breed and sell one of the white cows for about 100,000 baht [\$2,800 USD], which is ten times what a buffalo or a brown cow can bring. The main reason the white cows fetch such a high price is because they are still new in northeast Thailand, and there are a lot of Isan farmers who want them.

At dawn every morning Bunlut gives water to his fourteen cows, then walks them on the road to a large parcel of grassland that he owns, where he leaves them to graze for the day. Then in the evening after he has finished his work making concrete spirit houses he walks out to his fields to round them up and bring them home where they can drink water and sleep in the cow shed next to his house. He no longer grows rice on his lands, but only a special grass that these cows like to eat.

I asked him which way he would make more money from his land: (1) growing rice, (2) breeding and selling cows, or (3) growing trees. He said growing rice is the least profitable, but growing trees and herding cows is about equally profitable. I then asked him why he prefers to raise cows rather than plant trees. After all, herding the cows every morning and evening, growing the grass for them to eat, and doing other things to take care of them, is a lot more work than planting trees once every five or six years.

The big problem with growing trees, he said, is that landowners have to wait five or six years before they can get any money from selling trees. Because most people cannot afford to wait that long, it is better for them to breed cows. With cows they can sell some each year. I then pointed out how American tree farms will rotate tree cuttings each year and cut only one sixth of the land area. Every year they will cut one sixth of the land, and immediately reseed that section of land so the tree seedlings can start growing again. By the sixth year of cutting only one sixth of the land, the new trees in the first section have grown large enough to harvest again. Thus, every year the landowners can get money from selling one-sixth of their trees.

Of course, for this plan to work, a person has to own a large enough parcel of land to cut only one-sixth of it each year. If prices for wood fluctuate too much, the landowner might be tempted to sell more than one-sixth of the trees in any particular year. If the

rotation plan is to work, it means that landowners must be disciplined and not cut any more than one sixth of their land.

I explained the advantages of growing trees over cows. First, I said, the high prices for cows are due to speculation, because so many Isan farmers still want to buy them. The high price is due not to the value of the meat, but to the desire people have to own some of these cows. As more and more farmers buy the new type of cows, and breed their own calves, the market law of supply and demand will come into play. Whenever the demand for these large cows slackens, the price could come tumbling down very quickly.

On the other hand, trees are going up in value, because of the scarcity of wood. I pointed out to him that within the last thirty years, there has been an 80% reduction in forest lands in Thailand. So many trees have been cut down, and not replaced, that the cost of wood has skyrocketed. This trend will continue in the future, as the demand for wood for building, for cooking and heating, and for other needs increases. Second, I told him, there is a population explosion of cows going on in the world today, as a result of the human population explosion. Seventy-five years ago there were only two billion people in the world, but today there are over six billion people. With more people eating more beef, there are now more cows in the world than there are people.

This is why I encourage people to stop eating beef, and instead to become vegetarian or to eat only small animals. With so many cows eating grass, as the cows eat they burp methane. This methane gas goes into the upper atmosphere and is a big contributor to the destruction of the ozone layer. That is a major factor in global warming. Of course, pollution from automobiles and other gas-consuming machines is also a major factor that needs to be changed, but this does not negate the impact of so many cows in the world burping methane.

July 14, 2007

Today I learned an important lesson in trusting my own judgment. I had had a good talk with the mayor of this village, discussing my environmental concerns with him. Afterward I had some other ideas that I wanted to discuss with him. My translator Yeck and I kept going to his place of work, but he was always gone to a meeting in the district headquarters. Yeck left his phone number for him to call. After several days, the mayor still had not called. I assumed the mayor was just very busy, but Yeck said this is because the mayor did not want to do the changes that I suggested, to get people to stop burning their trash and instead to make compost bins in their yards. Yeck said the mayor was trying to avoid me, and I should drop the whole idea. I felt that Yeck understood Isan reactions better than I as an outsider did, so I believed him. I felt very discouraged that my ideas to try to reduce air pollution would have no impact. But yesterday evening we were going home and saw the mayor sitting with some friends and drinking. He said he could not talk now, because he had drunk too much, but he would come to my house at 8am tomorrow. Yeck said not to believe him, because he was drunk and did not know what he was saying. Yeck said I should not expect to see him.

Yet, sharply at 8am today the mayor arrived at my house, just as he said. He apologized for not being in touch, but said he had been so busy that he never had time to get back to me. Just as I originally thought, he was merely overcommitted. He reiterated that he thought I had many good ideas that could help to improve the village, and he wanted my ideas. I said I would write them down, and get someone to translate them into Thai so he could have the written report to keep.

After he left I talked with Yeck and pointed out that even though he is Isan, he was wrong about the mayor's reaction. I said that I felt Yeck always interpreted things in the most negative way possible, and in this case the mayor was not reacting against me but was simply too busy. I have a tendency to interpret things in the most positive way possible, and in this characteristic Yeck and I are at polar opposites. What this shows is that even if an anthropologist is an outsider, and knows much less about the culture than a member of that society, the insider still can be mistaken in interpreting events. In this case, Yeck's individual tendency to interpret things negatively was more influential than his being Isan. Sometimes, I have learned, it is necessary for the anthropologist to trust his or her own judgment, even when an informant says that is wrong.

After the mayor left I worked on that report all day, and am pleased with the result. The main points I made included a plan to make the village more beautiful by planting more trees and scrubs along the sides of the streets, and to reduce air pollution by convincing people to stop burning their trash and instead to recycle and make compost bins in their yards for leaves and biodegradable kitchen trash. The local schools are doing anti-smoking and anti-drug campaigns, and I expressed support for these programs as well as public health campaigns to convince many of the men to cut down on their consumption of alcohol which damages their liver.

I also included some ideas for economic development of the village in ways that are less damaging to the environment than the present emphasis on raising cows and buffaloes. The mayor has just established a program to provide free fish tanks and free small fish, so that people can grow fish at their home for their own consumption and for sale. Building on that idea, I suggested also encouraging people to grow small animals to eat and sell (growing more fish, frogs, insects, chickens, ducks, and importing turkeys from America), and to plant more fruit trees and make chemical-free gardens, then to sell the produce at a night market to be established in the village.

Beyond that, I suggested beginning a long-range plan to change the economy from rice farming and its attendant cow raising, to planning tree farms. The mayor is sympathetic to my lobbying about the problem of deforestation in the world, and realizes the need for planting more trees as a way to help the environment. Once people plant trees in their fields, they will be freed of the backbreaking labor of rice cultivation and of the daily needs of caring for cows, so that then they can have the time to pursue other kinds of jobs. While many of the people are committed to cattle raising, I think there is potential for change if other types of jobs open up for them. I suggested building on the current trend of doing work in concrete, but expanding the kind of work currently done with

spirit houses and burial monuments, to use the expertise of local workers to build concrete houses, concrete roads, and concrete art. The mayor wants local people to move in new directions, going right to the cutting edge of new technological developments and pursue computer related jobs. He is working to get a strong internet connection for this area. He is quite progressive. He wants me to set up a plan to improve English comprehension among village youth, in order to help them become better at learning computers.

To do that, I have become more active in helping the local schools. I decided to donate a large number of English instruction books I brought with me from America. I gave these books both to the primary school in the village, and also to the high school that is one kilometer south of the village. With Yeck translating, I have had productive conversations with the headmasters of both schools. Both of them want to improve English instruction among their students, so I wrote a report for them detailing the best ways to accomplish this goal. Right now, instruction focuses on grammar, which is very boring and frustrating to students. I am proposing a plan based on Immersion Theory, which says that the best way to learn a language is by immersing children in an environment where they are speaking and listening to English on a daily basis. Rather than boring grammar lessons, the kids sing songs, watch CDs of English native speakers, explore English internet sites, and do other fun activities where they are practicing correct pronunciation and improving comprehension to carry on basic conversation and communication. The focus is on practical education that will help them in needs that they will actually use in their future.

I will await the responses to see if any of my ideas will resonate with them, but so far it looks very good. I have learned I have to be patient in expecting quick action, but if some programs can be set up now, then perhaps they will be able to help the students in ensuing months until I return in December.

It seems that a lot of things I have been thinking about, for the last several months, are finally coming together just before I leave. These are all good developments, and I look forward to working with the local leaders after I return in December.