

ISAN FIELDNOTES March 23, 2008

BUDDHISM AND THE ETHIC OF JOY

I have so many great pictures of life in this Isan village in northeast Thailand, but I can only send a few with each email. Isan people are a visual anthropologist's dream. In sharp contrast to my research with traditionalist Native Americans (many of whom do not like their picture taken), Isan people are always begging me to take their picture. On the few occasions when people go to a photography studio to get their portrait made, they are posed looking very serious. So they think they should do likewise when I take a photo of them. Many may be beaming in happiness, but as soon as I aim the camera they drop their smile to look serious. Then as soon as the flash goes off they are smiling widely again. I try to catch them when they do not expect it, to get their more typical expression. My digital camera has a little screen on the back, and when I show them their tiny picture they invariably laugh with joy. Mine is the only camera in the village, and I think people realize I am making a visual record of this time, that they can draw on in the future. Already, people enjoy seeing pictures I took five years ago when I first started coming here. My biggest problem in taking pictures here is that so many great shots are ruined because children rush to the foreground to try to be in the picture. Many pictures are blurred because people cannot keep still long enough. Thank goodness I can delete all the bad pictures on my computer, instead of having to pay for developing every photograph in print.

I am leaving Thailand soon since my visa is running out, and am going to Cambodia for awhile. This will probably be my last email that I can send before I leave. But what an eventful time this has been. For the last couple of weeks there have been constant celebrations in different villages. Lek and I went to another village, gave some money (about two or three dollars) to the household, and they gave us a delicious meal. Each village does this for two days, then a few days later another village hosts the same thing. I went to a few villages, but stayed home to do my writing while Lek went to several more villages. Too much celebrating for me. People use this time to visit all their friends, taking money and getting a meal in return. At last our turn came, and it was time for us to buy a lot of food (plus sodas, beer, and whiskey, which is a requirement for every celebration). Lots of people came and went, and I figure the money we received just about covered the cost of the food and drinks. Thus, by this tradition Isan people have figured out a way to have fun with their friends, get drunk, eat lots of good food, and it really does not cost much.

In this tradition, as in many things here, the important thing is "sanook" [enjoyment]. People often greet me with the phrase "Khun sabai dee mai?" [Are you enjoying yourself?] These villagers may be poor in material goods, but boy can they have fun! This cultural focus grows directly out of their Buddhist approach to life. The First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught is that life is full of suffering. It is inevitable. That teaching makes sense to these people: farming is a lot of hard work for little money, they have little hope of improving their situation, life is fragile and unpredictable. In Thai Buddhism, the purpose of life is to overcome suffering and find happiness. What better

way is there to avoid suffering and find happiness, Isan people reason, than to have fun? After coming to Thailand several times over the years, I have concluded that enjoying life and having fun is the distinctive characteristic that stands out so much for Isan culture.

For the last several days I have been volunteering to help decorate the local temple, for an event where people bring money to help support the temple. And, being Buddhists, they of course have a big party in the process. A group of several households get together to make an offering of money, but instead of just handing the money to the temple, they make a pretty decoration. Different groups compete with each other to see who can make the most beautiful presentation of money. Some arrange the money hanging from banana leaves, while others have a pot with flowers and cash arranged together.

It is interesting that the group of neighbors around my house chose Lek, a transgender person, to hold the group's arrangement of money. [see the attached photo of Lek in the blue jacket that Lek sewed himself]. But instead of just bringing the offering directly to the temple, they go to the other side of the village, where a troupe of drummers is waiting. With the group making the temple offering in front, the drummers start playing. There is also an electric keyboard with big loudspeakers mounted on a cart, so it is ear-splittingly loud music. They slowly walk down the street and across the village toward the temple, and as soon as they start playing, people pour out of their houses to dance to the music. Not everyone dances, but of those who do the ages range from the elderly to little kids. The music and dancing is really energetic.

I have a reputation as a good dancer, thanks to my parents who were excellent dancers and who taught dance classes when I was a child. Dance has always been very important in my family: my sister teaches dance classes and my niece is majoring in dance in college. A lot of my research, at American Indian pow wows, Native Hawaiian hulas, Javanese classical dances at the Sultan's Palace in Yogyakarta, and Reyog all-male dance groups in Ponorogo in Indonesia, has been studying dancers. People here are always insistent that they want to watch me dance. I enjoy the street dances that go on here, but I have to admit it is a rather unpleasant sensation to be jumping up and down in the frantic dancing, lost in the music, and to feel that unique squish as one's foot lands in a pile of buffalo dung. Hey, nobody else seems to mind it, so why should I? After all, it's just recycled grass. And since the cows and buffalos are herded through the streets every morning and every evening, there is no way to avoid the dung if one is not paying close attention. But having stepped in a big pile one too many times while dancing, this time I decided to be one of the drummers. They have big drums, and my drum is small, but still the musicians were happy for me to join them. I was a drummer in a rock and roll band when I was in college and grad school, so I was able to pick up their beat quickly. Until I started coming to this village, I had not played the drums in many years, but it is amazing how quickly I could get back into it. Isan people are invariably amazed when a foreigner can play their music, and I got several pats on the back from people as we played.

When the group of dancers have danced their way across the village, at last they arrive at the temple. The people making the offering and some but not all of the dancers go inside for prayers. While all this raucous music is blaring away, the monks are sitting cross-

legged in the temple waiting to bless the partiers. The dancers come in, receive glasses of ice water, soda, or tea as they enter, and take their offerings to the monks. Before the dance started, people came to the temple bringing bags of rice, fresh foods, toiletries and other groceries for the monks. The monks do chanting and offer prayers for the people's good health and happiness. Isan people are such a contrast. One minute they are dancing lewdly, and the next minute they are bowing down in prayer. To them this is no contrast in the least, since sex is not considered sinful in Thai Buddhism.

As soon as the prayers are over (and sometimes while the prayer is still finishing), while people are bowing down reverently to the monks, they start impishly throwing rice at the monks. Somebody handed me a handful of rice, and I joined in with what appears to be an irreverent contrast to the respectful way monks are usually treated. The monks sit there placidly and take all this, sometimes cracking a smile. But in the case of Pop, a fourteen year old novice who has a reputation as a fun-loving scamp, people really got into throwing rice at him. So much rice was thrown at him, that Pop gathered it together and started throwing rice back at them. [see picture] The older monks just looked at this scene of pandemonium and laughed. In that unique mixture of religiosity and humor that characterizes Isan culture, Thai Buddhism finds a way for people to have fun while they are being religious.

After they finish their prayers, some people stay at the temple to relax and talk, while others walk back to the other side of the village to begin the next musical procession as it repeats the process with another group of neighbors bringing a temple offering. The drummers have been taking a break until a crowd develops, then with the next group of neighbors in front with their offering, the drummers start playing and the whole process starts over again. Everybody uses this temple offering as an excuse for a party. What could be more religious than that?

STREET DANCING AS A MEANS OF ACCEPTANCE OF TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

As the mass of people who are dancing vigorously move step by step toward the temple, right in front of the dance group are the ladyboys. If Isan people like to party a lot, the transgender ladyboys are the most Isan of all. Every time there is a dance, at least a few ladyboys are sure to show up. I especially admire Mua, one of my main informants. Mua is sixty-two years old, but is right out there dancing with the young people. In fact, Mua is often the first person to start dancing, to kind of break the ice for others to join in. Mua loves the attention, and is always ready to smile sweetly and pose for my pictures. Sometimes Mua dresses like a regular Isan woman, in traditional Isan clothing, but for big celebrations Mua will often dress in a Western-style frilly party dress. On some occasions Mua will come out in a particular dress, dance for awhile, then go somewhere to make a costume change, and come out dancing in a different dress. Talk about making an appearance!

I have asked Mua and other ladyboys who dress in Western style why they like to do that, and they always say they do it because they want to look fashionable and sophisticated. They see the glamour in Western movies and television shows, as well as

pictures of fashion models in magazines and newspapers. Thai people are proud of their traditional culture, but they have absorbed the idea of Western cultural imperialism that Western style is tres chic. In Molum bands I have seen performers wearing a big cross. At first I thought they must be Christian converts, but when I have talked to them they know nothing of Christianity. They just wear it because they have seen Western rock singers wearing a cross, and they think it looks cool.

For this dance, however, Mua did not wear a Western style dress. Instead, Mua showed up in a South Asian style, complete with a nose ring. [see photo] But instead of a red circle on the forehead, Mua had carefully shaped a red heart, like a valentine love message. Mua is certainly a unique person, who follows her own desires and has constructed a full life within Isan culture. I have often had people who do not know about my association with Mua point to her and say “that lady is a man,” like they expect me to be surprised. But I have never heard even one disparaging comment about Mua or any other ladyboy in these villages. To the contrary, people often go out of their way to be friendly toward them.

When I sent my last email with a photo of me dancing with Mua at a monk’s ordination, one person wrote me back: “Wow, Walter, your research is really cutting edge. Not only are you the man, but the dude dancing next to you is the man and the woman.” I got a kick out of that. Ladyboys show up at every Buddhist event. In their outlandish behavior, long hair, and fancy dress, they are the total opposite of the monks with their calm demeanor, shaved heads, and plain orange robes. But Thai Buddhism seems quite adept at incorporating opposites. My hypothesis is that this respectful treatment of transgender people is a holdover from pre-Buddhist animist religion in Thailand, which has now been incorporated into Thai religion. Buddhist acceptance of transgender people is a prime reason why this minority is so well accepted in Isan culture.

I always tell the ladyboys here that they should be grateful to live in a place where they are so accepted. I tell them about the violence directed toward transgender people in America. They always have this questioning look when I tell them about the attacks and murders that happen all too often in the United States. Their look and responses show they do not understand why someone would kill a transgender person just because they are gender nonconformist. If a carload of trannies showed up unannounced at a street dance in a small village in the United States, I hate to think what might happen. But here, they are just part of the scenery. Little kids see them, see the way everyone accepts them, and so they grow up without prejudice. Because transgender people have been a prominent and accepted part of Isan culture going back probably thousands of years, the old people here grew up in this kind of accepting cultural environment as well. If anybody does harbor prejudice, they certainly do not take any action or show any disapproval in public.

The young men in particular gravitate around the ladyboys. In America, adolescent males and young men would be precisely the most likely people to be violent or show antagonism. But here, sometimes it seems like the only people who really let loose and dance like there is no tomorrow are the young men and the ladyboys.

The young men are not only close to the ladyboys, but they are also close to each other. The dances go on all day, but usually the old people retire by the evening. Some young women may dance, but they are either in front or on the sidelines. After dark the young men are the center of the dance. Shirts come off, pants are dropping low on their waists to the point part of their buttocks can be seen, and their frantic dancing gets more and more close. [see photo] At points they are one big group, jumping up and down together, with lots of body contact. Hands go everywhere, and body is pressed against body.

After my hands got sore from the drumming, by the evening I was ready to give my drum to someone else to play. Several people urged me to join in the dance. As I became part of the group, it is always amazing to me how many times a young man would pause in front of me, and actually back up to me so that his buttocks were firmly in my groin. As we danced, there was a lot of obviously sexual excitement. Hands rubbed my butt, and I was groped several times. Yet, these are straight boys, and I have been coming here long enough to know that they do not intend to approach me for sex. Everybody in this village knows that I am gay, and most of the young men have never made an overt sexual invitation. But they really like me to touch them when they are dancing. If I tell them they are handsome, they beam with pride. They don't want to have sex with me, but they have absolutely no hesitation about holding my hand as we walk down the street, or putting their arm around me as we sit together. They may drape their leg over mine, or lie down with their head in my lap. Married men do that as well with me.

This is what life is like in a non-homophobic society. People grow up, from their earliest consciousness, with an awareness that there are transgender people, lesbians and gay men in their village and in their life. There is no shock of learning of an unknown alien type of strange person. Some people are tall, some are short, some are heavy, some are skinny, some are light-skinned, some are dark-skinned, and some are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. People see that I am left-handed, but there is no more reaction to them knowing I am gay than there is to knowing that I am a leftie. It's just the way things are.

What I have learned from my experience in Thailand, as well as my experience with traditionalist American Indians and Polynesians, is that LGBT people will not be accepted in a society until they are completely open with their relatives, neighbors, and friends. The reason this is so important is so that the children of those people will see specific individuals who are LGBT. But they will not look at them as a category, but as "my relative so-and-so", or "my mother's friend." Children are the key to a non-homophobic future.

When I hear some LGBT person say that they have not come out to their young nieces and nephews, but "will wait until they are old enough to understand it," that is exactly wrong. Young children's brains are constantly observing and processing everything they see around them in their daily life. That is how they learn. If an adolescent has never seen or known a disabled person in a wheelchair, they might recoil or feel uncomfortable when they do see such a person. But for little kids, when they see a disabled person for

the first time they are likely to ask questions and then very quickly get used to the reality that some people are different. Young children are much quicker to adjust to new information than adolescents and adults.

I will never forget an experience I had at Huntington Beach in southern California in 1989. My partner Robert and I wanted to go swimming at the beach, but when we got there the water was too cold for me. So I sat in a beach chair, reading a book while Robert went swimming. As I was sitting there a cute little five year old boy came walking by and smiled at me and said hello. He had a plastic shovel and sandpail, and he plopped down and started filling the pail with sand. He started talking with me as he continued to shovel. Back and forth went the shovel, filling up the pail until it was full. Then he would turn the pail over and make a sand castle. After that, he would start shoveling again, filling up the pail and turning over the full pail to make another part of the sand castle.

After this went on for awhile and he described in great detail the sand castle he was making, Robert came out of the ocean shivering in the cool afternoon breeze. Robert had a beautiful trim muscular body, which he liked to show off, so he was wearing nothing but a little Speedo bikini. It was obvious to anyone that he was a man. Robert came running over, grabbed a towel that was on the edge of my chair, and asked me for the keys to my van. He wanted to go there to warm up.

As soon as Robert ran to the van with the keys, the little boy asked inquisitively, "Who was that man?" As he continued to shovel, my mind raced with thoughts about what I should say. I weighed different options, then I decided. I said, "That's Robert. He is my husband." As soon as I said this the little boy, who had been continually shoveling while he asked the question, suddenly stopped. He looked at Robert in the distance, then he looked at me. His shovel was stopped midway in the air. He had a questioning look on his face. He said: "You love each other, like a husband and a wife?" "Yes" I answered. He looked at me again. Then, after his brain had had a moment to process this new information, he looked back at his empty shovel and said, "Oh, OK." Then he stuck the shovel into the sand and brought another shovelful of sand into the pail. He continued to shovel, back and forth, while telling me in even greater detail about the grand sand castle he was constructing.

In the case of this five year old boy, it had taken him about two minutes to process this new information he had never encountered before. For the first time he saw two very obvious men who were husbands. Not a man and a woman, but a man and a man. He learned that day that a man and a man can have the same kind of relationship as a man and a woman. There was no need for me to talk about sexual acts, or anything else in terms of private behaviors. This little boy filed that new bit of information away, that two men can be husbands, in the same way that his brain received every other new bit of information he was learning. And then he went back to the really important topic which was how to build a wonderful sand castle.

Since I only saw that boy that one time, I have no idea if he grew up being homophobic or not. But even that single encounter with me probably had some kind of influence on his acceptance of other people in same-sex relationships that he might meet later. A single encounter with a stranger, though, is not enough. If that boy had an uncle or aunt in a same-sex relationship, or a neighbor, teacher, or friend of his parents, then that situation would have a much greater potential for acceptance. This is why it is so crucially important for LGBT people to come out of the closet. In homophobic America, coming out is a political act.

The key is to influence kids while they are young. The younger the better. The more little kids see LGBT people as they are forming their sense of what their surroundings are, the more likely they are to process this reality just like they are learning every other thing. The Isan children who were there in the street dance were much more interested in me taking their picture than in the fact that several males were dressed in women's clothing. Such an occurrence is just par for the course. Nothing strange about it.

Homophobic conservatives are correct when they accuse gay activists of wanting to convert their children. The goal of gay activism is to convert people of all ages, from being homophobes to being tolerant people. Once people are tolerant, the next step is for them to become genuinely accepting. That is really hard to accomplish with adults. I am fortunate to work in a field like academia that is more tolerant of sexual diversity than most sectors of American society, but I have experienced plenty of discrimination within academia. And transphobia is especially bad. I remember the first time I taught Transgender Studies at USC, and I had brought a cross-dressing psychologist to campus as a guest speaker in my class. This person is very tall, and sometimes people surmise that this femininely dressed individual is a male. As we were walking to my classroom I saw a History professor give me a look of such hostility that I was taken aback. That professor has now died, and the reality is that it may take a new generation before society can change significantly. Rather than trying to convert old people, a more effective strategy is to focus on that new generation if attitudes are going to be affected.

When I was at the height of my political activism in the gay rights movement about 1979 or 1980, as the leader of the Greater Cincinnati Gay Coalition, I snuck into a local church that was showing an anti-gay documentary film. This film had been produced by a fundamentalist Christian church in California. I cannot remember the title, but I do remember the film. The filmmaker had gone to San Francisco and shot footage of the city's annual Gay Pride Parade. In this film, which was designed to jolt the viewer into seeing the shocking things that went on in the Sodom and Gomorrah by the Bay, the most outlandish behaviors were what made it into the film: there were bare-chested muscle men in tight shorts holding each other and kissing, there were butch lesbians with buzz cuts carrying protest signs and marching determinedly in their combat boots, there were men with beards and hairy chests dressed in feminine dresses, there were other men with outlandish makeup wearing nuns' frocks and offering prayers and benedictions to the partiers in the parade, there was a carload of lesbians making out with each other as they joyously rode along the parade route. Most disturbing to the filmmakers was a contingent

in the parade of gay and lesbian teenagers marching along, happily waving to all the bystanders. “See” blared the narrator, “the homosexuals are out to recruit the young!”

To an adult who had never seen such things, this film was indeed shocking. People of the same sex in skimpy clothing sticking their tongues down each others’ throats was an effective way to motivate them to become active in opposing gay and lesbian rights. But I remember thinking to myself that, for the many children present at that church meeting, this film probably had a different effect. Though I am sure the filmmaker did not have this intent, every single parader shown in the film was smiling or laughing. The kids watching that film saw queer people having a lot of fun. Any little boy or girl in that audience who would grow up having same-sex attractions could recall that film and know for sure that they were not the only one in the world to have such feelings. And any other child viewing that film would process these scenes the same way that five year old boy at the beach processed my statement as he made his sand castle. So I was both disturbed and happy as I left that church that day.

At USC I originated and taught a class for many years called “Overcoming Prejudice.” For this class I did a lot of research in social psychology about how attitudes are changed and prejudices dropped. What I learned is that having gay people being represented positively in the mass media is very important, but research has shown that the most effective way to prevent homophobia in the next generation is for massive numbers of LGBT people to be open about themselves to their younger relatives, neighbors, friends and children of friends and co-workers. Conservatives are right: the battle for gay rights is a battle for the hearts and souls of young children. If kids grow up seeing LGBT people as part of society, then same-sex sexuality becomes just another of the many aspects of life that they absorb in their worldview. They have a more accurate understanding of the realities of the world than those children who grow up without knowing about LGBT people. If the latter group learns that reality later on when they are older, it is alien and shocking to them. If they learn it early, it is just part of the way the world is.

For kids growing up in Isan villages, they are spared the trauma and confusion that occur for older people when they find out a relative or friend is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. These kids are educated to the realities of life. They already know all that. So what. Big deal.

Now for more important matters:

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THE BIG PROBLEM IN MY LIFE IS CEREAL

I have practically everything I desire here in Thailand, except for cereal. GrapeNuts and Shredded Wheat are two of the few American things that I cannot do without. Though I have looked everywhere I cannot find those kinds of cereal anywhere in Thailand. I brought several boxes with me when I flew here in December, but unfortunately I did not estimate correctly how much I would need. Last week I was down to my last box, so I emailed my mother and her husband to send me some more. The U.S. Post Office

Express Mail got it here in six days, which is great, but charged \$73.00 for eight boxes of cereal. Wow, I did not know it would be so expensive. That is about the same amount of money that I have paid for three months of electric use at my house. Added to the \$3.50 for the cereal itself, with the postage that means each box of cereal costs me about \$13.00. I better savor every bite!

I keep the cereal in the refrigerator because that is practically the only way I can keep ants out of it. The ants are so tiny that they can squeeze their way even into some plastic bags that are not 100% sealed. Of course, people here do not get upset when ants get into their food; they just eat the ants along with their meal. To them ants are just a bit of extra protein to add to the meal.

PLEASE CLOSE THE DOOR

The weather has been pleasant since I arrived in January, though on some nights it was downright cold. But last week it became really hot. Last year I was plagued by heat rashes that would not go away. Despite taking various pills and creams I only got relief when I went back to America. Within a few days of arrival in Los Angeles, my rash went away. Now for the first time this year, last week I noticed a tiny bit of outbreak on my chest. I have started using the air conditioner in my office (where I also moved a bed so I can sleep in there) and took some cold showers and it went away, but yesterday it came back again. I am worried that this might be just the start of another round of heat rashes. I hope not. I will go to Cambodia and hope that the weather might be a bit cooler there than here.

I have been busy doing a lot of writing lately, for an article I committed to do for a journal, so I have been staying home and working in my air conditioned office. People are being really nice to me. Neighbors bring me a delicious dish of food, or come to tell me about an upcoming party they want me to attend, or just to say hello. The only difficulty is that every time someone comes for a visit, they walk into my office and leave the door open. Isan people just are not used to closing doors. The only time they close the door is when they are going to sleep at night, and sometimes not even then. So when they walk in I invariably have to say “garuna bit batu” which means “please close the door.” Then when they go out again I have to repeat that, but about half the time it does not register with them and I still have to get up from my writing and go after them to close the door. Or if they do close it, they do not close it all the way. Nobody in the village has an air conditioner except me, so they have absolutely no understanding of the need to close the door.

What is really funny, though, is to watch people navigate around my screen doors. If the screen door to my office is open, it almost completely blocks the main entry to the house. I try to keep it closed, but with people coming and going it is often left open. If it is open and someone comes in or goes out of the house, instead of simply closing that screen door they will squeeze every so tightly around the open screen door. The first time that happened I thought the person must be drunk, but since then I have seen the same thing happen with so many visitors. When I see someone starting to squeeze, I tell them to

shut the office screen door, but they say “mai ben lai” [don’t worry about it] and continue to squeeze past. Even fat people would rather suck in their gut than push the screen door closed. What is it about touching a door with Isan people? This is a mystery I just do not understand.

Even with Lek, who lived in America for fifteen years and knows that air conditioning is not cheap, the door is sometimes left open. But with the screen doors it is a constant struggle. I will give Lek a lecture for the five thousandth time about why I want to keep the screen doors closed, to keep the insects out, and then the very next time Lek goes out of a room the door is left wide open. At first I thought this must be some kind of subconscious resistance to me, but whenever I talk to Lek about it, Lek just says “sorry, I forgot.” If this were only Lek doing this, I would definitely think it was an indication of some kind of problem, but every single person here does the exact same thing. Whenever there are several people in the house, I don’t even bother to try to keep the screens closed. But lately the mosquitoes have gotten really bad in the kitchen and bathroom, so I am perturbed whenever I go in there and get bitten. The mosquitoes don’t seem to bother the villagers, but they sure dive bomb onto me whenever I take a shower. I show Lek the mosquito whelps on me, Lek looks genuinely worried and says “Oh, I’m so sorry,” and offers to give me some cream to rub on it. Then as Lek goes to the other room to get the cream the door is left open.

Lek is so attentive to my needs, but as with other people here, closing doors is just not part of their way of living. As the time approaches for me to leave for Cambodia, Lek is sad that I am leaving. “Oh, I will be so lonely when you are gone,” Lek says. “Nonsense” I reply, “Every single day this house is filled with people coming to visit. In this little village you have more friends than ninety percent of Americans. I don’t think lonely applies to you in the least.” Lek laughed and had to admit that I was right, “Still, I will miss you while you are gone. Please come back as soon as possible.” OK, I promised. But I have had enough experiences in doing fieldwork that I never know what opportunities lie ahead. I look forward to my time coming up in Cambodia. I will write from there whenever I have time.