

## HOUSE OPENING BUDDHIST CEREMONY

The night after my Lucky Day ceremony was the first night that I was allowed to sleep in my new house, and it was a great relief finally to be able to sleep here. Even though the electric installation is far from finished, one plug was installed so I could have a light and a fan to keep cool. After a restful sleep I awoke early before dawn to get ready for the Buddhist monks who were coming to bless the new house. I was told that the number of monks in attendance should be an odd number, so we settled on five monks as the number. My friend the English-speaking monk from Roi Et led the ceremony, along with the abbot and the other monk who reside at the Wat in this village. Two other monks from a neighboring village, who I had not previously met, also came. They entered ceremoniously and sat down in the living room on reed mats that had been laid out for them. They began chanting long prayers in Pali, the ancient Indian language of the Buddha. As they chanted, they spread a long white cotton string from one end of the house to the other, wishing for good fortune and happiness for me as I live in this house. Then the English speaking monk made a speech to the villagers who were crowded into the house to watch the ceremony. He used this as an opportunity to explain to the villagers about the kind of research that I do as an anthropologist, and asked that they cooperate to provide me with information as well as being a good neighbor.

After his speech the monks did another long chanting prayer in Pali. They had me come forward and receive a special blessing while I prayed for a good future while I poured sacred water from a glass into a bowl. An elderly neighbor lady helped me do this correctly. Then they were served food on large bamboo trays that had been brought from the village Buddhist temple. When they finished eating, the rest of the food was served to the crowd of people who waited until the ceremony ended. It seems that practically every Buddhist ceremony involves a communal meal at the end. As the people ate, the abbot of the village temple climbed up high on a ladder to paint some sacred symbols above the entryway at the front of the house. I and some friends held the ladder as the monk perched precariously at the top of the ladder. The symbols are quite intricate, and I want to ask to find out the meaning of these symbols. After finishing that painting, the monk went from room to room with a reed brush and a pail of water, spraying water on the walls while giving sacred prayers to protect me and other occupants of the house.

I then presented each monk with a brass bowl with practical items inside (toothpaste, detergent, handcloth, etc.) and an envelope containing 200 baht (about five US dollars) which I was told was the appropriate amount. I felt that the abbot did so much special blessings that the next day I gave him an envelope with an additional 500 baht (about fourteen US dollars). He was very grateful, and he gave me a special healing massage for my shoulder that was sore from the work I had been doing on the house.

After a leisurely meal, the monks left and the villagers gradually left. Several stayed behind to clean up the leftovers from the feast that I had paid for. I was happy to pay for the food for everyone, but as I remarked to the monk on the day before, I thought that this

custom was onerous for many Thai people who have just gone through the expenses of building a house, to also have to pay for two big feasts for the neighbors. My Isan friends who handled the food purchasing and preparation did a wonderful job, and at the end returned some money to me with a careful accounting of all that they had spent. I find the villagers here to be exceptionally honest, and they pride themselves on this quality. They see dealing honestly with neighbors as integral to the harmony of the village.

It was a lovely ceremony, but at the end after everyone had left, I felt mixed feelings of relief at finally being able to move in, with apprehension about all the work still remaining to be done. Since no one would come to work for the next few days before the Buddhist festival on the weekend, I spent the day unpacking boxes and trying to establish some semblance of order from the move. It is hard to do much with so little of the electrical work completed. So, on the following day I decided to follow the wishes of my neighbors and avoid work to attend the festival.

By the next morning, as I walked through the village, numerous people called to me to join them as they sat in small groups of drinking buddies. I do not like to drink too much, and the idea of consuming alcohol in the morning is more than my stomach can bear, so I had to politely say no to their invitations. I made my way to the temple where a crowd of people had already gathered. Banners and flags were flying everywhere, and many decorations had been made for the temple. A large platform was placed in the middle of the temple, with banana leaves decorating it. On this platform a monk was sitting and chanting in Pali. Periodically someone would beat a large gong, and people would throw rice at the monk doing the chanting. One monk with a particularly beautiful voice elicited quite a bit of thrown rice, as well as excited whoops as one might expect to hear at a rock concert. The calm demeanor of the monks contrasted greatly with the excitement of the village laypeople.

After a big midday meal, the chanting continued in the temple. But the real excitement moved outside. A group of monks led a parade through the streets of the village, to the opposite end at a pond of sacred water that is next to the village primary school. The monks sat on reed mats next to the pond, and did special chants while the crowd of people prayed. At the end of the prayers, the people unfolded a very long painting of scenes from the life of the person who was later reincarnated as the Buddha. This person seems particularly important in Thai Buddhism. People joined to hold a section of the beautiful painting, which had been painted by hand by several villagers. I was walking alongside the crowd, taking photographs the whole way.

By the time the crowd had walked back to the temple, they were met with a large group of drummers. This band included portable amplifiers for an electric guitar and keyboard, and they started moving around and around the temple. On hearing the exciting drumming, the crowd of followers enthusiastically started dancing. I was taking pictures, and since the people here love to have their picture taken I was greeted with smiles and thanks. Eventually, someone grabbed my camera and motioned for me to join the crowd. It had been a long time since I had done any dancing, due to my dislocated knee and knee surgery, but I awkwardly joined in. As I got the beat of the steps they were doing, and

felt that my knee was doing OK, I got into the music and really loosened up. Isan music is wonderfully danceable, and the crowd of villagers began to grow as the intensity of the music built into a raucous beat. By the late afternoon, after circling the temple many times, the drummers led the crowd out of the temple grounds and through the streets of the village. As they moved along, more villagers joined in. Many people from neighboring villages also attended.

What is nice about Isan dancing is that people of all ages, from little children to the elderly, seem equally comfortable in participating. Old elderly woman who is a leader in the temple was right at the front of the crowd the entire time, dancing with enthusiasm. I was surprised to see a person like her, in her 70s, dancing so exuberantly for so long. As the crowd swelled, however, I noticed a core group of young men (mid teens to late twenties) had left their drinking parties to form a central core of the dancers. Just as I observed at the New Years celebrations, the young men danced excitedly with each other. It looked like a Gay Pride parade, as they were so affectionate and physical with each other. Isan culture seems to give a lot of leeway to young men, allowing them to engage in all kinds of behavior in seeming recognition of their high adrenaline levels. If they pour out their energy in dancing so wildly, this is seen as a good thing because it gives them a release in socially acceptable ways. It is understood by all that they will eventually grow out of it, and behave more responsibly as adult men later, but for now the guiding rule seems to be “sanook” (have a good time!).

After circling the village several times, the drummers returned to the temple while leading the swelling crowd with them. Inside the temple, the calm Pali chanting continued while just outside the temple walls the raucous drumming built in intensity. I saw quite a number of people leave the dance to go inside the temple, and immediately change from dancing to prayerful calmness. Then, after finishing their prayers, they joined in the dancing again just as enthusiastically when they went outside. The calmness of the temple was like the placid center of a storm, and the contrast of the surrounding dancing could not have been more stark.

When I took a break from the dancing, the English-speaking monk said several people told him I was a good role model for the young men, because I was dancing so enthusiastically and enjoying myself so much, but without drinking. I said I don't have to drink to have a good time, but just appreciate the joy of life.

The drumming continued past sunset and late into the night. The dancing became ever more intense. Several young men, all of whom know that I am gay, came up to me and danced in very suggestive ways, with lots of body contact to the point that I became a bit embarrassed. Yet, they are not gay, and evidently have no interest in having sex with me, but they simply did so in order to enjoy dancing with me. This is what the world would look like without homophobia. They have absolutely no fear that anyone would think that they are gay, and they can express their feelings freely without worry. This is one of the wonderful things about life in this village.

As I enjoyed dancing late into the night, I realized that my condemnations of Isan multiple holidays is inconsistent with my enjoyment of Isan festivals and partying. How can I criticize the workers for not coming to work at my house during the days leading to the festival, when I myself partook of the enjoyment of the festivities? The whole weekend was a wonderful celebration of the human spirit, interestingly combining the reflective calmness of Buddhist chanting with the no-holds-barred exuberance of the drumming and dancing. Two sides of human personality, with the need for both elements, was present in this festival.

On the next day, to my surprise, the workers appeared to do the work on my house. We got a lot done on that day, and I was pleased at the progress. I was all set to go on the next day, but the English-speaking monk asked me to speak to three of his classes at Mahachulalongkorn University in Roi Et, about sixty kilometers from my village. How could I refuse his request, after he had been so nice to me? I reluctantly told the workers I could not be present the following day, and they accepted with a shrug of unconcern. On the next day, after giving lectures on Buddhism in America, on environmental destruction, and on effective strategies for improving English instruction in Thailand, I was presented with a beautiful large stuffed pillow that is a local style for lounging on a bamboo platform. Some of the monks gave me little Buddhist charms, and they insisted that I take a 13 year old novice to my home for the weekend to help him improve his English. He is very friendly, so I agreed and brought him along. He immediately felt comfortable at my house, and fell right into the routine. I asked if he wanted to stay at the village temple, but he insisted on sleeping at my house. He has been quite pleasant as a houseguest, helping me in planting the garden at the house and going with me as I do shopping. Beyond the fact that he has a shaved head, wears Buddhist robes, and does not eat after noon, he seems a typical teenager. He likes staying here so much that he has now been here for a week, and only today told me that he has to return to his monastery tomorrow at the latest. Since I have been talking English to him constantly, I feel that he has learned a lot during this time. When I was not busy with the house work, I showed him how to do things on a computer.

This week has seen a lot of work being done on the house. There are still many problems with the construction, and the house is a lot hotter than I expected, but it has turned out to have nice qualities. All the villagers who come to see it say how beautiful it is. Now if I can only get it all to work right, I can relax and enjoy it. That will be in another report.

March 16, 2007

I bought a new mobile phone for 5,000 baht (\$125 USD) that is supposed to be able to connect me to the internet from my house. So far, after trying on a number of days, I have only been able to connect three times. sorry for the lack of communication, but I have been so occupied with the house construction and all the ceremonies, and getting the house set up the way I like it, that I have not been going into Maha Sarakham to get to the internet.

Lek was worried about me being here with no one to speak English, so he took the bus to come here. He has been his critical self, but also very helpful at the same time. Tone, the translator from Maha Sarakham University who I hired begged me for an advance on his salary of 2,500

baht, in order to pay his rent. I told him every single time I have loaned money to a Thai person, I never get paid back. So I said I really did not want to do that. He begged some more, promising on his honor as a responsible university graduate that he would follow through and either pay me back or work it off. I pay him the outlandishly high salary of 500 baht per day ( \$12.50 USD) so I told him if he would promise not to be like all the others I had hired, and show up for work dependably, then I would advance it to him. He promised on a stack of Buddhist prayer books. Well, he showed up for three days after that, and then did not show up. So he owes me 1000 baht still. Lek arrived that day, so I did not call Tone. Several days later, never having heard anything from Tone, I called him. He said he had to go to Bangkok, and would return within the next two days. I said he should call me immediately if there is any change from our plan, and he promised faithfully to do that. That was four days ago and I have not heard from him since then. As it turns out, I did not need him during these days since Lek was here. But it still galls me that he has not called or shown up as promised. If even a responsible university graduate student acts this way, I can only conclude that Thai people are just not dependable. They are the nicest people in the world, but promises and commitments mean literally nothing to them.

Lek has been very helpful in getting good prices for workers for the house, and for materials. His sister's husband has worked here for several days for free, making my fishpond, and done great work. The house really is turning out to be beautiful. It just has a lot of problems. I dread to think what will happen during the rainy season.

Yesterday some people told me that the way I have an open side of the house, during a tropical storm that my whole living room will be soaked. I put up a plastic tarp as a sun shade, and it works fine for that, but they said it will not be sufficient for a bad storm. I wish people would tell me these things earlier, but they do not want to be the purveyor of bad news so they say nothing when I am planning the house. Now I am told that I need to buy an aluminum roof to cover the fishpond, which I thought would protect the house from a storm. I thought I might need to buy this anyway, because I had been suffering from mosquito bites so much that I decided to go ahead and spend the money to put screens over the whole yard. That was about as cheap as doing screens all around the house. But when we went to price the screens, the helpful employee at Homemart told me about a mosquito trap for 2,500 baht. Since that was considerably cheaper than the screens, I decided to buy it. Also, he recommended a spray for bugs in the ground, and Lek sprayed the whole yard. For the last three days this seems to be working pretty well, so I am not getting bitten as before. I wish I had known about all this earlier, or I would not have spent so much time and energy and money trying to make the house bugproof.

But I did decide to put screens on my two office windows and a screen door for my office and another for the kitchen. When they finished the work I saw that there were no locks on any of the screens. The installer said he never heard of locks for screens. Can you imagine? I pointed out how anyone could come to the front window, push open the screen, reach inside the window, and steal something (like my computer) sitting on my desk by the window. The man suggested I move my desk away from the window!!! I insisted that every screen door in America is installed with locks, and I want locks. They always reply, "well, this is not America, this is Thailand." After insisting again, the man left. The next day he returned with plastic locks for the two windows, but he said he could not find any locks even a simple hook, for the screen door. So, now I have two screen doors with no locks. Not that they would be used anyway. Neither Lek nor anyone else in Thailand is used to opening and closing doors, since their doors are always open whenever anyone is at home, so my entreaties to "please close the door" go for naught. Finally, after showing Lek the flies in the kitchen because he continually leaves the screen door open, he is starting to close it--sometimes. But he and other Thai people just don't think about things like that.

I was always irritated at Lek not screwing on lids correctly. He continually screws a lid on crooked, so ants often get into food. I always thought this was just his own person idiocentracy (sp?), but now I see other Thai people continually doing the same thing, they wipe away the ants,

and I point out if they screw the lid on carefully ants cannot get into their food, but they just give me these blank looks. They really do think very differently from everything I have been used to. Sometimes I feel like Alice in Wonderland here.

Just as I am getting frustrated with this kind of lack of attention to detail, someone will do something especially kind or helpful to me. They really are the sweetest people in the world. How can I get upset at these little things when they are so nice.

I have a small walkin closet, and I told the electrician I want a small light ("lek fire") in there. Later, I come in to find that he has installed the biggest florescent tube that I have bought (for the front of the house) in this small closet. When I complained, he said he thought I would want to see well the things that were inside the closet! I have told him to always check with me before making some kind of decision like this, and he promises to do that (and sometimes actually does ask, which is better than most of the workers I have found here). But then something like this happens.

Today I realized that, when walking into the bathroom late at night when it is dark, the switch to the closet is closet to the entry, and the switch to the bathroom light is further away. Thus, I have to stumble about in the dark when it would have been just as easy to install the switch to the bathroom closest to the door.

What goes through the mind of these workers just boggles my imagination. Every Thai house I have been into has all these little things that make living there more difficult. But people just shrug and accept it all as part of the reality of life. Or, they will construct some kind of makeshift thing that will get the job accomplished. I have seen people run two electric extension cords, and put the connecting point right in the middle of a doorway, where it is dangerous to trip on. They could easily change to put the long cord where the short one is, so that the connector is not in the middle of the doorway, but that is just not the way they think. No problem. Just step over it.

I dont know why my electrician was even working on that closet, when the electricity in the bathroom is still not finished. What goes on in the minds of these workers (and he is among the best I have found) really defies any kind of logic. He finished the lights in Lek's salon (which will not be used until Lek moves here permanently) before doing the lights in my office, which I am using every day. Finally that did get done, but every worker I have hired seems to do exactly the lowest priority thing when I insist that the other things are higher priority. They are not deliberately trying to sabotage my efforts, and they genuinely want to be helpful. But if I want three bricks cemented to finish a row of bricks, they will inevitably start another row of bricks first, leaving the unfinished part until later. Thus, many things are unfinished.

Lek decided to pave the driveway, which I thought was low priority and should wait until later. But he got two workers for so cheap that I agreed to go ahead. Then after they started the work, it turned out that they did not know how to do smoothing concrete work. Bunlute, Lek's brother in law, was going to come and do that part for free, but he got busy in his work and he could not come. So the only person who knew how to do that was the electrician!! So for two days the only electrician in this district was working on the driveway while the two workers I hired stood around and watched him. Some bargain! Plus, the electricity is still not finished, because the electrician has been so busy on the driveway. They worked and worked, and the carport is beautiful. But later I checked and, despite my repeated statements that I wanted to make sure the concrete slopes so that water does not stand on it because I do not want to fall on a slick wet carport, after they left and the concrete dried, I poured some water on it and it just sat there. There is no slope at all. Plus, after making this beautiful paved carport, they left jagged edges at the front side, which could damage a car tire as it pulls in and out of the carport. I made them redo that. But why dont they think of these things before hand?

A former student of mine, who is now living in India, says the workers there are exactly the same way, and his advice to me is to learn meditation so that I do not let these things bother me. I guess with this kind of incompetence, one really does need to learn to meditate. Maybe that is why meditation is such a big deal in Asia.

Tonight I came out into the carport to see Lek painting over the concrete splashes that the workers had left on the wall. That was very nice of him, only he did not put down paper on the floor, as he repeatedly has heard me insist that all the workers use, and so there are paint spots all along the carport edge. The other day I noticed in the village temple, which has a beautiful tile floor, that there were paint spots all along the walls of the temple. They just do not notice such things, even though I think it ruins a beautiful tile floor. They just laugh when I point this out. Crazy American!

Lek decided to let me keep his car to use here, and so for that favor I bought four new tires which were badly needed. That cost me 10,600 baht (\$300 USD) but I think is well worth it for having a car that I can drive. plus I want good tires for safety if I am going to be driving it around. Lek has been buying used tires, and has had about eight flat tires since I have been riding with him last fall. When I say the need to buy new tires, he always says he has no money, so he can only afford used tires. I point out that he has spent more money on used tires than if he had bought new tires in the beginning. And so it goes.

Well, every day the house gets closer to completion. Every day people in the village come to see the progress, and they always tell me it is the most beautiful house in the village. I want to scream that it has so many problems how can they be so sanguine. But then I look at their houses, and realize that this house is, by far, the most beautiful.

I have been getting some great deals on beautiful tropical plants, and plus the electrician has given me several plants for free from his yard. He has all these beautiful plants behind his house where no one goes, and all this ugly open space at the front of his house where he and his family spend their time. I tell him he should put some of these beautiful plants at the front to make his surroundings beautiful, but of course that does not happen. Oh well, at least the people here like my house a lot. I wish someone would offer to buy it, so that I could sell it and build another house now that I know all the mistakes to avoid. Of course, why do more work? As I lay on my hammock, overlooking the fishpond and the beautiful plants that I have planted (the mango tree is already starting to grow little mangos in only a week since I planted it!), I really do love it. So, I have to forget the problems and focus on the enjoyment I get from the good things about the house.

Of course, the big question is what to do when the hot weather arrives. It is already hotter than hades here, and I am only comfortable if I am DIRECTLY under the ceiling fan or one of the portable fans. I had hoped to avoid having an air conditioner because they use so much electricity. But my office is like an oven. I don't know why, since I made a very high ceiling and put lots of insulation in the ceiling. But it is still hot. I am going to have to do something to improve the air flow. Lek does not want to open up the top because he fears dust, but I may have to tear some holes in the walls or ceiling to get more ventilation as I originally wanted. The neighbors say it is hot because I built a high wall around the yard. I wanted that for privacy and to block the ugly houses next to this house. But they say the high wall cuts out the breezes. Maybe they are right. Ugh.