

Brewing Tea

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Pali Buddhist texts show a multi-dimensional picture of a person, the Buddha, who determinedly finds the ultimate meaning of life. In the five main books of canonical *suttas*, gospels, the Buddha teaches what he found in a large ‘serial’ collection of what might be called ‘doctrinal statements’. Over the past 100 years, an academic discipline has developed in European universities termed Buddhist Studies. This academic endeavor uses various tools that have developed out of the academic discipline of Western Philosophical inquiry. Textual scholars of Buddhist Studies search for those logical consistencies, or inconsistencies, within the stated doctrines. Such endeavors certainly amount to a search. And re-search. One must follow an initial statement by the Buddha or other player in the sutta following so far as to systematically sift through the remaining texts, all five volumes, searching for consistency in the Buddha’s logic. A constant, arduous, and meticulous combing through and combing through.

It is an ironic twist of history that this scholastic practice of Buddhist Studies developed in Europe rather than in Buddhist Asia. The wrenching turn that Europe took in the period of Galileo made all the difference: going from a culture that classified what things were to describing how they were. This was the development of critical inquiry. However, Asian Buddhist Research Institutes, with Japan leading the way, are now more and more adopting these academic methodologies. It was for this reason that I was hired to teach the subject of Academic Writing and Research Methodology in Buddhist Studies in Mahachulalongkorn University. Mahachulalongkorn, or MCU, is Thailand’s primary Buddhist university. My basic technique of teaching was to read academic papers from the Buddhist Studies journals and look at the logic that the scholar employed in his or her research topic. It became a central focus of my class and also my counseling hours, to again and again point out the patterns of logical inquiry which actually constitute the internal structures of most of the papers. This was of course a difficult learning process for my students as none of them spoke English as their native tongue.

A predictable side effect of this teaching duty, was that my mind was almost continually lodged in logic space. In the direction of absent-mindedness, professionally dwelling on my subject whether eating, sleeping or other. It was first and most immediately occupied with the logic of the particulars, of the governing factors. It didn't matter if they were theoretical or experiential. The structure was there in the classroom or there out in the street.

Most of my time was spent in the department. The university was centered in Wat Mahatat, one of the main monasteries in Bangkok. That was located a two minute walk from the river bank. The *Chao Phraya* river. The great wandering serpentine river of Thailand. For my exercise, I would walk out the front of Wat Mahatat and across to the Royal Family's parade grounds, Sanam Luang. Once over the side streets became the venue for escaping from the traffic while getting a good late afternoon's walk down to Pa-u-rat, the old city's Little India. This was a daily habit. I would walk and review the day's class materials. In late June, following this, my narrow view of my daily activities, when walking home from that Nepali chai shop, I stooped into an almost abandoned café to use the toilet. Exiting the toilet though was a non-descript Asian man, forgettable. Yes, right down to the Chinese teapot filled with water and brewed tea leaves. This was cradled in his strong and rough and true Asian hands.

"*Ni pao-cha ma?*" I inquired if he was drinking the tea... It was just an off-handed remark as the Chinese in Thailand usually don't understand the Mandarin dialect. Oh, but he answered snap back, "*Duai*, yes, I am drinking tea; *ee-chi huh*...Come and drink with me." I sat down at his table, a table with a stained plastic top that he obviously shared with a vacuous, an eighty year old grandfather. He was dressed in pajamas. They had been drinking their dragon tea together. I continued to speak in Mandarin, "Hummm, you must be from Mainland China." He was not from Shanghai as I first guessed, but from *Guang Dong*, the region that supplied Hong Kong with its clip clack Cantonese dialect. Most Chinese like him come to Bangkok for doing business. "*Ah bu-shur, woa shur Jong ee-sen.*" How curious, he was a Chinese doctor. "Really, you are doing acupuncture?" No he wasn't, he was a practitioner of acupressure. *An-jin*.

Being somewhat tall and Chinese sturdy of farmer's stock, his common appearance, came into focus as I studied his face. Loose falling and side parted hair. Straight and black - like silk - his hair. It hung over his ruddy with a worn complexion of darkened skin. With unlined eyes, his off colored teeth portrayed, betrayed the many years of smoking and chewing the betel. "*Jen-de ma?* Is it true? That is a little known aspect of Chinese medicine; mostly they have used acupuncture on me." "Oh no! Acupuncture can be dangerous. It invades the body. With '*an-jin*' we just press...If you have a problem in your shoulder...here or here...Or, do you have problems ? I can help your problems. Do you ?" Yes indeed, my lower back had been out since May. After a two week stint of trying to rest on that soft mattress in Geneva. "*Duai, je-li yo won-ti.* Yes, I have a problem. Here. Right here!" After my three year absence from Taiwan, it was always inspiring to speak Mandarin. And a bonus maybe to help my sacroiliac or whatever my affliction was.

I moved a bit - showing some pain. "Oh, right here" I slowly turned my head and very gently placed my hand down, right on the spot. Then he had me lean over right down to my knees. He guided his forefinger to the exact spot. And at once, his strong fingers began the digging into the near-by muscle. With his digging and probing, immediately it brought - what an unsuspected relief! Deeper and deeper he pushed and poked. He coaxed a malevolent, spur-type energy out of that spot. It flew out. Was it gone? But after just a few minutes, I tried, out of politeness, to stop the poking and jabbing, his treatment.

"*Bu-how ee-shur, Woa bu-yao gae ni mang.*" He was sweating, intent. "I hate to be troublesome, giving you this work. It must be tiring." But he wouldn't relent. After this treatment - a relieving twenty minutes - I knew that I needed a follow up. "*Wang ee-sen,* Dr. Wang, you did that very well. I no doubt need to visit at your clinic." "Yes, you need to come three or four more times. Make it once, every three days."

“Ni de ban-kong-shur dzai-na-li?” I wanted to know where his office was, as he had come to the café to tea and treat the old grandfather. He answered that his office was fifteen or twenty minutes away. *“By foot?”* The distance he gave was doable. *“No by car.”* *“Oh, hen yuen.* It is quite far.” He then insisted that I come now - right now - to his office, the implication being that I could learn first hand where it was. But I was also anxious to be on my way. Because I could have my Thai friend call and get his address, I asked, *“Is your secretary Thai?”* *“Bu-hsin.* No that wouldn’t work”, he continued, *“Come, we’ll go there now. I’ll show you the way. Come.”*

Actually, I didn’t have any special thing on for that evening, just another lonely night in Bangkok. I merely wanted to get back to my apartment. I’d shower and read. Although his approach to inviting me was a bit clumsy but I felt that his healing skills were enough of a sufficient reason for me to not judge his character on his so oddly, idiosyncratic communication. He was from *‘Da-lou’*, Mainland China. Society there is not as sophisticated as it is in Taiwan. I agreed.

We walked out into the tepid, more than muggy, Bangkok night. I was a little surprised that he didn’t have a car. He took me out onto the street and he hailed a taxi. *“As you have helped with my problem, please let me pay.”* To this he did not agree. We were new friends, the taxi was his responsibility. *“It’s near Hua-long-pong, the central train station.”* Once we passed *Hua-long-pong*, we drove down a much less accessible street. Then we got out the taxi at the mouth of a rather dark alleyway. I paid it anyway. Dr. Wang was introverted, *“It’s down here,”* he pointed and we began walking...past a *tuk-tuk* taxi company. Past some dwellings had Chinese paper motifs on the tops of the narrow doors and across the many windows. This partially allayed my increasing sense of unease as to the wisdom of going on this journey.

We then turned onto a smaller and even darker alleyway. I would have a tough time defending myself if.... *“It’s here,”* he said. Indeed he spoke in Thai to a middle-aged man whose head appeared through a window. Whoever he was, he was in kind of an office. In the man’s office, he turned out to be the landlord of the entire housing block.

This is where Dr. Wang, my supposed new friend, rented an apartment. The landlord's desk has a large framed photo of his shaven headed orange robed monk, his *Ajahn*, slouched on a platform smoking what looked to be a large joint. It was a photographic amulet. A Buddhist Icon. Oh, extend your protection to me. I felt now that this, perhaps, was a safe haven after all. And so I was able to relax a bit the short time talking to the landlord.

From the time of Dr. Wang's visage has now changed from the innocuous healing to various shades of darkness. Or perhaps it was the darkness in the taxi cab. Did he pick up on my well-hidden apprehensions? He seems rather pleased that I am talking to his landlord, and I give my name card, 'Lecturer in Buddhist Studies.' We are discussing the fairly reasonable cost of apartments then Dr. Wang interjects, somewhat abruptly, "Better to see them—come up to my apt and we can also drink some tea."

I feel it difficult to refuse this paradox of healing and worrisome intentions but a doctor should have healing intentions. "Now all of my questions about Chinese medical sutras and Taoist meditations he has answered according to my studies of the texts. It is just too incongruous to intuit bad intentions..." The tension between my logic and intuition cancel each other out. This essentially leaves me in a state of...no control. I follow, attempting to exude confidence and trust. Internal resolve is there to extricate myself. If needed, I will use a maximum force.

The narrow, somberly yellowed stairway, shadows racing by in a vacuum. I fixate on our climb. From the 1st floor, up to the 2nd. Up again to the 3rd floor. This is a problem of logic. Was I now just experiencing a normal Chinese social custom? I have demonstrated my relative familiarity with Chinese culture. In short, we have previously engaged in...in a limited fashion, the philosophical and the spiritual discourses. We come to the 4th floor and step into the corridor. The staircase continues to ascend.

He opens his door. A panorama, the twilight zone of intention, he glides inside. Yes, I follow. The paint on ceilings and walls worn as the hallway, even the front office. His

double bed a field of unmade dreams. Packets and containers disheveled on the wall shelves. External restless energy assaults it batters me...it is his personal force. He is turning on the air-conditioning, "*woa in-kai mae yo...*, I more or less have no..."(I could not get the word 'time' out)... He stops, he intuits I am not ready to stay in there. He pirouettes, "Well this is the apartment, 3500 Baht..." "Oh...*How*, fine..." "OK let's go up on the roof and drink tea." And he is out of this one room nightmare. I follow. The door closes and locks itself.

On the stairs going up. I poise internally, ready to strike. Yet I hope that...he sees me composed, confident, solid. The roof door opens onto the hazy starred sky. There are four poured concrete walls that rise another four feet from flat roof. The walls are tall enough on which to rest one's forearms while gazing on the neighborhood below. A vista of rooftops are there and paths and homes and shops of this district of Bangkok. And two dozen or so potted plants and a gently swaying clothesline. From a cranny he extricates a fold-table with two stools. "*Ah, Pao-cha...*let's brew tea." He feels my intuitive assessment. Surely my appearance does not give my reluctance away. "*Ni ji-shuay*, how old are you?" he asks me. "39".

"Stick out your hand. I want to see your palm."

Examining, his eyes are staring, he starts to tell me things about myself. But I have no interest. I feel as if I am tip toeing along a tight rope. "*Dung ee-sha...*Wait a minute, I want to get my horoscope book." Down he goes. Relief...space, room and time to think. I shake the not knowing from my body. Will I need to jump off this roof? Reflective of my disorientation, I should be taking this opportunity to run down and escape! Get of this search for an awkward truth. Instead, I look over each of the four sides of the roof. All but one is impossible to jump from. Three are instant death. The fourth, some two meters below, has a corrugated asbestos roof. It's doable but I would probably break a hole in it from the jump. That's...Dr Wang's coming up the stairs...he is - naturally composed - like an old friend, his shadowy face lightened with traces of high school acne. "What exactly is your birth date?" "December twenty-first, nineteen hundred and sixty-three." "What time of day were you born? *Ji-dian chu-sen?*"

“I don’t know, my mother and father don’t remember if it was morning or night.”

“Well, look, this is as close as I can get.” He points to my date in the book and said, “you think too much!” Ha ha...I think too much. The irony isn’t missed, even for one second. My horoscope indicates I am an obsessive thinker. I no sooner cut through this taste of the ironic when a bright faced young Chinese man seems to appear at the top of the stairs. Softly he speaks to the doctor, “*Ni yo ke-ren*, you have a patient.”

And with that, our encounter ended. “*Duai bu-chi*, Sorry, but we must go down.”

This is happening in a void of architecture, a warping reality of multidimensional clicking clocks reverberating on warped walls and horrified tomb horses with fractured chopstick legs racing, “in mute nostril agony”. I turn to look at the transparently eyed messenger. Gone. Disappeared. As sightlessly as he had come. My down the stairs, a vanished Guardian Angel. We are down to the stability of the ground floor. His patients wait. Two glowing motherly in the office women. Well on middle-aged Thai-Chinese descended women. They say hello, yes and I say goodbye and return to the night streets. Bangkok, city of Buddhist angles.