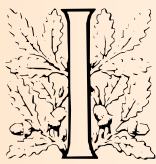


"Mai Pehn Rai"

means "*Never Mind*"



I agreed to play the piano for an SGI Thailand culture festival in Bangkok. This particular part of the program was a five-minute dance piece for ten dancers, and the song I selected was "Ana Maria" by Wayne Shorter, it seemed to perfectly fit the sad and exotic feeling the dancers were conveying. Sunday afternoon I grabbed a taxi and headed out about an hour into Bangkok's northern suburbs for the rehearsal. The Culture Center was teeming with hundreds of people of all ages, a tremendous three story hubbub of activity broken into large and small groups. Some of them were lined up for food by the grills in the back, food being an indispensable part of every Thai function. I was escorted to the spacious auditorium bustling with activity and was shown the piano. They asked me where I'd like it positioned and I pointed to an area in front of the stage. Immediately at least ten young guys surrounded the instrument and whisked it across the floor. I sat down at the Yamaha and tested it out when a very attractive young lady with a clipboard in hand came out to talk to me. She said with a polite Thai smile that the dancers were unable to come to the rehearsal because they had some kind of exam today, but that I could go ahead and play anyway.

I was thunderstruck, thrown off my axis; I went spinning right out

of my body! Obviously there was no point in my being here! There was nothing that could be accomplished, what couldn't they understand about that? I closed the lid of the piano and walked to the exit door, as bewildered and indignant as I've ever felt in my life.

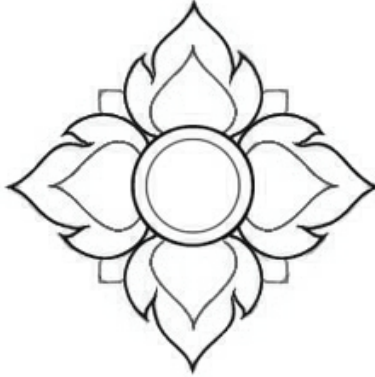
They looked at me with this smile I didn't understand as they said "sorry, so sorry," – and smiled some more – and the smiles were concealing their secret knowledge, that they were being patient with this poor foreigner who didn't know how to keep cool – and in fact I was smoldering! Didn't they realize I could have been doing something else with my time, don't they respect that my time is valuable? And still this calm smile – My God, where are these people coming from?!

As things developed, they did arrange another rehearsal time at my convenience and all the dancers did show up. They understood that I was a foreigner and used to doing things a certain way and so out of respect and consideration they followed through thoroughly and we worked everything out. And as usual everyone smiled a lot and in fact they were incredibly sweet and delightful to be around the whole time. Much later a friend told me a story that gave me some understanding of a point concerning tribal Thai culture. It was about a football match between two teams, and one of the teams didn't show up. So the single team kicked the ball around, entertained themselves, everyone shared some good food and conversation and no one including the audience went home disappointed, angry or upset.

I believe we can call this "Living in the moment", or "Appreciating the moment." Not necessarily in the Buddhist sense, but in a Thai cultural sense. In tribal Thai thinking there is no "I should've done this,

or I could've been that", or, "if I could do it again I'd...(guilt and regret!). Coulda–woulda–shoulda is something we invented, now it's a conditioned response. We've assigned a specific value to moments of time, time is money. We anticipate 'quality time'. What we do with this moment must be leading to a future. We believe we can "lose time", but we can't even prove that 'time' truly exists. What might have happened if I had anyway started playing the piano in the auditorium on that day – maybe some people would enjoy it, some might start dancing, I might not have wasted my time having a headache.

And so we must come to appreciate the brilliance of the Thai mind, even though as Westerners it's darn near impossible to adopt. Their entire concept of time is not the same as ours. Their language treats tenses differently to accommodate another perception of past present and future. And the Western mind will perceive this way of looking at life as backwards, unproductive and inefficient. Our definition of Time must be the proper one in the world as we know it! It's easy to understand how difficult it must be for Thailand to integrate into global society, and how frustrating it can be for a businessman from the West to operate in Thailand without blowing fuses every day. Thais are used to living in the moment, and for all we know, the moment may contain all that matters.



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