

# Walking Buddha's Path

By Derek Joe Tennant

## Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to Nawy, for enduring my hours at the computer writing this story. It took away from precious time we had together at an important juncture in our relationship. She cared for me while I wrote, despite feeling ignored.

I also need to thank Lama Surya Das, his book "*Buddha Is As Buddha Does*" focused my thoughts and energy towards the Bodhisattva Vow. I have been traveling towards this Vow my entire life; he brought the next steps into view with this book. His book is a rich resource if you desire to know more about the Bodhisattva Way.

I would add that this is a fictional story, though much is based in truth. Certainly the spiritual parts are indicative of where I am on this path today. I haven't changed many names, as you are unlikely to know these people in real life. Unless you are part of my inner circle of friends you will be unable to find them in the world today.

Finally, I must thank the Universe, The One, Spirit, or whatever name you choose to place on God, for providing me the path to know what 's presented here, the ability to say what I have tried to say, and the peace that comes from practicing what I preach.

## Prologue

28 September, 2002

He had only been in Thailand for 4 days, and his body had yet to adopt the local time zone. He was staring into the dark at 3:30 am, wide-awake, hearing an occasional rooster crowing in the distance. Not seeing any reason to toss and turn and miss an opportunity to explore a foreign land, he crept from the room, out the front door and into the yard.

The Milky Way was splayed across the heavens like tagger's spray paint. Born and raised in American cities, the wonder of the uncountable stars never failed to amaze him. And here, so far from any big city lights, the stellar display was better than any he'd ever seen. He wandered the dirt path that constituted the road in front of his fiancée's home, keeping one eye out for snakes on the ground and the other seeking falling stars above. Within the hour, he'd found both.

As dawn began to spread across the eastern horizon, he felt a strong mixture of fear and anticipation. Today was his wedding day, the beginning of a grand adventure. Whatever the outcome, he knew his life would never be the same. This was a giant fork in the road of life, he was choosing the exciting unknown path and leaving the known paved superhighway far behind. He felt special, lucky, that he was able to make a choice so profound and different. Few had the desire or opportunity to choose such a radical change in culture and lifestyle. It was time to hold his nose and jump off the cliff into a future he could not even imagine. It was time to live.

Friday, 7 December 2007

“Khun Joe?” The Thai policeman pronounced the honorific with a strong dash of sarcasm.

With a glance at his soon-to-be-ex spouse, he nodded and said, “Yes.”

“You follow me, no?”

He rose from the plastic waiting room chair and began to follow the policeman down the long hallway. A backwards glance showed his wife sitting in her chair, looking off to the right, either dodging his silent appeal for information or distracted.

After passing many doors with wired security glass panes, the officer opened one, stepped aside, and gestured for him to enter. Inside the spartan room, another officer sat behind a small table, and gestured for him to take the only other seat in the room. He’d seen enough TV dramas to recognize an interrogation room, complete with bare walls and one-way glass window, to understand where he’d been taken.

The door closed behind him, and a click announced the door had been locked from the outside.

“Tell me, Mr. Joe, how did you meet your wife?”

He had come to Thailand one last time, to finalize the divorce. His wife, Mao, had told him he only had to sign one last paper and he’d no longer have to care for her. This questioning must be related to the divorce somehow. “I had come to Thailand on vacation, and saw her working in a bar in Phuket. We talked, and traded email addresses, and continued to communicate after I returned home to America.”

“That was 6 years ago, am I right?”

“Late in 2001, yes.”

“When did you find out she had a 9 year old daughter?”

“She told me about her family, her son and her daughter, that first night. She showed me pictures, and explained that she was working to be able to send money to her Mother, who was caring for the children while she was in Phuket.”

“How many wives have you had in America?”

“Two.”

“Why did those marriages fail?”

“My first, because we should not have gotten married in the first place. We were not compatible. My second wife married me because she had been abused before we met and needed someone to take care of her and her children who would not continue the abuse. Once the kids had grown up, she didn’t need my help anymore and went her own way.”

“Do you have any children?”

“I had a son, but he died when he was 8 months old.”

“Did your first wife have children??”

“One daughter.”

“How many children did your second wife have?”

He wondered what all the focus on children was about. “Seven.”

“Any daughters?”

“Three.”

“Isn’t it true, Mr. Joe, that you have always abused your stepdaughters?”

He was stunned. Had Mao accused him of abusing her daughter, Kan? The specter of a soon-to-be-short lifetime spent in Thai jails for child molestation drew his heart up into his throat. “I’ve never abused anyone, daughters, sons or wives. What is this all about? Why are you speaking to me? Isn’t this about our divorce?”

“We know you have molested your daughter in this marriage, and wonder if the American authorities might also have an interest in prosecuting you for your crimes in that country once we have finished your punishment here. Obviously, you select your wives because they have daughters you want to abuse. It will go better for you in your trial if you confess and show remorse, but either way you won’t be going back to America for a very long time. Did you think you could just come to Thailand and have your way with our children? Did you think we are barbarians here, who would not care that you are a foul animal?”

“I did not do this, and you have no proof. I want to speak with the American Embassy before I answer any more questions.”

“You don’t have the right to speak with the Embassy here. You have to be human to qualify for those kinds of privileges, and you are not one of us. You are the worst of men, men who prey on little girls. Our proof is the statement of your stepdaughter, which is all we need. Your trial will be tomorrow morning. By 10 am you will be on your way to a cell where you will spend many years to ponder what it means to come to a foreign land and rape little children. If you live long enough to get out, you will be sent back to America to answer for your crimes there. You’ll not touch another child as long as you live.” The officer stood and came around from the back of the desk, towards the door. The lock clicked again, someone had obviously been watching and knew the interview was over. He jumped up from the chair so quickly it fell over behind him, and he reached for the officer to get his undivided attention. “I’m not guilty! This is a lie! You can’t do this, it’s not right!”

The officer eluded the grasp and stepped back. “Dare to touch me and you will never get out of prison alive. That’s your only warning. Now let me leave. We will meet again in court tomorrow for your sentencing.”

The door opened and two officers, handguns outstretched, raced into the room. The interrogating officer quickly left, and the two guards backed out, the door being shut and locked again very quickly. Silence reigned and in the crashing waves of emotion, he tried not to cry.

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He was a survivor. He had always been able to block the emotion of the moment, and act as if the tragedy were happening to someone else. This paid dividends during his time as a firefighter; a rescue worker can’t get too close to any situation, can’t let it touch them, or they would be unable to function. There is always time later for reflection, for feeling, for crying. In the moment itself, there is only room for action.

His hand went into his pocket, and hidden from view of the one-way mirror and anyone watching, opened his flip phone. Not allowed a phone call, huh? He wanted to test that rule. Finding the “6” button by feel, he pressed it and began to count out the time it would take before Susan’s voicemail would be recording. “I’m in a Bangkok jail, call the American Embassy immediately. I need help. Call the Embassy. I’m locked up....”

The door was flung open and 2 guards rushed in. One wrapped arms around him and momentum threw them both to the floor. He fell with the cell phone hitting the floor, and the crunch against his thigh told him the phone had broken. As his attacker pushed off of him to stand, the second guard rewarded his phone creativity with a kick that broke his nose. Once standing, the other guard also began to kick him, and he curled into a fetal position and covered his head with his arms to protect himself.

The kicks and blows fell like rain, but soon slowed and finally stopped. The guards left the room, and the click following the closing of the door told him not to bother trying the handle. A quick inventory of throbbing pain told him that ribs, nose and one wrist may be broken, and a concussion was probably the least of his worries. A tender, tensing belly truly worried him. His medical training told him there was internal bleeding, and that could kill in minutes.

He dragged himself to the wall and pushed up into a sitting position very slowly and carefully. His could not use his right wrist, and using his left arm sparked complaints from the tender ribs. His breath came in small gasps. He was slightly dizzy, and began to monitor the spinning room to determine if the bleeding would have him fainting soon. But even as he focused, the spinning began to stop. Already, there was a silver lining to this cloud.

He began to meditate, and as he focused on maintaining a breathing pattern that minimized the pain of the broken ribs, he began to lose track of time. He didn’t know how much time passed before the door clicked and opened again, and a short man entered carrying a small medical bag, with a stethoscope draped around his neck. His dark khaki uniform was rumpled, as if he had worn it during a nap and had been awakened to handle this situation.

The doctor, if that’s what he was, attended him without speaking. A touch here, a squeeze there, noting the wince or gasp as an indication of the areas needing attention. The tender belly also concerned the doctor, and once he found that problem, the rest of the examination was completed quickly. A long piece of cloth created a quick sling for his right forearm, and without bothering with a splint, the doctor began to help him to his feet.

The pain in his ribcage made that a long process, but within a few moments, he was standing. The doctor motioned towards the door, and after just a few seconds delay, it opened. With the doctor supporting his good arm, they moved into the hall and past the two guards. They both wore smirks that told him there were no regrets, and would be no punishment for their act. Controlling the pain as he walked was a full time job, though, and he found he had no time to ponder the lack of retribution.

The two men shuffled past many doors, around several corners and finally entered what must have been the jail’s infirmary. There were three cots along

one wall, medical supplies along the opposite wall, and a desk with a chair on either side in the corner. After the doctor helped him lie down on the cot, he went to the desk, opened the top right hand drawer and retrieved a cell phone. After placing a quick call, speaking just a few words of unfamiliar Thai, he pulled a clipboard from a different drawer and began to write.

Lying on the cot, the room began to spin again. Fighting the uncomfortable feeling of his stomach trying to empty itself, swallowing quickly again and again, he again lost track of time. Someone began to prod his belly again, which now was very tense and tender, and he realized he had passed out for some amount of time. Opening his eyes, he saw a man bent over his stomach, wearing the green scrubs one associates with a surgeon. The surgeon stood and motioned for someone behind him to move forward, and two short Thais pushed a gurney towards the cot. It took all four men to wrestle him off the cot and onto the gurney, but once he was on the wheeled bed they easily pushed him out of the room and down the hall. His head still spinning, he didn't care where they were taking him. He closed his eyes and tried to minimize the pain of being jostled through the jail and into an ambulance. Once on board, a sharp pain in his arm told him he was receiving a shot, and he prayed that whatever it was, it at least contained a small amount of painkiller. The wave of relief that swept through his body seconds later told him his wish had been granted, but as the wave rose to a crescendo, he knew he'd been given a large dose, and within seconds he was unconscious.

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Susan rolled over in bed, trying to find just the right amount of arm to leave outside the covers to stay warm but not too warm. Nights in December could get cool, even here in San Diego, so she had taken the quilt out of the closet where she stored it during the summer and put it on the bed. But tonight it was a bit warm for that.

Gradually she became aware of her phone ringing. 'I wonder how long that's been going on?' she thought as the answering machine picked up. She sat straight up in the bed, suddenly wide-awake, realizing that any phone call at 2 am had to be trouble. The volume was turned down on the machine; she'd have to get up to find out.

She paused for just a second, wondering if she could just go back to sleep and deal with whatever difficulty had presented itself in the morning after having her coffee. She'd certainly be better able to think after her usual shot of caffeine. But compassion got the better of her need for sleep, and she crept from the bed to the phone, fearing what bad news she'd find.

Rewinding the message and turning up the volume, she heard, "I'm in a Bangkok jail, call the American Embassy immediately. I need help. Call the Embassy. I'm locked up...."

Derek's voice was clear but rather stressed. She supposed he would be stressed, if he were in the Bangkok jail, despite his reputation for being calm under fire. By far, he was the calmest person Susan knew. He also had a way of

being at the center of planetary chaos. He didn't see life as a drama, or revel in that like some of Susan's friends, but he did see it as one big adventure. Landing in jail would be new even for him, and she wondered what the rest of the story would be.

With no other details, she had to act. It took only a few moments to google a phone number for the American embassy in Bangkok, luckily there was a phone number listed for citizens to call 24 hours a day. It took a few more minutes to determine the country code for Thailand, but soon she was leaving a detailed message, ostensibly at the Embassy. She was surprised that there wasn't a switchboard operator, and had precious little detail to include in her message. But doing her best to indicate the urgency of the matter, and leaving her cell phone number, was all she could do with Derek's cryptic message. Knowing sleep was out of the question, she started the day's first pot of coffee and settled down at her desk to await the Embassy's call.

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Some days Ron had nothing to do. He would wile away the time playing Minesweeper on the computer, or reading the latest "*Asimov's Science Fiction*" magazine. Other days, and especially today it seemed, the phone did not stop ringing. There must be a full moon tonight, he thought, as he listened to another tale of a stolen handbag at the local market, a place that reminded him of the Flea Market back home, only worse. The bulk of the stalls sold food, some of which were unidentifiable as either plant animal or mineral, and some (like the stalls that sold maggots, cockroaches and other nasty creepy-crawly things) were only too identifiable. The smells were overwhelming, the crowd too thick to move easily through, unless you were familiar with the market and had just stolen a purse and needed to make a quick getaway. Then it seemed the crowd became your friend.

Other citizens on vacation had been sold gold jewelry, that the next day turned their fingers green, and now wanted the Embassy to issue them a refund. Sorry folks, when you are swindled in Bangkok, it's buyer beware. It's not like the USA, where the government is there to protect the stupid as well as the righteous. Here, you're on your own, and all the screaming in the world isn't going to get me to help you with this particular problem.

His secretary dropped a message form on the corner of his desk, and while listening to yet another vacationer complaining about how they were treated following a car accident (not *their* fault, of course!), he noticed the area code indicated the call had come from San Diego. He had hoped that this current conversation was going to signal the end of his week. Paul, his friend from the Passport Division, had offered to introduce him to 'the prettiest girl in Bangkok' tonight at the Cowboy Bar. One of Paul's favorite hangouts, he invited Ron once or twice a month to come by and be introduced to a 'special girl'. Usually, it was after Paul had tired of her, but these last few months he had been completely taken with a girl he described as 'more flexible than a yoga instructor', and so Ron had been getting referrals to untried companions. And Paul was rarely



wrong in his assessments, so Ron had been eager to see what he would find tonight.

But a call to the Bangkok Embassy problem line from the mainland was also rare, and piqued his curiosity. As quickly as he could, he managed to get the citizen off the line, assuring him that there was nothing the Embassy could do about the accident. A glance at his watch told him he had 7 minutes to call San Diego without leaving late, and only about 45 minutes before he'd be late for his meeting with Paul at Cowboy. He dialed the number and listened to it ring.

"Hello" Susan said as she answered after the second ring.

"Hello. I'm Ron Jacobi, calling from the Bangkok Embassy. Is this Susan?"

"Yes, it is. Thank you so much for calling me so quickly. My friend, Derek, left me a voicemail asking me to call the Embassy on his behalf, saying he's in a Bangkok jail."

"Why is he in jail?" Ron wasn't pleased at this news; this could take up a good portion of his weekend.

"He didn't say, It sounded as if his call was cut off before he could give me details. It was a very short message." Susan began to feel helpless, and it was reflected in her voice.

"Did he say anything else, like what jail he's in for instance?" Ron didn't relish the task of trying to locate a citizen among the many Bangkok jails; many didn't even have phone lines to facilitate such a task. He'd have to take many taxi rides to check the ones the Embassy knew about, and that still might not locate this person.

"He didn't. At this point, you know as much as I do." Susan didn't know what else to say.

"What's Derek's last name?" Ron reached for a message pad and pen from a cluttered desk drawer.

"Stevenson."

"I'll get on this right away, as soon as I can. Is this the best number to reach you?" Ron knew it was hopeless to begin calling tonight. Even if he knew what jail Derek was in, they'd not confirm that information tonight. It was already after hours for the Warden of any jail worth the name, and no one else would talk to an Embassy official. At least this conversation should not make him late to meet Paul. The weekend might turn out OK after all.

"It is, and call me anytime. How long will it take for you to find him?" Susan wanted to know if she should try to get a few more hours sleep before going to work.

"It could be days, It's already after hours Friday evening here and..."

"Days?" Susan was incredulous. "If Derek's in trouble, you need to help him and you can't wait days for that!"

"There's a lot of jails here, Susan, and it's the weekend. Only the Warden will tell me if they have a foreigner in custody, and they may not be there before Monday as it is. I'm sorry, but that's the best I can do for now."

"But the Embassy is his only chance for help. You've got to do something before Monday!" Ron heard the fear in Susan's voice, and knew he had to get her off

the phone quickly. He didn't want to get backed into a corner, and have to give up his weekend for what still might be a wild goose chase.

"I'll do everything I can, trust me. It's my job, but more importantly, it's what I do. Help people, that is. I'll call you just as soon as I have any information. Try to relax and wait for my call. Good by, Susan." He paused for just a second to make sure she did not protest, and hearing nothing from Susan, he hung up the phone. Another glance at his wrist, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He'd not be late to meet the most beautiful girl in Bangkok.

## Saturday

He heard voices talking in a language he didn't understand. His head felt like it was wrapped in a thick blanket, the voices might be obscured by some kind of drugs, but he didn't take drugs. He began to feel a pain in his belly, and as he tried to move, realized his right arm was in a cast and felt very heavy. He opened his eyes to a darkened room. He could make out a large machine next to his bed, the lights seemed to be indicating his vital signs, as the machine hissed and beeped. Focusing his sight on the LEDs also helped him focus on what had placed him here. He remembered the beating in the jail, the painful ride to a hospital, and nothing else since.

Trying to sit up, his belly felt like it was tearing open. He felt like screaming, and he returned to lying on his back. He focused on calming his breathing. The machine beeped a different pattern, and within moments someone was bending over him, speaking Thai, and fussing with his sheet to get a look at his belly. Now in English, she said, "You awake. Now how you feeling?"

Derek groaned in response. "Water" was all he managed to say through his clenched teeth, although the pain was already beginning to subside. The nurse changed a setting on the IV line dripping into his arm. "I go for doctor." She turned and walked away without waiting for a response from him.

His pain quickly became manageable. He had always told himself that he had a high pain threshold, so he wasn't sure if it was actually fading or if he was just getting it under control. An inventory of his body told him he had issues with his ribs, his arm, his head and his belly. He also felt he was on some pain medication, as his thinking wasn't as sharp as usual.

The light in his room came on, blinding him temporarily. Once his eyes had adjusted, he opened them to find a short, dark man in surgical garb making notes of the numbers on the machine by his bed. The man glanced at him, noted a few more numbers, and then turned to face him.

"You're going to be alright. Someone will be in here shortly to tell you more about what will happen to you. Press the button if you need anything from the nurse."

The doctor turned and left the room.

"What will happen to me?" Derek's question hung in the air, unanswered.

He had to wait only a few minutes before a tall, dark man in military fatigues walked into the room. After a quick glance around the room the man began to speak, as if reciting something he had memorized but did not understand, staring at the wall directly above Derek's head.

"You have begun to serve the sentence given you in court this morning. You will be taken to the prison when you are healthy enough to move." His features softened and his gaze fell on Derek's face. "With mercy, you may survive your 20 year sentence. If not,....."

Twenty years? Derek felt a wave of panic rise and threaten to crash over him as if a tsunami. A deep breath held it at bay. A nurse entered the room and moved to the IV that still dripped into his good arm. As she fussed with the injection port, the man spun on his heels and moved swiftly out of the room. Derek watched

him leave, seeing his future narrow into just a small tunnel of possibility, and so missed seeing the nurse add a heavy dose of sedative to the drip. He was caught off-guard as the sedative worked its magic, and put him swiftly into a deep sleep.

## Sunday

It was time for a game plan. Derek was utilizing his high pain threshold to refuse to take the painkillers offered by both his attending physician and the helpful nurses. It was difficult to refuse the nurses, they wanted to be helpful and at least one of the three on the floor managed to be in his room every moment. They asked about pain with broken English every few minutes. It was rude to ignore them, but eventually that is what Derek did, just to be able to focus on the task at hand.

The first step to creating the plan was to take inventory of his situation. He was being held incommunicado, as far as he knew. His message to Susan may not have gotten through, as it was now Sunday and no one from the Embassy had come to visit. Susan was certainly resourceful enough that had she received the message, she'd have found a number and would be raising her voice if she did not get answers quickly. That was why Derek had called her. He was counting on her obstinacy, but would have to plan as if she failed to raise the alarm.

He had no lawyer, and knew nothing about the Thai legal system, so any plans for appeal would have to wait a more thorough understanding of what he faced. He was past the stage of feeling out of control, subject to the drifts of panic as he had been Saturday evening. His entire life seems to have prepared him for dealing with a situation like this, so he'd make the best of what might be a bad situation if it happened to most people. For example, he regularly chided himself for not meditating more. Now he'd have lots of time for meditation.

He was certain his spiritual beliefs would see him through this, so his plan centered around remembering what he had learned about reality, life and his place in it. With hours of meditation and recall of much of what he had learned in recent years, he felt confident this situation would work to his advantage. He did not fear spending a great portion of his life in a Thai jail, he feared not learning the most from this path.

One of the first lessons he knew he would practice concerned patience. He was calm as he locked down his 'worry center' for the evening, knowing he would need his rest to be prepared for what lay ahead. He would do this drug-free, with clarity and intention, and it would all turn out well in the end. Bring on tomorrow, he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

## Monday

He awoke hungry. That was a good sign. It meant his body agreed with his mind, that it wanted to live despite the rough road ahead. He found that if he lay on his right side, and slowly pushed himself upright, neither his ribs nor his belly complained too loudly. For the first few seconds sitting upright, the room spun slowly, but that quickly passed. He even felt an urge to pee, but not badly enough to warrant standing up just yet.

Before he had a chance to tire of sitting, a nurse entered the room, followed by a guard. The guard stepped to the side just inside the door and remained watchful. The nurse carried a small tray in one hand, clothes in the other. She set the tray down on a stand that was next to the bed. She set the clothes on the edge of the bed, and began to help him out of his gown and into the clothing. It was merely a shirt and pants, made of rough tan material, which seemed rather stiff from the last time it had been washed. He understood this was a sign he was to be moved later today.

He asked, in English, "Can you call the American Embassy for me?" The nurse froze for just the barest of moments, but then continued dressing him as if she didn't understand what he had said. He knew better, but the guard was ever watchful, and he knew she could not respond directly.

After moving the stand into place over his legs, she moved the single bowl from the tray to the stand and quickly left the room. The bowl was not quite the size of his closed fist, and contained a thin, clear rice soup. A brown powder had been sprinkled over the top, but unlike the cinnamon that it reminded him of, this powder had virtually no taste. Neither did the soup, except for a salty aftertaste. He wasn't very happy, but felt that after having no food for over two days, this was as good a place as any to start eating again.

He quickly finished the small portion, and pushed the stand aside so that he could lie down again. He realized that what was going to see him through this was to have the attitude, "act as if". If he acted like he had actually chosen this as his path, he would have the right attitude to see any opportunity for growth. He would flow with whatever energy happened to come his way, and as a result, he would suffer less than any other way of behaving. "Acting as if" this was his own making, his resistance to the problems it posed would be minimal and the outcome the best it could be.

He dozed briefly, and was shaken awake by a nurse with a cup of pills. He tried to refuse them, but she clearly was distressed by that gesture. Deciding not to push the matter, he swallowed the handful of colorful tablets in one gulp. At least one of the pills must have been a sedative; he fell asleep again without being aware of being sleepy.

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Ron came to work exactly on time, one of the few days he was not at least a few minutes late. It wasn't due to faster service at the roadside stand where he

purchased coffee on the walk into work; it was mainly because he only hit the snooze button twice instead of the usual four times this morning. He actually was eager to be on time, for once; with a citizen possibly missing, his boss would soon be breathing down his neck for answers. He best get started trying to find the right one.

He found 5 messages from Susan on the corner of his desk, and another one, hand scribbled on the back of the Embassy's bridge club schedule, from Jason. Jason manned the help desk most weekends, and this note was short and to the point: "Call me as soon as you see this" followed by a local cell phone number. With a deep sigh, both to calm himself and to express displeasure at having someone else involved in this problem, he reached for the phone and dialed the number Jason had left. Jason picked up on the first ring, as if waiting for the call. "What's so important?"

"I should be asking you what's *not* important." Jason sounded irritated even beyond having to 'work' on a day off. "You take a call on Friday about a missing person and then skip for the weekend?"

"Hey, you know as well as I do you can't get any answers from a Thai jail on the weekend. What was I supposed to do?" Ron didn't like that Jason was so worked up about this; he might go to Ron's boss with a complaint. The weekend had been nice, with the new girl from the Cowboy Bar and all, but it hadn't been so good as to be worth getting yelled at by his boss.

"A heads up for me would have been a good place to start. I get calls all weekend from someone stateside and don't know what's going on, you think I like looking like I'm just sitting on my hands here while someone rots in a cell?" Jason obviously needed to vent a little.

"I'm sorry, but the call came in just as I was leaving Friday. I didn't think she'd call every few hours, all weekend long. I told her it would be days before we had any answers, and we'd call as soon as we knew anything. That should have kept her off your back." Ron was truly surprised.

"Next time, at least do me the courtesy of letting me know, OK?"

"Sure thing, Jason. Sorry it turned out to be such a problem. I won't let it happen again."

Hanging up the phone, Ron reached for the pile of messages from Susan. Each one sounded more hysterical than the last, and the final one was a threat to go over his head if he didn't call her immediately. Boy, he thought, better get her down off the ceiling before she ruins this gig. There are too many beautiful ladies in Bangkok to get transferred to some backwater post before his tour was normally up.

Quick math told him the time in San Diego was just past 6 pm, still a decent time for a call, so he dialed her number. And of course, got Susan's voicemail on the first ring. Not realizing that probably meant she was on another call, he left a brief message about not knowing anything yet, and that he'd be sure to call her the *instant* any information turned up. Hanging up the phone with a smile, relieved at not having to spend long minutes with the hysterical friend of a supposedly missing man, he wandered down the hall to the commissary. This would be a tense day, and he wanted at least one more jolt of caffeine before digging into it.

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Susan didn't realize there had been another call while she had been talking with her mother, but she noticed the signal for a waiting message as she began to dial a friend's phone moments later. Before completing that call, she picked up the voicemail. After listening to the brief message twice, she read between the lines that nothing had been done to find Derek. She made good on her threat to go over Ron's head, dialing the Embassy's switchboard and asking to speak to the head of the department that aids US citizens in trouble. It only took a brief moment of her time to explain why she was so angry, and to receive assurances that the situation would be handled differently beginning immediately. Silently, she gave the Embassy the rest of the day to find answers. If none were forthcoming, she'd go there herself.

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Ron was approaching his office from the cafeteria, and saw his boss marching purposefully from the opposite direction. His face grim, Ron's boss had already seen Ron coming, and appeared headed straight for him. Speaking uncomfortably loud, Ron heard him before they were close enough for a casual conversation. "What the hell are you doing taking the weekend off when someone is in trouble?"

Ron immediately went into damage control mode, and unfortunately, that meant he spoke before collecting his thoughts. "I, I, it isn't for sure anyone *is* in trouble. All we have is a report, albeit one from someone who may have no reason to lie to us, but then why not? This could all be some kind of hoax, and we could be....."

"A hoax? You think this is a *hoax*?"

Ron stopped and thought for a moment; this wasn't going well. "Of course I don't *think* it's a hoax, but we must consider that as a slim possibility. It's just impossible to reach anyone of authority at local jails on the weekend, and there's no point in driving myself crazy making useless phone calls. Now that it's Monday morning, I can get right on it."

"And so you shall. I need a status report by 3 pm, sooner if you find out anything that might be helpful. Don't drop this ball, Ron."

"I won't, Sir." Ron felt like saluting, but knew that would be taken as sarcasm, and refrained. But he did manage to march right down the hall to his office, double-time. He brought out a binder from the bottom desk drawer, one where he kept notes from previous cases involving local law enforcement, and made a list of the phone numbers for every jail he had called in the past. He had meant to do this before now, but Minesweeper always got the better of him on those quiet afternoons. Now it set him back a good hour when he could little afford the time. Oh well, hopefully the phone calls would yield results quickly. There aren't *that* many jails in Bangkok.

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Derek awoke as he was being trundled down the hall and into a waiting ambulance. The windows in the rear doors of the vehicle had been crudely painted with brown paint, and so he had no idea where they were going as they left the hospital. The road became progressively worse, and it seemed they had driven for hours, before they bounced through a particularly bad stretch of road and came to a stop. Both front doors opened, letting in a bit more light, and a few seconds later the rear doors opened. Outside, in the glaring noonday sun, stood several sweating, armed guards and the two ambulance attendants. The attendants quickly had his gurney on the ground, unbuckled him, and encouraged him to stand by lifting him by the arms.

Once on his feet, he looked around. They were at least on the outskirts of Bangkok, if not actually in the countryside, as no tall buildings could be seen over the wall of the compound. A wide swath of jungle had been cleared just outside the wall, leaving a space that would be impossible to cross without being seen. The wall was only 5 feet tall, made of concrete blocks and topped with concertina wire. In places, a layer of broken glass glittered in the sun where it had been strewn to further complicate going over the wall.

The attendants stepped away, one began to bundle the gurney back onto the ambulance, and one of the guards prodded Derek with the end of his rifle. Taking the hint, he began to walk on a concrete sidewalk in the direction indicated, towards a cluster of small concrete bunkers. One guard moved to take the lead, and with a glance over his shoulder to make sure he was being followed, moved quickly towards one of the structures close to the wall. A swift look behind him let Derek see there were barracks on the other side of the compound, what appeared to be an administration building to his left, and guard towers on each corner. This looked like a prisoner of war camp right out of some World War II movie.

Just to the left of the bunkers, standing in the shade provided by the only tree within the walls, Derek saw a small man dressed in only a *longyi*. The *longyi* is traditional dress for Burmese people, but Thais only wear them if they are being very economical, or are otherwise very poor. As the group approached the last concrete building, the guard in the lead began to fish keys from his pocket. He moved to the door, fit the key in the lock, and swung the door open. Stepping aside, he motioned for Derek to enter.

He had to duck to get through the door, and once inside found the roof to be exactly 6 feet above the concrete floor. He knew this because he was 6 feet one inch tall, and he was just not able to stand completely erect. The walls, ceiling and floor were all of concrete. There were two barred windows, smaller than a laptop screen each, about 5 feet off the ground on either side. The room was 6 feet wide and about 8 feet deep. There was a battered bucket just to the right of the door, which still held some remains of the previous resident's last toilet stop. Thankfully, it had been long ago and had little foul smell.

The guard closed the door, which clicked as the lock turned in place, and he was left to contemplate the silence that would be his friend for a long time to come.

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Ron dialed jail after jail, always presenting himself as an Embassy official in search of Derek Stevenson. Invariably, the person who answered the phone then had to locate the Warden, who then didn't speak English, and he had to locate some guard who spoke about enough to find the toilet in a restaurant. This would all take between 15 and 35 minutes, and so by lunchtime he had barely called 5 of the 17 jails on his list. This was going to be a long day, he could tell. He called Paul to see he could deliver lunch; only to find out Paul had called in sick today. Ron wondered if he had sprained something over the weekend, during acrobatic sex, or just caught another episode of the Bangkok runs. Paul liked to eat at those stalls you see on Bangkok alleys and streets; goodness only knows what's being sold there. Ron wouldn't eat at those places if it were the last food on Earth. He stuck with the American restaurants, the McDonalds and KFCs, Dunkin' Donuts, 7-11 and Burger King, most of which were clustered in the neighborhood around the Embassy. Like home-away-from-home, Ron told his parents.

Ron stuck his head out into the hall and hailed the next person he saw. He asked for something from the cafeteria, 'anything as long as it is meat', fished a few bills from his wallet to more than cover the expected purchase, and went back to working the phones. Of course it was lunchtime at the jails too, the next phone call took over an hour to complete, and ended in disappointment for him.

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*Samsara*. Suffering. That describes life on this planet at this time.

The concept is that we are distracted from our true selves, our 'Buddha-nature' if you will, by the problems of our lives and our resistance to those problems. It is the resistance that creates suffering, not the problem. All things change. Either you are enduring something you don't like, or you are enjoying something you like, that you will inevitably lose. It is how you handle the loss that determines whether you suffer or not. The more you fight it, the more you separate yourself from the ultimate, endless and loving oneness, the more you suffer.

Put another way, in our life pain is built in. You can't avoid the pain that is caused by change. But suffering is avoidable; you can choose to meet each change with equanimity and calm acceptance. What is there to fear? When you find yourself fearing an outcome or situation, face that fear with curiosity. Ask what this situation has to teach you. Look for those times when you can exceed your comfort zone, as it will stretch you and show you new vistas and perspectives. These new views can then be incorporated into your reality. They teach you how others may see the same situation in a true, yet different, way.

He wanted to begin to treat every emotion as valuable. There is no such thing as a negative emotion, just feelings that evolve and change over time. If you are to include all in your experience, then you must include and incorporate even the darkness in your work. Hence, he had come across recommendations to work on the 'shadows' of his psyche, those emotions and processes created and yet disowned because of past experiences. One technique he wanted to use involved identifying problematic emotions, facing them and defining them and finally reclaiming them as valid parts of his makeup. This would remove their power, their ability to interfere with calm action, and allow him to control his behavior. He was tired of just reacting with unconscious intent to every wind of change that blew through his life, living life on 'auto-pilot'.

He recalled a story, about a monk who had sought enlightenment for many years. Finally, in exasperation, he prepared to find a mountain cave where he could meditate alone and

uninterrupted, sure that this plan would lead to his goal. On his way, he met a fellow traveler who also had a large bag of belongings over one shoulder. The traveler asked where he was going, and he told the man of his enlightenment plan. Unbeknownst to him, he had met the Bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri. Manjushri suddenly dropped his large bag on the ground with a 'thud', and instantly the monk 'got it', and was enlightened. He dropped his own personal story, his identity, his ego and it was as if a large weight had just been lifted from his own shoulders. After a short reflection, he asked Manjushri "Now what?" Manjushri picked up his bag again, and continued peacefully down the path.

Even though his goal was much like the monk's, he intellectually understood that 'bliss' or 'nirvana' was also another 'state of consciousness', and not the goal. He must take what Buddhism refers to as the 'Middle Path'. He must see reality, as it truly is, being of and among the world, but also be able to see the oneness, the endless ultimate self that lies within everything. Dipping into both aspects would inform his action with wisdom, allow him to act with equanimity in the best way for all, not just himself. Leading by example, blessing others with his powerful yet calm energy, one by one the people in his life would also understand and grow into a similar way of being, and ultimately enlightenment themselves. He had read much recently about the Bodhisattva Vow, a pledge to work on attaining enlightenment for all sentient beings, not just himself. Though he did not remember the exact pledge, he understood the concept, and was sure if he continued to act in a way consistent with this path, knowing the exact words would not stop him from his path of growth here in this Thai jail. And so, on this first evening in what would be his home for months and years to come, he dedicated himself to remember as much as he could about spirit, about being present in each moment, about developing his perspective to include all beings. He promised himself this opportunity to grow would not be wasted.

He would take a few days to learn the rhythm of this new place. He would be patient and see how this school would be structured before setting up his curriculum. For now it is Ok just to wait and see what happens next.

And boy, it's hot in this box.

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Ron got more and more anxious as 3 pm crept closer and he was no nearer an answer for his boss. He began to get angry, at the incompetent jailers who not only didn't know English, the world's tongue these days, but also didn't seem to even know who they had locked up this afternoon. It was taking longer and longer to get a 'no' out of each jail he called. Finally he could put it off no longer, he had to report that today had been a failure.

Happily, he pointed out to his boss that it was midnight in San Diego, and even his boss had to agree that it wasn't the best move to wake Susan with no new information. He could put off that call until tomorrow, one small consolation in an otherwise horrific day. After returning to his office, he began to find more and more jailers had left for the day, and so he wrapped up his calling and still had time to chat up Lisa, the lady in the office down the hall. She hadn't had the best of weekends, falling asleep on the sand at Patong Beach while her boyfriend spent the afternoon watching Muay Thai boxing. It would be days before she could bend her arms completely, the sunburn on her backside was so bad. Even SPF 30 won't work forever in this sunshine, he almost said, but didn't. Instead,

he pointed out that not every boyfriend would leave his lady unattended an entire afternoon, hint, hint, wink, wink.

She didn't seem to get his point, unfortunately.

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A cool breeze began to come through the window on the left, and just a few minutes later, the skies opened up and began to dump large amounts of rain all at once. The breeze pushed a little bit of the moisture into the cell, which he welcomed as kind of an impromptu shower. The water was warm, the breeze lowered the temperature by a good 7 degrees C, and the only negative seemed to be that it only lasted a few minutes. The concrete walls still radiated heat from the sunshine they had absorbed before the clouds arrived, the water on the floor quickly evaporated, and the temperature inside the cell was right back where it had been. It got him to wondering, though, if any provision would be made for him to have drinking water. One could dehydrate rather quickly in this hot environment.

He was still pondering that thought when he heard the sound of sandals approaching on the sidewalk. He moved to the wall away from the door, and slowly sat down. The jingle of keys, the scrape of the lock, and the door swung open. A large, muscular man stood in the doorway, holding a black baton in his right hand and tapping his left palm with it, as if impatient.

The man took a step inside, ducking as few Thais would have to do, to clear the doorjamb. He spoke in Thai.

*"Speak Thai can?"*

*"Can little bit"* Derek answered, also in Thai.

*"And for I, English speak little bit too."*

For a few moments, they each pondered this. Then the jailer again spoke in Thai.

*"Every day number 2, shower 10 minutes you can. Every shower number 4, wash clothes 5 minutes you can. They bring food each day 2 times. They clean this (indicating the waste bucket just inside the door) each evening. You (Derek couldn't understand these words) cannot, you lie cannot, you touch me cannot. You talk with others cannot. Understand do you?"*

*"Understand. Bring water when?"*

*"Water for drinking bring each day 2 times with food. Here 20 years you are. Good luck."* The jailer turned and beckoned to someone outside the door. The man Derek had seen under the tree entered, carrying a tray with food and 3 plastic water bottles. As the man set the water bottles next to the bucket, the jailer left the cell. Seen up close, the man appeared to be in his late teens. Derek could hear the shuffle of the jailer's sandals fade in the distance as the man approached slowly. He seemed afraid of Derek for some reason. While still a few steps away, he crouched and placed the food bowls on the floor. Each bowl was similar in size to the one at the hospital this morning. One bowl had rice, with what appeared to be two bits of carrot on top; more for appearance than nutritional value they were so small. One had a clear broth with 3 pieces of cabbage floating in it. The last one had what seemed to be a weed that had been steamed. Derek had seen this served in some restaurants along with a

particularly spicy curry, but had never tried it and didn't know what it was called. The man slid the three bowls towards Derek, but turned away before Derek could reach out to them. Derek, who had been studying the man's face intently, said in Thai, "*You name what?*"

The man whirled back around to face him, a look of panic on his face. His eyes darted between Derek and the door, more towards the door, until it became obvious no one was going to burst through and beat the daylights out of him. Still, he did not answer. He picked up the bucket and stepped through the door, closing it behind him. Derek heard a key in the lock, then the sandals shuffling away.

He quickly began to eat, not because he was hungry, but because he didn't know how long the man would be gone on bucket duty. Derek ate 2/3rds of each item, leaving the rest in each bowl. The weed tasted awful, he had trouble getting 2/3rds of it down, but figured at this point he was not wise to turn away any nutrition. Especially with what he had in mind.

The man returned with a clean bucket after about 7 minutes, near as Derek could tell. As he stepped into the cell, Derek asked again, "*You name what?*"

This time, without so much fear, the man looked quickly around, then in a voice barely more than a whisper, said "Neung".

The Thai word for the number '1', 'Neung' is a popular nickname for both men and women. Derek pointed at the bowls in front of him, and mimed eating from a bowl held close to his mouth. "*Give you*" he said.

The change in Neung's demeanor was electric. With a smile on his face, he fell to eating so quickly he almost spilled the soup. He finished almost before Derek could say "*Hungry are you?*"

Neung nodded once in response to the question, wiped his mouth with his hand (which he then wiped on his *longyi*) and began to pick up the bowls. He glanced at Derek twice, with a blank expression each time, as if trying to decide if he should say thank you or not. He backed to the door once the dishes were collected, paused on the threshold, then turned and quickly shut the door without a word. Still Derek was pleased. He had been generous, and it had not gone unnoticed, even if unremarked.

Derek took his time getting up, and moved to the water bottles. These would be his friends, he knew for a fact.

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Mao gathered the food she had purchased at the market and rode her motorcycle down the street to Leo's house. Leo lived in a compound with three of her sisters (Neung, Lao and Wang), her Mother, and a cousin, each with their own house. Each evening they would gather for supper, and various neighbors would join in the potluck affair. It was a great way to stay current on the gossip in the neighborhood. Tonight, Mao had news to share.

She was patient, however, and waited until someone asked if her trip to Bangkok had resulted in a divorce

"No. I had Kan make a statement to the police that the *falang* (foreigner) had molested her on several occasions. They asked me about him, and I told them

he had two other wives before me, in America. They asked how we had met, and I told them. When he came to get the divorce, I took him to the police station instead of the Court office. They took him away, and came back to tell me a few minutes later that he would never bother us again. It serves him right, after he has taken so much from me, first marrying me when he should know Thai people look down on this kind of arrangement, and then by leaving me penniless, and not offering to give me money every month. He said he would love me forever, only to walk out on me like this. Let him see what it is like to be alone, to not have money for once. He'll learn to treasure having someone who takes care of him after some time in prison. And this way, too, it's clear he was a bad person, and it is good we are no longer together. You understand that now, right?"

What she failed to see during her long rant was how it was being received by her friends. Many dismissed her complaint as 'sour grapes', but a few were terribly disturbed by her actions. Wang, in particular, didn't feel this outcome was right or acceptable. She had spent almost as much time with the *falang* as Mao, in the last two years. He often came to the compound, because he was lonely being home alone. Mao was hardly ever there with him anymore. Wang knew he was a kind, gentle man who would never hurt anyone on purpose. She'd seen him with Kan, Mao's daughter, and knew the accusations were lies. Just like the lies Mao made up to get gambling money from her husband, she'd lied again to get revenge. This would worry Wang for a very long time.

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Derek remembered meeting Mao as if it happened yesterday. He was an international traveler, and had taken a trip to Italy just to discover what authentic Italian food was like. His other favorite food was Thai, so it was natural to visit Thailand as well. It was a short trip, only 6 nights, but he was thoroughly enchanted with the country and planned to return. The last evening he had to explore was in Patong Beach, Phuket.

He hadn't brought a razor, he was traveling light this trip. After so many days without shaving, he felt rather scruffy. The hotel had a barbershop that advertised a shave for US\$1, and he'd never had a barber shave him before. Always one for new experiences, he took the plunge. Afterwards feeling crisp and clean, he took to the streets of Patong Beach, looking for a place to eat. As the sun sank into the ocean, he found a nice little stand that was crowded with locals, always a good sign. He had several small dishes, many of which he couldn't identify, but all were delicious. He was especially pleased that the spicy hotness of the Thai food was bearable, few *falangs* could stand the peppers but he had no trouble. He loved them, in fact.

Now that it was dark, the bars began to come alive. There were three basic types he could see, one type had girls wearing miniskirts, some with underwear, dancing on tables to attract the tourists to sit and have a drink. Another type had a tout on the sidewalk, extolling the virtues of his staff and denigrating the nearby bars. The third type had their staff on the sidewalk, grabbing arms, belt loops, indeed anything they could on the passersby and trying to drag them inside the

open-air bar for a beer. None of these approaches interested him, he wasn't one for drinking and wasn't here for the ladies. But he loved to people-watch, and in that regard, this was paradise.

He wandered the streets for hours. He had made several round trips throughout the bar section of town, and as it neared midnight he began to think of returning to his hotel. Then he saw her. She was outside the bar, accosting strangers. It seemed to him as if there was a spotlight above her head, shining down on her, setting her apart from any other lady in town. Love at first sight? Yeah. He would never forget that moment, the way she looked under the lamps of the bar.

He approached the bar, but she had gone back inside by the time he got there. He went around the corner, walked another hundred meters or so then doubled back. This time, she was again outside, but one of the other ladies, Nok, grabbed him to bring him inside. He accepted.

From a seat just inside the bar, he watched for an hour as she worked the crowd. It was clear she was a ringleader in this place, making jokes that had everyone laughing, instigating different schemes to attract the men, jumping up on a table to dance and then jumping down again once a few other ladies took the hint and joined her. She was graceful in every move, and knew her craft. He was taken by all of this.

Nok attended him, and for the first time in years he actually had two beers. She kept after him to take her to a room nearby, that was the point of all of this after all, and how she got paid. He consistently refused, as that was not the reason he was here. Finally, to get her to leave him alone, he told her who he was interested in. She went and fetched Mao.

They were able to talk; Mao knew a little bit of English. He told her his name was Joe, actually that's his middle name. But he discovered very early on this trip that Thai people have trouble saying 'Derek'. It comes out as 'Dalick' if they are even close, which many are not. They can, however, say Joe very easily. So that's how he introduced himself to all.

She was a singer too, she told him, and had two children. They were back home in the North, with her Mother, and she regularly sent them money from her working so that they could eat and go to school. She brought out pictures, both of her singing and of her family. She was interested in finding out more about America, and expressed an interest in visiting there someday. An hour later, they exchanged email addresses, he promised to email her, and he left her a tip that would have paid for her time in the nearby room, had he wanted that. He didn't, but he wanted to help her.

One thing led to another; soon they had married and he was working some bit of the year in America then spending most of the rest in Thailand with his wife. And now, six years later, it had gone very, very sour. She had asked for a little bit of money in the beginning, and gradually raised the amount she required until it had become quite a monthly sum. That still wasn't an issue for him, he wasn't rich by American standards, but could still support her on what he made. It was only when she began to have 'car accidents' and 'family illnesses', and needed large sums of money quickly in addition to her monthly support, that it had become a problem. And finally, she took him one day to the place where she had begun to

gamble, playing Hi-Low for extravagant amounts of money. He asked around the neighborhood, and no one knew of any 'accidents', no one had been sick. It was clear she had lied to him to get money for gambling.

He couldn't abide this. He had borrowed the money to pay her gambling debts, and had made it clear to her numerous times that he was at his limit and could no longer afford to borrow for her. The lack of respect she showed, both for him and for money, by continuing to gamble left him with no alternative but to leave.

And now it had come down to this. He realized he should have taken into account her need to save face within the village. Just cutting her off was not the best thing he could have done. Also, he needs to shoulder some of the blame for allowing her demands to increase. Each time she asked for more, he gave it to her. It built in her the belief that he had money, and just wasn't giving it to her unless she asked. He had enabled her addiction to gambling. Though he had communicated his financial situation more than once, he apparently hadn't done it in a way she could understand within her culture, he decided.

The conclusion he reached sitting in the little concrete bunker was that he was as much at fault here as she. The good news is that he will be challenged and grow far more sitting here than he would be if he were out and trying to borrow more money. He could accept what had happened, and flow with it. He forgave her for what she had done, and silently asked that she forgive him. He hoped that one day he'd have the opportunity to tell her in person that he regretted how things had turned out, and wished he had acted differently.

He had taken off his shirt long ago, and now he folded it neatly and used it as a pillow. Lying in the middle of the floor, he could see a few stars through each window. Too bad it wasn't going to rain tonight, to cool things off. And boy, it is hot in this box.

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Susan awoke with a start, having slept longer than she had hoped. She had expected a phone call in the middle of the night, from that guy at the embassy, telling her Derek had been located. He seemed like a nice guy and all, but just rather ignorant of how desperate this situation was. It had now been three days, with no word, and Susan had reached the end of her rope. A quick search online led her to the EVA website, and she bought a ticket for the flight leaving late tonight. It would have her in Bangkok Wednesday afternoon, local time. Then we'll see if it's as easy to shrug off someone's concern when they are standing in front of you, not on a phone 14,000 kilometers away.



Tuesday

Sleeping on any hard surface had never been his forte. He tossed and turned all night, not from stress or worry, but from the inability to find a comfortable position on the concrete floor. It didn't help that the floor managed to get cold, near midnight he guessed, as the walls finished radiating the heat they'd stored during the day.

His hips were sore, his lower back ached, and even the bones in his ankle were protesting the hard concrete pressing on them. Even before he could detect the first glimmer of sunlight in the dark night sky, a cock began to crow. Sleep was obviously not going to be coming anytime soon, so he sat up and began to meditate.

He began to ponder being one with the floor.

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Neung approached the cell with apprehension. It was the first time he had been told to serve a *falang*, and he had been warned not to cause any trouble. Others outside the prison would be paying attention, he was told, and this prisoner was not to be beaten with the regularity one grew used to in Thai prisons. The warden feared there would be inspections and regular visits by people who had the power to make new rules, or break existing ones, at the prison. He was not eager to give the outsiders reason to complain. If the warden became unhappy because of something Neung did, well, he shuddered to think of what that might be like, on the receiving end of the warden's baton. He was a strong man, especially for a Thai.

Last evening, in their first meeting, Neung had been elated when the *falang* offered him food. At the same time he was paranoid the warden was still waiting outside the door trying to catch him breaking rules. But his hunger overcame the fear, and he ate what was offered. With any luck, the *falang* would continue to offer food. Maybe he didn't like Thai food. Neung was pretty sure, however, this wouldn't continue. The *falang* was a large man, larger than almost anyone Neung had ever seen in person, and a man that large would need every bit of food available to avoid wasting away to nothing. Soon hunger would trump generosity. He fished the keys out from where he had tucked them into the waist of his *longyi*. It was a sign of the trust the warden had in him, that he was being allowed the key to the *falang's* cell, and to carry out his duties unsupervised. He did not want to let the warden down by failing to enforce the prison rules. He had been a prisoner here since he was 8, and had been released at age 16, but had nowhere else to go. Both parents were dead, in a bus accident when he was 3, and he only really remembered them from 2 photos his grandmother had given him on a prison visit when he was 10. But since his release, the warden let him stay and help with chores around the place. He had always been faithful the system, after all, it provided him the meals that kept him alive. He hardly remembered what life was like outside, and this late in life, didn't look forward to having to learn a whole new lifestyle should he actually have to leave the prison.

Being uneducated didn't help him know how to adjust; he'd really struggle if he were free.

He used the keys quietly in the door, but was surprised to find the prisoner staring at him as he opened it. He thought he had been quieter than that. Today he brought the normal fare, the rice bowl and the soup bowl. Yesterday's vegetables were treats given to prisoners on the occasion of their first prison meal. From now on, this would be typical. He placed a bag containing 3 water bottles on the floor near the bucket, and then set the food bowls on the floor less than a meter in front of the *falang*. The man began to eat quickly. Even though he expected it, he was still shocked to hear the prisoner speak.

"*You and I, same?*" "Well, of course not!" he thought. But what he said was,

"*Speak with you cannot.*"

"*I understand. But you are worker?*"

He glanced over his shoulder to be sure they remained alone, then whispered, "*Prisoner before, now worker.*"

"*Go home each night do you?*" It hardly seemed worth the trouble he would find himself in if he were caught speaking with the *falang*.

He shook his head 'no', twice. He was just beginning to turn to leave, when the prisoner pushed a bowl towards him. Just as last night, about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the food remained. He hesitated. He couldn't continue to take the food without incurring a debt he'd have to repay someday, probably by breaking a prison rule or two. But he was given the same food as the prisoners, in the same amount. He was always hungry.

He promised himself he would only eat this time, to try to catch up on missing nutrition, and that he would refuse the food if offered again. Having made the promise, he fell to eating and in a few seconds, had cleaned the bowl. The second bowl was pushed forward the same way, and he also finished it. He looked into the prisoner's eyes, which had watched the whole process, and nodded a quick 'thanks' before turning and leaving the cell. He was amazed at the depth, the love, which he had seen in those eyes.

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He heard the shuffle of sandals on the sidewalk outside, then the key quietly turned in the lock. It seemed to be about 2 hours past sunrise. He watched as the door opened, noting the surprise on Neung's face at the fact he was expected. Neung had brought water and some food, less than last night, but Derek wasn't sure if this was a permanent change, or just the difference between breakfast and supper. His resolve to be generous towards Neung did not waver, despite the diminished amount of nourishment. He set to eating, not expecting Neung to stay long.

Trying to delay Neung leaving, he spoke, "*You and I, same?*"

He didn't know the Thai word for prisoner, this was the best he could do.

"*Speak with you cannot.*" He expected that.

"*I understand. But you are worker?*" He needed to know Neung's status, and whether he left the compound from time to time.

"*Prisoner before, now worker.*"

“Go home each night do you?” A friend who leaves each night would be valuable. He saw the head shake, and now had finished enough of the rice to offer the rest to Neung. He watched as Neung fought over the decision to eat or not eat, and almost smiled. But hunger won out, and Neung ate quickly. Derek wondered what the punishment would be if they were ever caught. Whatever it was, for his part, it would be worth it. Already he could see that Neung needed the food as much, or more, than he. He was happy to share his food, meager as it was. Just a fellow soul, struggling to survive; ‘remember: We Are One’, Derek told himself. So it was with a great feeling of love towards a fellow human that he watched as Neung finished the meal. The nod of thanks was more than enough; Derek had his reward already.

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Ron didn’t hit the snooze button even once Tuesday morning. Remembering the problems he was having at work had him wide-awake in seconds. He was not looking forward to today, he was sure the boss would want answers before he came home tonight. He drank his usual coffee on the way into work, and even purchased an extra to take along with him, to save himself a trip to the cafeteria. Maybe if his boss saw him constantly working the phones, the pressure would let up. Even just a little relief would be welcome.

He began working the phones, continuing on with his list. He was dreading having to hit the streets if the phone list didn’t manage to find the missing citizen. And it wouldn’t happen soon enough, as far as Ron was concerned. But just as yesterday, each call was interminable, each answer was ‘no’. This was certainly not easy.

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The warden’s aide knocked on the office door, but opened it without awaiting the OK. He’d have to discipline the boy for that. That was something to look forward to, later this evening.

“The American Embassy is on the phone!” the boy blurted, obviously excited. The warden’s heart moved up into his throat. Now he was glad he had ordered that the *falang* be placed in a separate cell away from the others. The prisoners would have torn him to pieces by now, since he was guilty of child molestation. Try explaining that to an Embassy official who had no idea how a prison operated, and was always acting as if the world revolved around their citizens. He reached for the phone. “Hello”

“Good Morning, Sir. I’m Ron Jacobi calling from the American Embassy. We are trying to locate one of our citizens, a Derek Stevenson. Is it possible he is in your facility?”

The warden had no idea what was being said. His English vocabulary consisted of about 20 words, and after the caller said ‘good morning’ he recognized none of them. In Thai he responded, “*Speak Thai can you?*”

“No.” Ron had heard that phrase often enough to know what was being asked.

“Wait.” The warden set the phone down, and told his aide, “Find Gai. He speaks a little English. Find him quickly and bring him here.”

The aide rushed out the door, not even bothering to close it. Another reason to punish him.

While awaiting Gai, the warden pondered what would happen when the Embassy found out the *falang* was here. First, they would visit to ensure the prisoner was being 'treated fairly', code for being spoiled, if you asked the warden. Second, there would be regular visits, and they would bring in food and magazines and books and insist on giving these items to the prisoner themselves. And third, worst of all, they would pressure the government to release the prisoner, or at least let him go back to their country to finish the sentence. All in all, it added up to one big headache. It would be best if they didn't know the *falang* was here. But he would lose his post and be banished to some backwater pit of a jail, probably as an aide for the rest of his career, if it was discovered he lied about having a prisoner to an Embassy. Best to face the music.

Gai walked in, followed by an out-of-breath aide. The warden indicated the phone receiver lying on the desk, and Gai picked it up. He said "Hello" and listened for a few seconds. Then he covered the mouthpiece and spoke to the warden, "They want to know if we have a *falang* named Dalick Something."

The warden felt a huge wave of relief wash over him. "No, we don't." Blessedly, the *falang* who arrived yesterday was named 'Joe Something', not even close to Dalick. What a coincidence, that he should get a *falang* and an Embassy is looking for a different one the next day. But at any rate, the heat was gone. He could look forward the rest of the day to punishing the aide for his failures to maintain office procedures in his excitement. It was turning out to be a great day after all.

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Susan arrived early at the airport. She had not taken an international flight since the security tightened following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but she heeded the warnings to be present at least two hours before international departures. Happily, she breezed through security and had lots of time to wait for the flight. Departure was at 1:30 am Tuesday, and due to the International dateline, it would already be Wednesday when she landed in Taipei 13 hours later for a three-hour layover. Then on to Bangkok, arriving before noon local time. She'd be able to present herself to Ron before he leaves for the day Wednesday. He didn't know she was coming, and would probably think she had given up. How wrong he was.

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Derek began to ponder patience. His plan would take years to come to fruition, though years are what he appeared to have an abundance of right now. Patience: the ability to do nothing when there is nothing to do. He understands that he has no control over events; he's not superstitious, and he doesn't believe that any thought he has actually causes anything to change in the universe. What he does control, however, is how he responds to what happens around, and inside, him. He has always been of the temperament to see the glass as half full, to see the silver lining in any cloud. The lining in this cloud might very well be his spiritual growth, the chance to examine his beliefs, and to put them into practice under the most rigorous of circumstances. That would require patience, to take the time to examine so many aspects of life and energy, and God.

'Every journey must begin with a small step': a famous quote. Derek remembered fondly a favorite story about Napoleon. It seems Napoleon's troops had to travel from town to town, over roads that exposed them to the hot summer sun. He formulated a plan to plant trees along the roadsides, and so shade his troops. One of his ministers protested, "It will take twenty years for the trees to be of any use!" he cried. "Then we need to begin planting today," Napoleon had replied. And as Napoleon obviously knew, Derek would be better off twenty years from now by pursuing growth today, one small bit at a time.

Did patience mean not acting? Of course not. Who can know the future? No one. It always comes down to action, eventually. What is key about patience is the skill to make the right decision, at the right time; avoiding a knee-jerk reaction, often based on fear caused by ingrained patterns of behavior and not any reasoned response. Get off autopilot, and begin to see the reality in any situation and choose the path that benefits everyone, not just me.

Patience includes perseverance and tolerance. It is the opposite of anger, which is really about separation of self from others. Anger is selfish and greedy, and ignores the reality of one's Buddha nature, which is only love.

He remembered another quote, from a dharma talk he listened to given by a monk in Australia he found on the web: "When there is nothing to do, do nothing." He liked the way this cut to the problem many people had with patience, the fact they cannot wait to act, and always feel pressure to be 'doing something'. This often led to inappropriate action. Each situation calls for its own appropriate response.

Patience is about acting at the appropriate time. One can't be patient and be distracted by transient events and emotions, yet most people live only *for* those emotions. To be truly patient, you have to see the whole picture. That picture may be distasteful; it may not meet your expectations. I must avoid projecting my own desires onto the situation, he thought. There is a Tibetan parable about patience, concerning a man who constantly turns a prayer wheel in his hand. He lives with a son and one horse on a small piece of land. One morning he wakes to find the horse has disappeared. His neighbors bemoan this fact, knowing it will be impossible for the man to work his land without a horse. He says, however, "We must give thanks for everything. Who can tell good or bad?"

The next morning, the horse returns, and 2 wild horses have come along with it. The neighbors cheer this bonanza, but again he only says, "I am grateful, but who knows what the world will bring? We must simply wait and see."

The next day, his son is taming the wild horses, and falls and breaks his leg. Again the neighbors cry out in his misfortune, but the man only says, "I am grateful my son still lives. What has happened cannot be called good or bad."

On the following morning a military recruiter shows up to take the man's son away to join the army. Finding the son in bed with the broken leg, he leaves empty-handed. The neighbors cheer his good luck, but he only says, "Nothing is known for sure, we shall see." As the tale shows, we must accept what is, without projecting our own judgments of good or bad, and without feeling a rush to settle the future based on incomplete information.

Patience also has no room for 'enemies' because it is founded in the One, the sense of God present in the deepest reaches of each being. There, in the One, is only love, and the acknowledgement that 'We Are One'. I can't be an enemy to myself very well, can I? So rather than battle others, others who are not truly separate from myself anyway, I need to work towards a win-win solution that helps all. I need to see the issue from all points of view, and solve it helping all those perspectives gain something. I don't have to acquiesce, but I do have to avoid fury, wishful thinking and self-righteousness, all of which require separateness to exist. Above all, 'be fair' and the right path will

be found. And truly, when you are in the Now moment, in touch with the One, with God, its *already fine, peaceful and right*.

He'd cultivate the patience to work each concept through to a natural conclusion, or to get the most from a particular event in each of the many different aspects of his being. He remembered one of his all-time favorite commercials; "We will sell no wine before it's time". "There is a season for everything, and everything in its season" also came to mind. And he has also believed as far back as he can recall, "this too shall pass". He craves change and learning new things, and that too, indicates a level of patience beyond what most people are comfortable with. One never knows when something learned today might be useful in the future, whether a bit of data, a skill, or even something as profound as a new way of seeing the same old reality. But in whatever way, learning is only truly useful if you are willing to file it away for some unknown future time, and isn't that patience?

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Ron, while pleased, was concerned that a whole day had gone by without so much as a message from Susan. It seemed odd that she had been such a pain those first three days, and then she would just give up. Perhaps her boss had said something to her that had calmed her down. Ron hoped so, it would make this report that much easier to deliver: a second day of calls, completing his list of jail phone numbers, without finding Derek.

He hated to admit it, but it looked as though he would have to hit the pavement Wednesday, getting out in the city and countryside, and find more jails, or find out where Derek had been when he made the call. If he could locate the trail at any point, it would be easy to find the man. But without a trail.....Bangkok was a big place. Ron knew very few people outside the Embassy staff, having been stationed here just under 8 months. And the Embassy staff did not make a habit of fraternizing with the natives, other than those who work in bars. He frankly didn't know where to start. He couldn't put this off, however, so he started down the hall to deliver the bleak situation report to his boss.

As he turned the corner just a few doors from his goal, he almost ran into Jason. Or Jason almost ran into him, with his attention centered on a briefing paper as he walked. After apologizing, Jason asked, "So how's the hunt going?" "Not well", Ron had to admit. "I have called everywhere I know, with no luck. I don't know where to go next."

"Got a moment? Come with me?" Ron was willing to take any excuse to put off telling his boss of his failure, so he was quick to agree.

Jason was silent as they walked to his office on the floor above. Ron had never been to Jason's office, and paid close attention to who was working nearby.

Judging by the neighborhood, the Embassy thought rather well of Jason.

As Ron entered behind him, Jason quietly said, "Close the door" over his shoulder and went straight to the right hand desk drawer. Opening it, he brought out a battered notebook and began rifling the pages. Finding the one he wanted, he spun the notebook around to where Ron could read it, and pointed to a name and number: 'Lip 08-0117-3327'.

"Call Lip tonight, after 8 pm. He works in the Police Headquarters but should be home by then. Mention my name, and tell him I'm trying to find a *falang* that was arrested Friday. Give him your own cell number and tell him he'll get the usual if

he gets us what we need. I'd call him myself, but I'm a little unhappy with the last info he provided me. I want to send him a message that I don't want to work with him just yet. He should do you fine, to try to get back on my good side. I pay him well."

"How much do you pay him?" Ron had not heard that Embassy staff used paid informants.

"Depends on how important the info is. In this case, how much would you pay to find out where the guy is?" Ron didn't expect to have to put a price on his own job.

"I don't know, a hundred maybe? But doesn't the Embassy actually pay? What's the Embassy willing to pay?"

The angry look on Jason's face froze Ron in place. The silence became uncomfortable quickly.

"OK. If a hundred isn't enough, how much is good enough?"

"I'd think 5 times that would be a good price, but if you want to use Lip in the future, make an impression and double that."

A thousand bucks? To find a guy who got *himself* arrested? From his own pocket? 'You gotta be kidding' Ron thought, but what he said was, "OK, OK. I'll call him tonight. Uh, thanks."

As Jason stayed silent, Ron realized he'd received all the help he was going to get. He turned, opened the door and left.

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His meeting with his boss went exactly as he feared. He was given the impression he only had a limited amount of time to find the citizen, he was given no help, and received no sympathy for the work already done. In fact, he got the distinct feeling his boss felt he was slacking on this. Saying nothing of Jason's contact, he promised to start early in the morning, and report again next evening if not sooner. The only bright spot of the meeting came when his boss offered the name of the official Embassy contact in the Main Police Administration. He left so depressed he didn't even go back to his office, nor did he stop to talk with Lisa. The only thought on his mind as he left the building was to find the closest place where he could get a stiff drink of whiskey and have a beautiful girl take his mind off his problems and put it on something else.

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Neung approached the cell feeling a mixture of excitement and fear. His mind kept telling him he had promised not to accept any more food from the *falang*, but his stomach was growling at the prospect of being offered more to eat. He couldn't continue to eat without being caught eventually, and he didn't know if he would be punished for taking food from a foreigner or praised. If he were punished, though, it would be brutal. So he knew he should say no. This being the second dinner for the *falang*, it was also shower day. Neung had brought a towel along with the food and water. Procedure in the prison had the prisoner taking their shower before eating, as Neung had to accompany the prisoner to the showers area and back. But Neung was hungry.

He was not surprised this time to find the prisoner watching him as he opened the door. He set the water bottles down next to the bucket, set the food tray on the ground next to the water, and took the towel out from under his arm. Shaking it out to its full length, he held out the towel and motioned in the direction of the shower.

The *falang* said, “*Shower, yes?*” and began to stand. That took longer than normal; he seemed to be having a small bit of pain in rising. As he watched the man struggle to his feet, Neung could see a slight bulge under the man’s shirt that might be a bandage.

Once he was on his feet, however, he moved fine. Together, with the *falang* in front following Neung’s finger pointing, they moved to the shower area. Though called a ‘shower’, it actually was a pan bath in typical Thai tradition. A large trough was filled with water, and a small plastic bowl was used to scoop water to get oneself wet and remove soap. The *falang* removed his clothes, not at all modest about being naked, and Neung could see there was a bandage on his belly, and large bruises on his arms and chest. The man began to peel away the bandage, as the shower guard wandered out of the administrative building and strolled over to watch.

Once the bandage was off, Neung could see a long incision had been made across the man’s stomach. It looked new, but it had been closed without stitches. Neung had never heard of such a thing. The man seemed pleased with what he saw, and began to clean himself quickly. He seemed to be experienced at using the bowl to shower.

At the end of the five minutes allotted for the shower, the guard said “*Stop*” and the *falang* began to get dressed. Neung was relieved there was no confrontation, no lingering, no complaining as often happened with Thai prisoners. As they walked back to the cell, the prisoner looked all around, as if drinking in the memories of what he saw for later review.

Once back in the cell, the prisoner gingerly sat down against the back wall. Neung moved the tray near and placed the two bowls on the ground. He turned to pick up the bucket to take it out for emptying, and was horrified as his stomach let out a loud growl. He had wanted to refuse any food tonight, and here he was, his mind betrayed by his body. He nearly dropped the tray as he grabbed the bucket and left the cell. He quickly emptied and cleaned the bucket, and hurried back to the cell.

He wasn’t fast enough. Already, both bowls had been pushed away from the prisoner, with about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the food remaining. The *falang* sat with eyes closed, as if meditating. Neung set the bucket down, and started to turn and leave. But his body would not do what his mind demanded, and against his will, he found himself reaching for the bowls and quickly finishing the food. Ashamed at his lack of self-discipline, he gathered the bowls and left the cell.

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Derek was hungry when he heard Neung approaching with dinner. Better get used to this feeling, he thought, determined to stay the course with his plan to give food to his new friend.



Happily, Neung arrived with a towel and indicated he was to be allowed out of the cell for his shower. It was a relief to be able to stand without slouching, and to be able to focus on something farther away than 7 feet. As they moved together towards his first bath, he was determined to pay attention to his surroundings, to be able to review what he could recall later in his cell.

The compound's gate was on his left, a two-story wooden structure that appeared to be the administration building on his right. Straight ahead the largest structure appeared to be the main jail, as there were bars on the windows. This building was four stories high, and made of concrete. He saw two guards at the gate, two of four guard towers along the exterior wall were manned, and there were some people clustered under a patio outside a small building, just to the left of the jail. The jail had several doors, and there was a large cage of chain link fencing material that enshrouded two of them. He could see a guard sitting on a chair through an open door inside the cage.

In the distance, he could see hills in all directions, some closer than others. Atop one hill to his left, to the north, a golden spire glittered in the sun. Quite often temples were placed on hilltops. The hills farther away were shrouded with the mist common in Thailand, due to the moisture in the air. Derek found Thailand wasn't as humid as Florida in August, but there was still plenty of humidity to obscure vision.

The 'shower' turned out to be the traditional Thai bath, with a small plastic bowl to use to scoop water from a trough. He was familiar with this, and would have no problem. He was glad to be able to examine his belly. He wasn't having much pain and wanted to be sure there was no infection developing in the incision. With relief he saw the cut was healing nicely. There were no stitches; the doctors must have used the new surgical glue to close the cut. Knowing his time was limited, he got to work. He managed to get clean without getting water on the cast, but the skin around his wrist was starting to itch. He wanted to flush the inside of the cast with water, to cool his wrist, but decided not to.

The shower was quite refreshing, and ended much too quickly. The walk back was uneventful; he continued to drink in his surroundings. He was surprised there were so few guards; he rather expected to have a group surrounding him anytime he was out of the cell. It felt good that only Neung accompanied him. Once back in the cell, the routine unfolded as expected, with the food being offered and the bucket being emptied. He almost laughed when Neung's stomach growled, funny how quickly a body adjusts and expects a more normal level of nutrition. He could tell the Neung was conflicted about accepting the food, and worried he was causing Neung problems. But he was happy to see Neung eat. 'Not bad, for my first full day here' Derek thought. He was happy as Neung left for the evening.

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Ron reached for the phone several times before mustering the courage to dial the number Jason had given him. He was concerned that Jason wasn't making the call for him; it was his informer after all. This whole business of running an

informer was new to Ron, and he was completely unprepared for this turn of events. Still, he had no other leads, and if this got him the answer he needed, it might well be worth it. He finally dialed the number and waited for Lip to answer. The phone was answered, but nothing was said. Ron began the conversation, saying "Hello? Is this Lip?"

The grunt from the other end of the line might have meant anything, but Ron carried on with the script he had rehearsed. "Jason from the US Embassy told me you could help me locate an American in jail here. He said you'd get the usual price for any useful information. The American's name is Derek Stevenson. My cell number is, are you ready to write this down?"

Again there was silence on the line. "Can I give you my cell number?"

"OK" was all he heard, so he gave his number twice. The line remained silent, and looking at his phone's display, he found the call had ended. He hoped Lip had written the number down correctly before hanging up. He really needed some help here.

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Susan gradually became aware of the roaring of the 747's engines just feet from her head. According to local San Diego time, she had slept in; it was almost 8 am. Her stomach complained loudly about the late start to the day, but as she opened the window shade and looked outside, it was still dark. She would lose Tuesday completely on this flight, and arrive at sunrise in Taipei Wednesday morning. Totally odd.

She had not slept well; she had never been comfortable sleeping while sitting up. But she *had* managed to sleep through the first meal service. Looking around her now, most people were asleep, but a few had their overhead spotlights on and were reading or watching the TV in the seat back in front of them. One was eating noodle soup from a Styrofoam cup, and once again, her stomach demanded attention. She unbuckled her seat belt and moved forward towards the toilet. Once she finished with that, she approached a stewardess seated in the galley and asked for her own soup. The stewardess got right to it, and told her to return to her seat. Just moments later she was enjoying a light breakfast. Not quite halfway through the 14-hour flight, she pulled the magazine from the pouch in front of her, and thumbed through it until she found the movie listing. There were 8 movies rotating on four channels, and she began to plot her entertainment for the rest of the flight. She'd see some current films that she wouldn't pay \$9 to see in the theater. Such a deal!

## Wednesday

Neung sat up with a start. It was still dark outside; he wasn't sure what time it was. He had just had a dream that gave him the answer to what had bothered him these last two days, what to do about taking food from the *falang*.

Neung shared a room with Rangsang, the warden's aide. Rangsang was 21, and treated Neung as his younger brother. They slept in an office in the rear of the administration building, just two doors away from the toilet. They showered just outside the rear door, and slept on pads side by side. Neung had gone to bed alone last night, Rangsang had to attend the warden late as often happened. Shortly after they began to share the room, Rangsang had not come to the room to sleep by 8:30, as was their custom. Neung had gone to look for him, and found the door to the warden's office was closed. Approaching the door, he heard a bamboo stick striking flesh, and grunts coming from the office. He had been too afraid to approach or listen closely, running back to the room and hiding his head under his pillow. He did not ask Rangsang about it when his friend finally crept into the room a few hours later, he feared the same thing would happen to him if he appeared too curious.

Tonight he slept poorly, from missing Rangsang, being worried about what was keeping him away, and from the stress of taking the food from the prisoner. He feared what would happen if it was discovered, and he felt guilty about taking food from such a large man, when the food was not enough to sustain him in the first place. When Rangsang crept to bed, relieving some worry, he still slept poorly.

Now however, he knew what to do. Neung smiled and rolled over, quickly falling back to sleep.

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Susan landed in Taipei at 4:30 am Wednesday, Bangkok time. She was starving; it was 2:30 pm Tuesday back home in San Diego and she had taken a pass on the second meal served on the plane. Never a fan of airline food, reheated chicken from cooks using Asian recipes just didn't look appetizing. As she moved through the terminal to go to the gate for the Taipei-Bangkok leg, she was searching for food. Unfortunately, being 5:30 am in Taipei, she saw lots of bright, smiling faces in the duty-free stores, the bookstores and the perfumeries but no open restaurants.

She had nearly three hours of layover here, and took her time finding gate C8. The Taiwan National Museum had a small exhibit, and an electronics retailer had a product display with demo models of computers, games and G3 phones. As you might expect, the electronics had drawn the largest crowd. Converting NT\$ to US\$, the prices seemed to be just slightly more than she would expect to pay at home. After wandering through the bookstore, and finding only a handful of titles in English, she managed to find a coffee bar open for business and had a Danish and an espresso, then followed that with a hot chocolate. At least she wouldn't be sleepy on the next flight. She just had to hope the next airline meal would be more appealing.

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It was easy for the rooster to wake Derek; he hadn't slept well since arriving in this cell. There was only dark sky outside the windows, so it must be about 4:30 am, he figured. This whole idea of 'being one with the floor' was crazy. He hurt anywhere that had to touch the concrete. Back, shoulders, hips, ankles, all hurt. To top it off, this concrete was cold. Odd to be complaining of cold in Thailand, he thought. But cold he was. And itchy. He normally didn't notice mosquitoes; they'd never found him tasty. Others would be covered in bites, and he wouldn't have a single one. But this morning, he had half a dozen. At least, last he'd heard, Bangkok was not one of the parts of Thailand that was battling malaria. Knowing Neung would still be a few hours away with breakfast, he tried to find a position on the floor that didn't hurt.

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Neung woke with a start, it was still dark but he could hear the cock crowing in the distance, so it must be about 4:30 am. Somehow, the cock could see the dawn coming before Neung ever could. He was excited by the idea that had come to him in the night, and found it impossible to go back to sleep. He watched Rangsang sleep, chest rising and falling slowly. He was a handsome boy when asleep, the stress erased from his face. Neung wondered if he loved Rangsang, or if he even knew what love was all about. He only knew he would not be able to stand it if Rangsang were to leave him.

He couldn't get up before Rangsang; that would not be normal. And today, he needed to draw as little attention to his movements as possible. He needed to speak with the cook before he actually went to pick up the prisoner's food. He wanted the prisoner's ration increased immediately, if the cook agreed, so that he could continue to eat his extra portion without taking food away from the *falang*. For the first time since he could remember, he was going to sleep without a complaining belly. He didn't want that to stop. He lay on his pad, pretending to be asleep, and hoping the Rangsang would waken quickly and creep out of the room. Then he could find out if his plan would work.

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The neighbors were fighting again. Ron rolled over and pulled his pillow over his head, trying to shut out the yelling and banging coming from the other side of his bedroom wall. Something glass hit the wall and shattered, startling Ron and getting his adrenaline flowing. Sleep would be impossible for a while, and now that he was wide-awake he remembered what he had to do today, to get out into Bangkok and hunt for Derek.

Depressed and hyped up, there was no reason to stay in bed. His alarm clock showed 4:30 am, way to early to be up and around, but there was no helping it now. He turned on the TV, but found that the channels he enjoyed watching the most, the Thai channels that played music videos, were all playing infomercials at this time of day. Too early for the Bangkok Post, the English language newspaper, to be delivered to the newsstand down the street; he found himself

just pacing in the living room. Slowly moving back and forth, worrying about what today would bring and yet failing to formulate a viable plan. Hopefully coffee would clear his head, settle him into routine, and allow him to think clearly. If not, this could be a very long day indeed.

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Rangsan finally awoke, and crept out of the room without realizing Neung had lain awake for an hour. Neung gave him a minute to use the toilet, listened carefully for the rear door, and then counted to 30 after hearing it close softly. He jumped off the pad, quickly folded both pads and piled them in the corner as expected, and hurried to the toilet himself.

Finished with that business, he opened the rear door slightly, saw no one who would be suspicious of where he went, and headed to the kitchen. The kitchen was very smoky when he entered; the cook had just started the fire that would cook the morning's food.

The cook saw him, and managed to speak first, "Neung, how are you this morning?"

"I'm OK" Neung didn't want to give away how excited he was. He approached the table where the cook had begun to chop chili peppers for the morning's *nam prik* (chili sauce). "What are you making for the prisoner's breakfast today?"

"The usual, nothing new, Why?"

"That new prisoner, the *falang*, have you seen him?" Neung wanted to lead the cook into the right decision.

"No. Is he ugly?"

"Aren't all *falangs*?" Neung giggled a little, not having thought of the prisoner as ugly, but enjoying the joke.

"He's white, and that says something right there."

"Yeah, I suppose. He's big, that's why I ask. Much bigger than Thai people. He barely fits into the cell, can't even stand in it he's so big."

"Not too many Thais would have that problem," the cook laughed.

"Why do you think they put him in the punishment cell?" Neung had wondered about this from the start, but hadn't felt secure enough to ask any of the guards.

"Hmmm, maybe they don't want him in with the general population? Do you know why he's locked up?" The cook had an interesting question, Neung hadn't thought about that. Most people in jail hadn't done anything to be here anyway, they are all framed, so he wasn't in the habit of asking anyone why they were prisoners.

"I haven't asked, but I don't see why he would go directly to a punishment cell the minute he arrives."

"So I'll ask you again, why are you curious about today's breakfast?"

"If he's going to stay healthy, he needs more food than a Thai person. He's just so big...."

"Ahhhh, now I see. What's he giving you to ask for more food?"

"It's not like that at all!" Neung blurted out without thinking. "It's my idea, he hasn't asked anything of me!"

The cook paused in slicing peppers, and gazed appraisingly at Neung. He looked thoughtful for a few seconds, and then returned his gaze to the peppers. "Are you sure this is a path you want to take?" he asked quietly.

That gave Neung pause. He hadn't thought of this as a fork in the road, but the cook was right. He was making a choice that would affect his future, alter his destiny. Helping this *falang* would change his life forever, for good or bad. Was he willing to take the chance it might be bad?

His stomach growled, voicing its opinion. That was all the Neung needed. "Yeah, I want to help him. Will you help me?"

The cook looked up and into Neung's eyes one more time. After a pause that seemed to last forever, he nodded and motioned for Neung to leave. Neung whispered "Thank you" and left to begin his morning rounds in the jail proper.

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Ron had waited long enough; this day wasn't going to get easier by delaying its start. After walking to the coffee stand for his usual morning dose of caffeine, he caught a tuk-tuk to the Police Administration building. Tuk-tuks were the cheaper way to get around, and if Ron were going to have to pay Lip for any tip, he couldn't afford to waste money on a taxi. Tuk-tuks were glorified motorcycles, three wheeled bikes with a bench on the rear so that two thin people could sit comfortably, and a roof to keep the sun and rain off everyone. But as an open-air vehicle, the passengers were exposed to the cacophony of the streets, and had no air conditioning, both major disadvantages in Ron's mind.

It didn't take long for Ron to remember why he got out so infrequently during the day: Bangkok was more crowded with vehicle traffic than anywhere he had been. The reduced sense of personal space Thai people grew accustomed to, by living together four and sometimes five generations in single room, also translated into autos getting much closer together on the road than Ron would like. At one point, he looked to his right while the tuk-tuk waited at a red light, and saw that he would not be able to put his finger between the tuk-tuk and the bus next to it; they were that close. To his amazement, the two vehicles didn't touch as the light turned green and they pulled away.

He also found himself gagging on the diesel exhaust. Anyone who spent significant time outdoors, police directing traffic for example, wore facemasks to filter the filthy air. Ron had no desire to wear a mask, but hoped he wouldn't have to spend all day traipsing around the city on this wild goose chase.

After half an hour gagging on exhaust and gripping the rails of the tuk-tuk as the driver barreled through traffic, they pulled up at the front steps of an ornate stone building. The large sign out front proclaimed something in Thai with the English "Police Administration, Bangkok" in smaller letters underneath. Ron got out and paid the tuk-tuk driver the outrageous sum of 60 baht (US\$2), complaining under his breath that it was twice what it should be. He turned and trudged up the stairs, hoping against hope that this would be the start of the end of his quest. Entering the front doors, which stood open despite the air conditioning inside, he found himself in a large lobby. Stairs to the upper floors were on his right, and

several different service windows lined the wall on his left. Straight ahead, there was an atrium, and no wall between the lobby and the flowers outside.

One of the service windows, in addition to the Thai signs, had a hand-lettered piece of cardboard propped up that said "Information". He approached, mentioned the name "Mr. Sonsin" that his boss had given him, and was told "227". The clerk behind the counter retrieved a small piece of paper and wrote the number on it before sliding it across the counter to him. Just being sure he understood, Ron guessed.

He turned and went up the stairs to the second floor, and quickly found room 227. Of course the door was closed, so he knocked quietly. After many seconds of silence, he knocked again, louder this time, but without a different result. Just my luck, he thought. A man in a business suit passing by said "Hello!" and smiled broadly. When Ron smiled back, he held up his index finger and turned back the way he had come. Ron waited, having little else to do until he had spoken with Mr. Sonsin. The man quickly returned, with a police officer in tow. The officer asked Ron, "Are you here to visit Mr. Sonsin?"

"Yes. When will he be here, do you know?" Ron answered.

"Not before 12 o'clock. He has meeting every Wednesday." This was bad news. Then Ron had a thought, and fished the paper from his pocket that listed the jails he had already called. Thrusting it towards the officer, he asked, "Do you know of any jails nearby that are not on this list?"

The man took the paper, and began to look at it. "Why are you here?" he said as his eyes traveled down the page.

"I am Ron Jacobi, from the US Embassy. We have reason to believe that a US citizen was arrested Friday last, and we're trying to determine which jail is holding him so that we may verify he is well-treated." At the word 'arrested' the officer glanced up at Ron, before returning his eyes to the list.

"There are two jails near that are not on your list. What did the man do to be get arrested?"

"We don't know, unfortunately. We only know he called a friend to report he was in a Bangkok jail."

"We tell you more if I know why we arrested the man. Different offences are put in different jails."

"I don't know anymore than I have already told you. Can you write the addresses of the two jails in Thai on the back of the paper for me, please?"

The officer looked up at Ron for several seconds, then turned and began to move down the hall. As he walked, he turned and waved at Ron. Ron was dumbfounded; the officer was taking his list and not helping him at all. He almost yelled in his panic, "Can I have my list back?"

The officer stopped and turned around, then waved at Ron again. Ron felt embarrassed when he remembered that Thais wave to mean 'come here', not 'good by'. He walked quickly to catch up to the man. Seeing him coming, the officer turned and continued down the hall.

He turned into an office, and when Ron rounded the door and entered behind him, the officer was writing on the back of the paper. He finished and handed the

paper back to Ron. “Good luck” he said with a smile. Ron wasn’t sure if it was the smile of a friend being helpful or a shark looking at a small bite to eat.

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Derek heard Neung coming, and opened his eyes. He was having trouble meditating this morning, being so sore from sleeping on the floor. Neung opened the door and entered, carrying the tray ceremoniously high, as if trying to obscure what was on the tray from Derek’s gaze. He dropped the water bottles from several inches above the floor, maintaining the tray above Derek’s eyes. Then with a flourish of his left arm, he lowered the tray with his right, to display not two, not three, but four bowls on the tray. There were two portions of rice, and two of soup. He quickly set the bowls on the floor, in front of Derek, and sat back on his haunches. Their eyes met, and Derek quietly said, “Thank you, my friend” in English, and “*Friend, thank you*” in Thai. Neung was thrilled, as beyond his wildest hopes, Derek pushed an entire bowl of rice and one of soup towards him. “*Friend, thank you*” Neung murmured before beginning to eat.

They ate in silence, and not as quickly as they had before. They were just enjoying the relative abundance of food, and the friendship quickly developing between them. Once both had finished, Neung began to gather the bowls to leave.

“*Friend, give me sleeping pad can?*” Neung looked up as Derek spoke, and his heart came up in his throat. Here is where he begins to exact his payment for the food he’s given me, Neung thought. But it’s not an outrageous request; all the other prisoners have sleeping pads. The *falang* doesn’t have one because that’s the rule for the punishment cell. But if the cook is right, and he’s only here to keep him away from the rest of the prisoners because he’s *falang*, then he should be allowed a pad. Neung shuddered to think of what it would be like to sleep on the bare concrete when you weren’t used to it.

“*Maybe*” was all he could say. He quickly backed out of the cell before the prisoner could ask for anything else.

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Susan’s plane landed right on time. She disembarked, and quickly cleared immigration. Her bags were among the last to come up on the carousel, however. She had actually begun to fear that they missed making the connection in Taipei. But they finally arrived, and she moved through Customs and out into the hot Bangkok noon.

She was deluged with Thai men shouting “Taxi!” and “Where you go, Miss?” She stayed calm, shaking her head ‘no’ almost constantly, as she searched for an ATM and took out her daily maximum of US\$500. That gave her 15500 baht, at the best exchange rate she would be able to get. Next she looked for a taxi sign, finally finding one that read ‘Taxi Stand’ with an arrow. She followed its direction through the door to the sidewalk.

Once outside, she continued being barraged by touts, but saw the taxi stand and marched resolutely to it. The woman working behind its counter asked where she wanted to go, and she said “American Embassy, Wireless Road”. The lady



seemed to understand, scribbling something on a paper and tearing it from the book. She handed Susan the paper, and once Susan had turned around, a man grabbed it from her hand and pointed to a taxi waiting with the trunk open. A man standing next to the taxi hurried over and took Susan's bags, quickly throwing them in the trunk and then rushing to the driver's door without so much as opening the door for her. She wasn't upset by that, but noticed how it would be different in San Diego. Welcome to Bangkok, she thought.

Once in the taxi, the driver turned and asked her destination. She told him, and then scooted over into the middle of the back seat so that the car's air conditioning vent in the front dash could reach her. The cool air felt refreshing after the heat of midday. She settled back and began to take notice of the city as it passed by the window.

It certainly was more crowded than she had expected, and there was quite an interesting juxtaposition of hundreds-of-years-old Buddhist temples literally next to modern high-rise buildings. She saw too many roadside food carts to count, and more motorcycles than she knew existed on the planet. There was a constant bustle of activity. There also seemed to be a lot of people who were poor, judging by their clothing; it was old, mismatched, or dirty. A surprising number of people wore T-shirts with English sayings or from American companies and events. While stopped at a red light, the man on the motorcycle next to the taxi wore a T-shirt from the 2004 North Dakota State Fair. Susan wondered what tortured path that shirt had traveled before ending up on the Thai man.

Many billboards had English as well as Thai; travel, new homes and electronics comprised the bulk of these ads. One high-rise had a photo of the King on one side, 30 floors tall. Susan tried to imagine a building in San Diego having a 30-story picture of the President and failed to see it happening.

The driver said something in Thai and looked in the rear view mirror for her response. When she looked perplexed, he said in English "Toll road?" Still perplexed, he stuck out his hand as if expecting her to give him something and said "40 baht." She fumbled with her money, trying to extract a 100 baht bill from the folded bills, and saw they were approaching a tollbooth. After paying the toll, the driver handed her the change and a receipt that had the length of the road mapped on one side.

Another 5 minutes passed, then the driver pulled off the toll road and began dodging cycles and pedestrians on small city streets. She was amazed at how close the vehicles got to each other, impressed that she saw no accidents despite this. And being from California, she noticed that pedestrians received no consideration from vehicles, they crossed the street at their own risk. She couldn't see any street signs, and wondered how one used a map to find some place new.

The taxi stopped next to a concrete wall. The driver pointed down the street, and Susan could see a gate ahead. She looked at the meter and counted out 300 baht to cover the 237 baht fare. She waited for the change, which was slow in coming. She finally waved at the driver to say "Never mind" after he had managed to find 40 baht in various pockets. He smiled, and popped the lid to the

trunk. She got out and wrestled her luggage to the sidewalk alone, and the car began to pull away from the curb almost before she finished closing the trunk. Susan gathered her bags and approached the gate. There was a service window to the right of a turnstile, with a small queue formed in front. As she waited for her turn, she read the various signs. Most concerned travel visas for Thais, but it was obvious the Embassy was open limited hours for most activities. Fortunately it seemed to be open the early part of the afternoon, so she would be able to get in today.

Briefly explaining the reason for her visit, she was allowed to enter through the turnstile. She was directed to store her bags in one location, and to turn off and deposit her cell phone in another before entering the compound. Her attention was directed to a sign that announced her bags were subject to search for any reason, at any time. Just another sign of the world we live in, she thought. Having deposited her gear, she proceeded to locate an information desk to determine where Mr. James' office was. He was the supervisor of that incompetent Ron Jacobi. Susan had no interest in meeting Ron; she would go right to the top.

It took many minutes, but she finally had an idea of where to go. Following the directions, she moved through several hallways, and located the appropriate door. It stood open, and a tall, thin man worked with a laptop at the desk. There were two identical leather chairs in front of the desk. She knocked on the doorframe, and the man looked up.

"Mr. James? I'm Susan Andrews, from San Diego."

The look of surprise on his face was priceless. After surprise, she saw him lock down his emotions and smile at her. "Please, come in Ms. Andrews, and have a seat."

He stood and indicated a chair. Susan entered and offered her hand. He took it and shook her hand briefly, quickly sitting again. He clasped his hands in front of his chest and eyed her carefully. "What a surprise, to see you here. When you stopped calling, we hoped you understood how difficult it is to get information from Thai authorities. We continue to actively search for Mr. Stevenson."

"I'm sure you are searching, and I also believe you that it is difficult to get any useful information. However, I can't just sit at home while Derek is suffering here alone. He trusts me to help him, and so I have come to help. What exactly has happened while I've been traveling?"

He proceeded to give her a summary of what Ron had tried while failing to get results. He padded the account as much as plausible; reluctant to give her ammunition to use later if she decided to claim the Embassy staff had been unhelpful. By the time he finished, it sounded as if the entire city was looking under every rock for Derek.

"I believe you're doing what you can," Susan said when he had finished his tale.

"But I'd like to do what I can to help. Would you give me a list of the jails in Bangkok, so that I can contact them myself?"

"That would not be appropriate. You'd not have better luck than my staff, and may in fact create more problems for us. The best thing for you to do is to find a hotel and wait for us to complete our search."

“Well, I surely can’t do that after traveling all this way, now can I?” Susan turned on the sweetness in her smile and manner. “Surely there is something I might be able to do to help?”

The Embassy official clasped his hands together under his chin, and gazed towards the ceiling for a few moments. “I will contact my staff who are working on this, and see if there’s some way you may be of assistance. If there are contacts that would be more appropriate coming from a lady, I will seriously consider allowing you to help.”

Susan knew a brush-off when she heard one, and realized she’d get no further pursuing this conversation. “Thank you for your time today, Sir. I will let you know my contact info once I have located a suitable hotel.” She rose from the chair to leave.

“Indeed, you are very welcome Ms. Andrews. The Dusit Thani is undoubtedly the best hotel in Bangkok, if you’d like a recommendation. I look forward to delivering the news you’ve come so far to hear.”

As she returned to the front gate, she pondered her next move. Assuming that Ron had effectively contacted the Bangkok jails, and she knew she shouldn’t assume anything, perhaps she should start with the police stations and substations. After all, Derek most likely had been arrested before being taken to a jail. If she could find his trail at any point, she’d be able to find him quickly. Her mind made up, she gathered her belongings and flagged down a taxi. Once inside, she managed to communicate “Police Station” to the driver, and settled back for the ride.

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Ron began what would quickly become a routine, finding a tuk-tuk, paying an outrageous amount to go to a jail, getting the runaround while someone was located who could marginally speak English, being told there were no foreigners held there, and then beginning the loop all over again. After the visiting the two jails written on his paper, it was nearly noon. He returned to Mr. Sonsin’s office and waited only a few minutes before Mr. Sonsin appeared. After hearing Ron’s plea for the location of more jails, he obliged by giving him an official-looking roster. Ron thanked him and returned to the main floor of the Administration building. There were some benches in the atrium, he sat on the closest one and began the task of checking the list of jails he had called against the new list. There weren’t that many he had missed, only 4 in fact. Wouldn’t it just be his luck that the missing American would be in the last one he could find?

Cheered by knowing the runaround had an end in sight, he left the building and began to search for a restaurant in which to have lunch. He passed numerous roadside stands as he walked along the busy street, before he found an open restaurant. He was alone in the dining room, and it took a few moments to determine if the place was truly open for business. But a young girl appeared and took his order from the menu written in English on one side and Thai on the other. She had to look carefully at the items he pointed to; she was copying by rote what she could not understand. Ron feared he’d get the special of the day, whatever that happened to be, no matter what he ordered. It would be so typical.

She brought him the bottle of green tea he had asked for, and he sat staring at the TV that was tuned to a Thai soap opera without seeing what was on. His mind was far away, trying to imagine what it must be like to be in a Thai jail. No air conditioning in this climate would be difficult to bear for any amount of time, and the food must be atrocious. You'd have a cellmate who didn't speak English, so it would really be solitary confinement the entire time. You wouldn't have access to lawyers, and you wouldn't understand the legal system that put you there. Cut off from family and friends, no one to send money to help you buy the little things in the jails' dispensary, wait, would Thai jails even have a dispensary for prisoners? Ron had no idea. He shook his head, glad only that it wasn't him behind those Bangkok bars right now.

His meal arrived, and he was grateful that it appeared to be correct. But after just a few bites, he realized it had been prepared spicy as if it was for Thai people. He didn't do spicy, and with tears rolling down his face he tried to find the waitress to complain. She was nowhere to be found. All right then, he thought, if you're not here for a complaint then you're not here for payment either. He gulped down the last of the green tea, and hurried from the restaurant, leaving the meal behind. It was inedible anyway.

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Neung had spent all morning keeping a watchful eye out for Gai. His favorite guard, Gai spoke English and for that alone held Neung's respect. Not being educated himself, he greatly admired someone who could speak two languages. Gai also took time out of his day whenever Neung had a question. Most guards could hardly bother to step over him, and wouldn't consider speaking to him unless he forced himself on them. Gai was different, and Neung knew he would give good advice about today's problem.

Just after lunch, while the guards were loitering around the refrigerator where the water bottles were kept cold, he saw Gai lighting a cigarette and hurried over. He wasn't comfortable discussing the issue of the sleeping pad around the others, but he tactfully asked Gai where he was posted this afternoon. Fortunately, he was the guard for the visitor's store, the mini mart where visitors purchased small incidentals and snacks for later delivery to inmates. They were prohibited from giving money to prisoners, but this way they could provide the extra items that made life behind bars more tolerable. The prison reaped a small profit on the mark-up, as well.

Neung knew that would mean Gai had to be on post before lunch was over for the rest of the guards, but also that he would be alone. He went off to find something to do for half an hour, till Gai was back to work.

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Ron hurried to the corner and rounded it without being seen, he hoped. He began to watch the street for a tuk-tuk, as he continued quickly down the block. Feeling his cell phone vibrating in his pocket, he pulled it out and saw that it was his boss calling. Continuing to watch the street, he opened the phone. "Hello Mr. James."

"Hello Ron, you'll never guess who just left my office."

"I'm sure you're right, who?"

"Susan Andrews." Ron was just as surprised as Chris James had been, but didn't have to hide it. He stopped in his tracks and focused on a cloud drifting through the afternoon sky. At first glance, he couldn't think of a thing that she would be helpful for. And if she found Derek herself, well, Ron hated to think of how that would look.

"I hope you told her to stay off the streets of Bangkok, for her own safety of course."

"I told her we were diligently working on her behalf, that I'd meet with all the staff and see if there was anything useful she could do, and recommended the Dusit Thani as a great place to wait for news."

"All the staff? Who else is working on this?" Ron was both miffed and jealous.

"Just you, but I didn't leave her with that impression. All the more reason you need to find this guy, today if not sooner."

"Got it. I'm on it." Ron closed the phone without so much as a goodbye. He was, after all, in a hurry, wasn't he? A tuk-tuk appeared as if on cue, and he began the afternoon's search, albeit on an empty stomach. No time for eating, now that Susan was in town, eh boss?

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Neung knew where Gai would sit when working the store; he liked to keep more of an eye on the cashier than on the public. Few people had the nerve to shoplift from a prison store, but employees didn't seem to notice who they worked for. He approached Gai after checking that no other guards were around.

"So what's up, little man?"

"I was just wondering, why did the *falang* get put into a punishment cell from the first moment he arrived?"

"Why does it matter to you, my little friend?"

"He's too big for the cell, first of all, and second he doesn't get a sleeping pad when all other prisoners do. I guess I feel bad for the foreigner, having to sleep on the hard floor. He can hardly fold his legs when he sits, and he's used to soft beds all his life. It has to be worse for him to be in that cell than for a Thai. I just want to know why he's losing privileges, that's all."

Gai turned and watched the cashier for a moment. When he returned to face Neung, there was the hint of a smile on his face. "Do you know why they let you care for the *falang* without a guard always being with you?"

Neung hadn't thought to question that. He was given free rein to come and go around the prison, and had responsibilities that brought him into contact with every single prisoner. It was true that guards held the keys and would open and close doors for him, and having the key for the punishment cell was the first time he'd had that kind of responsibility. "No, I hadn't thought about it."

"Have you been here when there were other *falangs* as prisoners?"

"No."

"The problem with *falangs* is sooner or later the Embassy from their country finds them, and then the prison gets examined in great detail, to ensure the prisoner

was fairly treated. Usually, that means the prisoner needs to be treated better than a Thai. The warden can't treat him special, or the Thais would revolt and get him sent out into the countryside, to some pit of a jail, probably not as a warden anymore. But if the Embassy finds the prisoner wasn't treated well, they complain to the government, and someone must pay for the poor treatment. If the warden can explain he has removed the guard who was treating the prisoner poorly, he keeps his job and the Embassy is usually happy. They take the *falang* away, one guard loses his job, and things are back to normal. No guard wants to be *that* guard. So you're it."

It all made sense to Neung. He had never had to look at the 'politics' of his work here, but as Gai explained what to expect, he understood the game being played. He didn't fear losing his job, except that it would mean leaving the prison, leaving Rangsan, and being alone again. That's what would hurt. But if he managed to treat the *falang* better than a Thai, wouldn't he be able to stay here with Rangsan?

"So, is the *falang* in the punishment cell so that he's treated poorly and we get rid of him quickly?" In other words, Neung wanted to know, did he only have hours left in this job?

"The American Embassy called yesterday, and we told them we didn't have their *falang* here." Gai paused, to let that sink in. Neung relaxed, realizing the pressure was off. He didn't even question that the warden would lie about something as important as this; he expected that.

"So I imagine," Gai continued, "that the warden just doesn't want him with all the rest of the prisoners. Either he's afraid they will attack him because he's a child molester, or because he's a *falang*. Either way, it would be a big problem."

A child molester? Neung was speechless. The *falang* didn't strike him as the type to molest children. And, he paused as he thought this through, girls or boys? Still, Neung thought, I'm no longer a child. And he wouldn't try anything in a prison, surely? Maybe Neung should ask for an escort? No, he'd just be watchful, be extra careful, now that he knew about this prisoner. And this didn't change Neung's determination to help locate a sleeping pad, if that were possible.

"Then he's not being punished, so he should be allowed a sleeping pad."

"Is that all you want for him?"

Neung pondered that before answering. He had thought of asking for more time outside the cell to exercise, but now he thought that he wanted to limit his contact with the prisoner until he knew him better. He had no money to use to buy anything for the *falang*, so he needn't ask that he be allowed to have anything in the cell.

"That's all."

"Then I will ask the warden after my shift here today, if we can allow him a pad. You're right, it will help our case for treating him well if we allow him to have one. That is good thinking, my friend. Just make sure you check with me before asking for anything else for the man. I don't want you getting wrapped around his finger, and taking anything to him that would get you into trouble, OK?"

For about three milliseconds, Neung considered telling Gai about the food. But that had already happened, so he said, "I promise to check with you before doing

anything else. Thanks for your help on this, Gai.” Technically, he didn’t lie. It was a promise he thought he could keep.

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To her frustration, Susan would soon realize her first visit to a Thai Police Station would be a template for all the visits to follow. The taxi deposited her in front of the grandest building in the neighborhood. Its architecture would remind her of the Southern-style cotton plantations, like ‘Tara’ in “*Gone with the Wind*”. The front doors would be propped open, despite the air conditioning lowering the temperature inside to what felt like icebox levels. That ostentatious display of wealth and power could not fail to impress a local, she thought, after seeing the pattern repeated time after time.

She would hunt for an information counter, and wait while someone was located who could speak English. The chairs in the waiting room would be the hard molded plastic seats one often finds in bus terminal waiting rooms; designed to be uncomfortable and prevent one from sleeping and missing their bus. Once an English speaker had been found, she would explain why she was there, and show a picture of Derek. There would be no sign of recognition, a quick determination that this person had never been in the station, and a quick end to the conversation. She would always wonder how any one person would be aware of every person arrested in the station; she would have thought a computer would need to be consulted at the very least. But then again, if a police station arrested a foreigner, it could be that the news would spread. In any event, each visit would take 15 to 45 minutes, and end in failure.

At the first station, she asked about a listing of other stations, to facilitate her search. Instead of receiving one, she was referred to a Tourist Police station. That second station was able to give her a list to work from. The Tourist police seemed very nice, but were there to help tourists, not arrest them. They also claimed to be unable to help locate Derek. They seemed fairly powerless to do anything, in fact. Almost like police cadets, rather than the real thing. She would pursue this diligently, but to no effect.

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Ron also was having no luck. Late in the afternoon, he realized he had not been called by Lip, Jason’s informant. Just another indication that he was not meant to solve this easily, he murmured to himself sitting at yet another red light, in yet another tuk-tuk. If only his boss would understand how diligently he was pursuing this vanished citizen, the pressure might be lessened. He debated going to the last jail on his list, but it was on the very edge of the city, and by the time he could get there, through the beginning of rush hour traffic, it would be well into the evening, and there would be no chance of someone remaining at the jail who would be willing to talk with a Embassy official. He’d save that trek for first thing tomorrow. Now it was time to return home, shower and change, and get out to a bar to relieve some of the day’s stress. He had to try to keep his mind off planning what he would do if he didn’t find Derek at the last jail.

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Neung was stalling, hoping that he would see Gai before he had to take supper to the prisoner. In a perfect world, he would be able to take a sleeping pad under his arm when he delivered the food. He was elated to see Gai approaching him as he loitered outside the kitchen, carrying a battered, torn pad. Gai also was smiling, and got right down to business as he approached Neung.

“The warden agrees that it would be good to treat the *falang* at least as well as a Thai prisoner,” he began. “And that means he should also have some time outside the cell for exercise. The warden doesn’t want you to supervise that time alone, for your own safety. He instructs that you always have a guard with you. You can take him out for an extra 30 minutes every second shower period.”

Neung was excited. He’d have lots of good news for the prisoner this evening.

“Did he say which guard to take with me? Can you help me?”

“I was hoping you would ask. I’d like the chance to improve my English, talking with the *falang*. Can you arrange to take him his dinner after 6 on the evenings when he will have exercise? We could pick him up as soon as I finish my shift at 5, take him for a walk and shower, then you can get his dinner for him. I can get home without much delay that way. OK?”

“OK.” Neung couldn’t have asked for more, he’d get regular time with Gai, he’d be safe from the *falang*, and maybe, just maybe, the embassy would be happy with the way they treated their citizen and he’d still be able to stay here at the prison with Rangsan. Gai handed him the old thing from under his arm, and Neung dashed off to collect the evening’s dinner.

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Mao came to dinner at Leo’s house, bringing a man with her. She introduced him to everyone as her new boyfriend. She sure works fast, Wang thought. Wonder if he knows how she lied to get revenge on Joe? Does he worry she’d treat him the sane way?

Mao also announced she would be moving to Chon Buri with her man. He would help her find a job selling food in the market (sounds like he’ll be her pimp, Wang thought). The unspoken question was whether the move was prompted by the availability of jobs, or as a way to leave Tak and save some face by not being around people who knew what she had done. Wang dared not ask.

Lao asked what Kan would do, and Mao asked if anyone could watch Kan for her. Kan really wanted to stay in the school that Joe had put her in, for the rest of the term at least. It was a private school, much better than the public schools she attended before Joe came along. There had been 42 students in her last public school class; in the private school there were never more than 18. The private school also had the money to pay for real English language teachers.

Wang thought carefully before answering. She had the room, and the home had seemed lonely and quiet since her sister died of HIV two years ago. Wang still looked after her parents, but they were in their bedroom (the only ‘bedroom’ in the traditional Thai house) before it was dark, and up at dawn. Wang would often stay awake and watch TV until the stations went dark at 3 am. But taking Kan in would mean that Wang could look forward to lots of contact with Mao, something



she wasn't too keen on since she had lied to the police about Joe. Maybe having Kan stay with her, she could get Kan to talk about the conversation she'd had with the police at Mao's instigation. Maybe, she could get Kan to recant.

"Kan can stay with me", Wang offered. Several moments had passed and no one else seemed interested. Mao was appreciative.

Later as the eating turned to drinking (Mao brought some Thai whiskey to celebrate her last dinner in Ban Dong Pu for awhile) Wang asked about the police station Mao had gone to, specifically which one had handled the arrest for her?

"I don't like to drive in Bangkok, so I usually park the truck at the short-term lot at Don Muang airport and take a taxi when I have business there. The closest police station is Mae Song Thim."

The conversations, several of which had been competing for attention around the mats spread with the potluck, stopped.

And how much did it cost you, to get Joe taken away?" The station Mae Song Thim was reputed to be the worst, the most corrupt, station Thailand. They would do anything, for the right price.

"Just 10,000 baht." It's easy to say 'just', Wang thought, when you've lied to get Joe to give you nearly a million baht this past year. Wang made 4000 baht a month working a high prestige job as village representative within the Provincial (county) government. Supporting her parents with that, it would take her a year to save that amount.

"And when would you like Kan to move in?" Wang changed the subject, having gleaned what she wanted to know. The other conversations started again, once Mao had left they'd hash over this new information for days.

"Tomorrow OK with you?" It was.

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Neung paused on the sidewalk approaching the *falang's* cell. He had food, water and a battered sleeping pad. He had great news, about the extra exercise period, and Gai's offer to speak English with the prisoner. And he had bad news, not that he'd tell his friend, but he was worried about the child molestation charges. He didn't want that to ruin their friendship, but he knew he could never be close to the *falang* now that he knew that. He took a deep breath to calm his rapidly beating heart, and continued on his way.

It seemed to Derek that dinner was later than usual tonight, but without a watch, and on only his third evening in the cell, it was hard to know for sure. He was truly grateful that the ration had increased; he knew he would be hungry all the time even after taking the increase into account. The thought of being selfish and eating all the food didn't even cross his mind. The way Neung had presented the extra bowls this morning; he must have a hand in getting the extra food.

He heard Neung approach, use the key, and open the door to the cell. He felt blessed to see a sleeping pad under Neung's arm. Neung's face was emotionless, nothing to show his inner turmoil. Derek was surprised. He expected that, having provided what he asked for so quickly, Neung would be very excited. Neung dropped the water, and then maneuvered the pad out from

under his arm. Holding it out for Derek's inspection, he waited. Derek nodded and said "*Friend, thank you. This evening I will sleep well.*"

Neung nodded. "*You and (unknown Thai word, probably 'prisoner') Thai now same. Tomorrow before shower you will (unknown word) 30 minutes. Chicken will go together. Chicken speak English can.*"

Derek puzzled out that 'Chicken' was a nickname. For 30 minutes tomorrow, he apparently would be able to speak English with someone. Neung laid the pad down against the left wall. He then set the four bowls of food in front of Derek and waited to see what he would do. As this morning, he pushed two bowls towards Neung. Neung fell to eating, once again eating quickly as if afraid of being discovered, but no longer looking over his shoulder. Why's he in such a hurry, Derek wondered. He set down the two empty bowls, moved to the bucket just inside the door. "*Unhappy with me are you?*" Derek inquired.

It was as if Neung didn't hear the question, he picked up the bucket and left. He must have run to empty it, He was back before Derek had finished his food. Neung gathered the only empty bowls, his own, and returned to the door. He paused there, turning back to look at Derek with a sad look on his face, then he was gone.

Derek replayed the entire dinner over and over again, trying to puzzle it out. It was well past midnight before he rolled over, swatted at a mosquito and finally slept on his pad. He wasn't sure why Neung had acted so strangely, but they'd only known each other a few hours, and Derek had no way of knowing what pressures and difficulties Neung had been forced to deal with to get him the pad. Maybe the price had been higher than Neung felt he could pay. Maybe he resented Derek getting time with someone speaking English, jealous he'd lose the attention. Maybe someone had told him Derek was accused of molesting a girl. Maybe a bribe or worse, a personal favor, had been required to allow the pad into the cell. Hopefully, he'd build enough trust to find out the answer soon, before this budding relationship was irreparably damaged.

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Susan was exhausted. She'd been up way too long; it was now 5 am in San Diego and dark in Bangkok. She'd been to 5 police stations without luck. She'd asked the last taxi driver to take her to the Dusit Thani, but rather than check in there (it looked opulent and very, very expensive) she'd walked a few blocks down the street and checked into the Elizabeth. It was about US\$25 a night. She summoned enough energy to shower before collapsing in the bed. Never having traveled this far before, she didn't know that she'd be wide awake at 3 am, her body refusing to sleep past noon, no matter how tired she was. It would take nearly a week to get her body off San Diego time and onto Bangkok time. Her last thought before falling asleep was that she hoped to be home before the week was over.

## Thursday

Wang was awakened by the sound of a truck pulling up to the house. She scrambled off her sleeping pad, out from under the mosquito net, and quickly moved to open the door. Kan was already out of the truck by the time she got the door open, arms full of clothes. Mao was reaching into the truck's rear seat, her boyfriend sitting passively in the front passenger seat.

"Good morning Kan," Wang greeted her new roommate.

Kan didn't look the least bit happy to be here, and said nothing as she moved past Wang into the house. Wang turned and followed her, and showed her where she could hang her clothes. Mao entered carrying two large plastic shopping bags, which she placed on the floor in the center of the room. "Don't be any trouble," she said to Kan, and then looking to Wang, she added "Thanks so much for looking after Kan. Call me anytime if she's being a problem for you."

She turned and left the home, and Kan and Wang were left to sort out where the treasures of her short life could be placed. Wang was surprised to see that a birthday card, addressed to Kan from Joe, was one of her most prized possessions. Kan placed it where she could see it as she prepared to go to school each morning, carefully tucking its envelope from America into the back of the drawer Wang had allowed her to use. Kan was already dressed for school, and she went to the door and left for school without even saying goodbye. This will take some time to get used to, Wang thought. Fortunately, Wang wasn't much past being a 15-year-old girl herself. She would be able to work this out, she was sure.

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Derek awakened later than usual. The sun was already up, and the sounds of nature drifted in through the windows of his cell. He lay for a moment, enjoying the birds calling to each other. The pesky rooster still greeted the dawn nearby. Neung might arrive with breakfast at any moment.

He was feeling better every day. The pain where the surgeon had opened his belly was nearly gone, and the bruises had healed to the point where they no longer hurt unless he touched them, something that happened infrequently in an empty cell. He had slept well last night, once he got past trying to figure out Neung's visit. Hopefully, one day soon, he'd get some time with the person named Gai who spoke English, and he could find out more about Neung.

He hadn't been awake more than 15 minutes or so when Neung approached. After the usual jingle of the key in the lock, the door opened. Neung stepped into the cell, set down the usual three water bottles, and then lowered the tray and began to set down the bowls of rice and soup. As Derek pushed one of each towards Neung, he asked, "*For more food, you have to give what, or have to do what?*"

Neung looked up from the floor and directly into Derek's eyes for a moment, as if trying to gauge how much to tell. "*Only have to ask,*" he said in a low whisper. "*Ask who?*" Neung was trying to eat quickly, to end this line of questioning Derek surmised.

Neung glanced over his shoulder to ensure no one had approached the door while they spoke. "*Person who cooks,*" he answered truthfully.

"*Person who cooks gave more food after you did ask?*" Possible, thought Derek, though he doubted the cook would just go along with any prisoner's request for more food. There's more here than he's telling, Derek was sure.

"*Yes. Only ask.*" Neung sounded almost proud. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe the request came from him, and the cook agreed to help him, not a prisoner.

"*OK. Today shower, yes?*"

"*This afternoon, after 5 pm, yes.*" Neung had finished his food, and began to gather his bowls and move towards the door. "*I come back for you then.*"

"*Good, good. I want shower a lot.*" Derek watched as Neung backed out the door and heard the lock set into place as expected. The shuffle of sandals on concrete faded into the distance and then he was left with the sounds of birds. They went about their business, just another day in paradise, as Derek listened.

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Ron went right to the last jail on his list, struck out, and then went to the inter-provincial bus station. A first class air-conditioned bus would get him the northern outlying province in just an hour or so, for fewer baht than the 20 minute tuk-tuk ride to get him to the bus station. He would visit the police station in that province, get a list of their local jails, and then go onto the next outlying province. He'd return and make calls all afternoon, then tomorrow take the same approach to the east. Expanding the search in this way should get results, eventually, but would take a longer time. He was worried that Susan would continue to pressure his boss, and that might cause him to lose control of the investigation. The last thing he wanted after all this trouble, was to lose the glory if they ever found this guy.

He wondered if he should try to work on the weekend, assuming today and tomorrow were fruitless. It was a hard call, he wanted to appear to be interested in finding Derek, but at the same time, few people would work on weekends who might be willing to answer his inquiries. Today, he leaned towards working. But he'd wait to see if Lisa would go out with him, or if he got too tired by quitting time tomorrow. Either of those events would quickly change his mind. These bus station seats are hard, he thought waiting for the bus to be available for boarding. Once in his seat, he realized that wasn't much better, the bus seats were designed to fit the typical Asian, 5 foot 2 inch tall person. Ron's knees pressed the seat back in front of him, and he began a very uncomfortable 90 minutes sitting on the bus. At least, it was air-conditioned. And in return for his 40 baht, he had the chance to watch a movie that had a handful of Thai soldiers mow down division after division of American soldiers, and have a great, funny time of it all. Not understanding a word of Thai, he quickly grew bored with the entertainment, and turned his attention to watching the procession of wretched hovels pass by his bus window. Thank goodness I don't live here, he thought as shack after shack passed by.

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Susan visited Mae Song Thim just before lunch. It was no different than her other visits, but when she finally had someone who spoke English in front of her, and had brought out Derek's picture, the denial had come so quickly she was left with just a small nagging suspicion that she was being lied to. Quickly, though, her rational mind discounted her gut feeling. She left and went searching for somewhere nearby to have a quick lunch, before continuing her search. Once she was back home in San Diego, after her failed search, she'd think back to this one encounter and wonder if she dropped the ball here. If only she had trusted her gut, she'd think in those moments when she felt particularly like beating herself up over her inability to find her friend. Maybe she could've found him herself. If only....., if only....., if only.....

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Mindfulness. Throughout his life he had been exposed to the concept, Ram Dass's "Be Here Now" was probably the first 'official' presentation he'd seen on the subject. He had tried throughout the years to pay attention whenever and wherever he was. For many years, he had gone for a morning run. He never took a walkman along to relieve the tedium, he saw the run as an opportunity to pay attention to the now, to sense what his body was experiencing, to listen to the birds and the wind in the trees, to stay alert for his safety. It was almost a meditation itself. When he would do dishes (yes, even when married he often did the dishes) he would try to focus on each plate or spoon, ensuring the job was properly done. He tried to be a good listener when others were speaking, he knew from communications classes that most people are too busy formulating their response to truly listen to what the other person was saying. But he could see now, that he had a long way to go, to be mindful of what was happening in any given moment.

As well, he felt that when you go deep enough inside yourself, you find a place that is the same in you as it is in me. Not identical, *but part of the same*. And that same part, some call it God, is eternal, is always there and always the same. This does not coincide well with the idea of a beginning, and potentially an end, of the universe. He recalled hearing from Ken Wilber, in an interview once, that anything that has a beginning in time is not real. Ultimate reality is eternal and unchanging, something he referred to as 'one taste'. That is, every taste of the experience is the same. If you are truly mindful, every taste will be the same, blissful and complete and true.

Meditation is the root of mindfulness, as it helps one awaken from the illusion of separateness, delusion and confusion. By focusing on the breath, one can't help but step out of the ego. What becomes important then, is to watch the ego throw thoughts against the screen of the mind, trying to get attention. When meditation is successful, and one steps out of the Ego, one watches the ego perform through the eye of God, what some call 'The Witness'. The Witness is that which is always present, always paying attention, the true and perfect One that has always been and always will be. When younger, Derek had perceived 'enlightenment' to be the ability to exist in bliss, or nirvana, all the time by virtue of having seen through the illusion ego places over reality. Lately though, he had come to understand that bliss is just a state of consciousness like 'reality' or ego one to be used, but also transcended. God is already perfect, and present in each moment. Mindfulness is a tool for becoming aware of that fact.

Recent brain research has shown that learning and insight actually reorganize the brain, changing how the brain reacts to stimuli. Through working with recognizing the destructive behavior patterns that I run due to my conditioning, without thinking, I can overcome the autopilot aspect and reprogram my brain to remove these behaviors, he thought to himself. Mindfulness helps to identify these patterns that need work.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, there are four levels of mindfulness:

- Pay attention: this is spontaneous, curious, and is what most people mean when they say, "Pay attention!"
- Cultivated: the attention on pays with intentional mindfulness, expanded to include observing without judgment and reactivity
- Abiding: the result of practicing cultivated mindfulness, the trained awareness that rests without wavering wherever it is placed
- Dharmakaya: awareness itself, remaining undistracted. There is no 'I' noticing awareness, this is The Witness, *always and already* present.

Some teachers describe a 6 step process to use mindfulness to choose action:

- Recognize: first, one must notice that a situation has again presented itself, when you have handled similar events poorly in the past. This creates an opportunity to use mindfulness to choose a better course of action.
- Recollecting: Pausing to remember what problems have been caused by poor choices, or unconscious actions, in the past. Also remembering positive actions and the resulting outcomes.
- Reframing: Seeing from different points of view, to include all stakeholders and determine an action that benefits all, not just some.
- Relinquishing: Giving up the automatic or unconscious behavior, clearing the way for conscious choices and intelligent decisions.
- Reconditioning: Engraining the new course so that it will eventually become the automatic action in similar situations.
- Responding: Perform the chosen action intelligently and compassionately.

Derek remembered hearing that it was as bad to be stuck in the transcendental as to be stuck in petty automatic responses. With mindfulness, he hoped to be able to ply the Middle Way, to use both the transcendental perspective and reality as perceived by the ego to see the entire picture and make the best choices. The biggest aspect he was missing was the eternal quality of the moment. This impacts day-to-day existence by helping one to realize what one does to others he is actually doing to himself. We Are One is more than a religious slogan, ultimately it is all you need to know about reality. Being mindful is just another opportunity to tap into the one taste, to see God in everything and everyone.

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Ron managed to locate the provincial police administration building, and after much miscommunication, got a listing of jails in the province. He realized this plan would take longer than he had thought; it would already be quitting time when he got back to the Embassy. Using his cell, from the steps of the building, he began making his calls. The money on his phone ran out before the battery, but neither would be able to get him through the list. At least he would be able to say he had contacted more than one jail today, if his boss should ask. That was the important thing. He returned to the bus station, and began the trek back to Bangkok. Lisa would be preparing to leave work when he got back; he wanted to try to make plans for Saturday. He spent the entire trip back into town imagining the things they could do if she said yes.

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Kan returned on the school bus, and began to arrange her things in a more orderly fashion. She appreciated Wang taking her in. She didn't know Wang well, but knew her sisters Lao and Leo. Ma had spent a good amount of time playing *damee* at Leo's house until last year when she started going to Sukothai to play Hi-Low. When she went to Leo's to play, Kan often went along and played with Leo's daughter Ip. Ip was 3 years older than Kan, and sometimes didn't want to hang out with a younger friend. But usually they got along well. Wang would sometimes come by and visit while the group played cards. Wang didn't have much money, so she never played *damee* herself. But she played well, so sometimes a player would have Wang sit in for them while they went to the bathroom, or went to run a quick errand somewhere.

Wang came home from work, and sat for a few minutes watching Kan as she stashed her things. She finally broke the silence, "Kan, did you lie to the police to help your Ma?"

She gets right to the point, Kan thought. She wondered how honest she should be with Wang. Wang was helping her stay in a good school, which meant a lot to Kan. But on the other hand, Ma would be very sore with her if she let it be known they had lied to get revenge on the *falang*. Lied to get revenge for Ma, she corrected herself. Kan had no problem with Joe. He had only ever been helpful and caring to her. He was never inappropriate, always asked her how her day at school had been, and obviously wanted her future to be the best since he was giving Ma money for tuition at a Catholic school. He had asked her several times, if the school was trying to convert her to be a Catholic. He didn't want that, he wanted her to remain Buddhist. Fortunately the school did not try to convert her. There was a prayer they said in the morning, in English, and one before lunch. But her English wasn't good enough yet to understand what she was saying, and nothing else was said to turn her away from her culture.

"I said what Ma told me to say." Wang nodded in agreement.

"And how was school today?" Wang changed the subject.

"Good, as usual." Kan replied, relieved that the conversation had moved along.

"Where can I put my music box?"

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Neung was impatient to take the *falang* for his first walk with Gai, so he raced through the afternoon's chores and finished nearly an hour before Gai was relieved of duty at the dispensary. He spent some of the time while he waited sitting under the only tree in the yard, thinking about what he wanted to know about the prisoner. The obvious question, why are you here, was first on the list. But the second question, how can you stand to know you'll be here for 20 years, held a special meaning to Neung, he himself had only been here for 10 years, and he couldn't imagine what it must be like know the next 20 years would be spent in the tiny cell the *falang* now occupied. He was curious to see if there was anything the *falang* knew that Neung could use in his own situation. Of course, they weren't the same, as Neung was technically not a prisoner. Still, he had a slowly growing desire to leave this prison job eventually. Deep down he knew he

wouldn't have this opportunity, to learn how a *falang* thinks, forever. He needed to learn as much as he could, as quickly as possible.

As 5 pm approached, he moved to the dispensary to await the end of Gai's shift. Gai was smiling, as usual Neung thought, when he emerged from the building and saw Neung standing in the shade of the wall. "Let's go collect this stranger, OK?"

Neung smiled, and said, "Sure. Why not?"

"Now you be quiet while he and I talk. Our time is limited, and I promise to you that I will tell you everything he says, just later. OK?"

Neung had not expected that. He had envisioned Gai acting as his personal translator, that he would be allowed to question the prisoner. "But there are so many things I want to know!" he exclaimed.

"Don't worry, my little friend. I too, have many things I want to know, and most of them will interest you as well. If you have a particular question, ask me now, so that I will be sure to ask the *falang* for you."

Neung mentioned the two burning questions he had for today, and Gai agreed they were both of interest. Assured he'd have the answers soon, Neung agreed to wait.

They approached the cell. The *falang* stood as they entered. "My name is Gai. I guard you while we go for walk. OK?"

"Fine. And my name is Joe," the *falang* responded. "This walk you mention, will it be a regular thing, or just today?"

"Every number two shower, we will walk together, 30 minutes. Neung will come with, but he does not understand English, so he will not talk."

"Please, will you translate for me if I want to ask him something?"

"Yes. Now please come with us." Gai backed out of the cell, and stood to one side of the doorway while the *falang* followed. It felt good to be able to stand without slouching; Derek had nearly forgotten how good it felt in just a few days captivity.

Derek began the conversation, "How long have you been a guard here?"

"For seven years. And for two before that, I was at another prison."

"Your English is very good, where did you learn it?"

"I attended university for three years. My goal was international relations. Of course, English would be very useful for someone in that kind of work."

"What happened? Why are you working here now?"

"My schooling was funded by my parents. During my second year at school, they died in a car accident. A drunk driver hit them on the highway. I only had enough money to stay at school the third year, then I had to find a job to survive."

"Any chance you will be able to finish school one day?"

Gai paused before answering, deciding how open to be with this *falang*. "It takes so much money, for living and for tuition both, that I don't know. I would like to finish, it is true."

"Are you saving for that, and how much more do you need?"

"I have a quarter of what I need, I still need about 120,000 baht." Derek did the quick math, roughly US\$4000. Still, Gai would have to save another 30 years at this rate.



Neung understood the word 'baht', and while he didn't know English numbers very well he knew enough to understand Gai had mentioned a large one. What are they talking about, he wondered.

"That will take a long time, to save what you need."

"Yes. And now a question for you, how did you end up here?"

Derek told his story, including the regrets he had over how he had handled the ending, and why he felt bad about it. Gai was silent but for a few times he didn't understand a particular word. When Derek had finished, Gai pondered what he had said. Of course, every prisoner was innocent of the charges that landed them in prison. That was a given. But the openness the *falang* displayed in telling his story, the willingness to admit his own guilty part, impressed Gai. Here was a man who was trying to see the world clearly, without letting his feelings cloud his judgment. Yes, he had made a huge mistake in crossing a Thai woman. Yes, he did not understand *nam jai*, saving face, at all. To his detriment, he had hooked up with a lady who knew about Mae Song Thim. All these things were true. Yet Gai felt sorry for the *falang*, and believed him when he said he didn't abuse his stepdaughter.

They had managed to approach the showers as their 30 minutes ended. "You tell a fascinating story, I am sure to be interested in hearing more next time we walk."

Gai was ready to hand the prisoner off to Neung to finish the evening's duties.

"We will talk of ways you can make the best of your situation, then."

"I would appreciate any tips you may give me," Derek replied. He smiled and turned to Neung. "*Shower now can I?*"

Neung glanced at Gai, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "*Shower can.*"

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Ron was just having one of those days. First, the bus had taken forever to load, and the way they did things here, schedules or departure times were just suggestions. No driver worth the title would leave the terminal until the bus was at least half-full, and Ron's bus was no exception. By the time he disembarked at Morchit Bus Terminal, he knew returning to talk with Lisa was hopeless. She'd be long gone by then. He wouldn't take this chance tomorrow, he'd go in first thing, make the rest of the calls to the Northern province, and talk with her before leaving for the East.

Now for some liquid relief of the day's stress.

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Neung saw a group of guards hanging around the kitchen as he approached to collect the *falang's* dinner. They were gathered in a cluster, attention focused on something in the middle of the circle. He wriggled in between two of the smaller guards to see what had everyone's interest. Someone had managed to find an American magazine, apparently about the entertainment business, as it was full of movie ads and pictures of beautiful *falangs*. One of the guards noticed Neung, and with a sneer, said, "Go away, little boy. This is for men."

The others laughed, and shamed and embarrassed, Neung turned from the group and went on into the kitchen. Gathering the meal, the cook was distracted

and left Neung to fill the bowls himself. He made sure that every bowl was as full as could be, and that one of the bowls of soup contained more cabbage than was usual. For the *falang*, he thought to himself. He left the kitchen through a different door, so that he wouldn't have to pass the guards again on his way to the prisoner's cell. No sense giving them a chance to heckle him again. He went to the *falang*'s cell, quickly ate and departed. The *falang* seemed all talked out, only asking a few questions that Neung quietly answered. He was appreciative of the portion of food in his bowl. Neung wasn't interested in long conversations until he had the chance to talk with Gai and discover what the prisoner had said for so long during their walk. He sensed, from Gai's demeanor at the end, that Gai was satisfied with the talk. That was a good sign.

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Gabriel awoke several minutes before his alarm, set as usual to ring at 4:45 am. His job was an early one, with the consolation that he was off work by 2:30 and able to run errands or visit friends while others were still working. His step dad had been due to return from Thailand last evening, he usually arrived home between 5:30 and 6:30 pm, dropped off his bags and then went out to eat. He hated airline food so always arrived home on an airport shuttle bus ready to eat the furniture, if necessary.

But last night there had been no sign of him, by the time Gabriel went to bed a little past 8. He knew Derek would often accept airline offers when they were overbooked, especially if he had no pressing engagements upon arrival. He liked the discounts, or even free round trip tickets he sometimes got, for bumping to a later flight. Still, every other time he had done that, he had called and let Gabriel know when to expect him. There had been no calls by the time Gabe had gone to bed.

Gabe got out of bed and went to the kitchen, finding no messages on the answering machine. Moving down the hall towards Derek's bedroom, he saw the door was open, just like it had been last night. Turning on enough lights to see if the bed was being used, it wasn't. He did the time calculation; decided that it would be around 8 pm in Thailand, still acceptable for phone call. He quickly dialed Derek's cell, but got that recorded message; "The number you are trying to reach is not in service at this time. Please hang up and try your call again later." That could mean he was on a plane, even as I call, Gabe thought. It could also mean trouble. No time to worry about that now though, time for work. Gabe got dressed and stopped at the Starbucks on the way to work for the usual liquid breakfast.

Friday, 14 December 2007

Gabriel came straight home from work, unusual for him. First thing, checking the answering machine (empty) and Derek's bedroom (also empty) left him with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. This cannot be good. He quickly turned on CNN, but after watching the news bar cycle once and failing to see mention of a 747 crash, he at least felt confident that wasn't the problem. He was past caring about the time difference, so despite the fact it was before 6 am in Thailand, he dialed Derek's phone again. Same recording, phone not in service.

He knew Derek always flew EVA, so he tried calling the EVA counter at San Francisco International. They wouldn't give out information about specific passengers, but they did confirm no crash had occurred in their fleet and all flights had been nominal.

Before leaving for Thailand, he had left Gabe a 'yellow sticky paper' with two phone numbers, one a friend and one his younger brother, on the refrigerator. Derek was fond of using childish phrases like that (boo boo goo, for White-Out liquid eraser, was another of his favorites) because he insisted that like Peter Pan, he'd 'never grow up'. He was always interested in maintaining the child-like qualities of wonder and curiosity. This was a trait that had led to his penchant for world travel, in fact.

Roy, his brother, was the executor of the will he had written, and was current on the last instructions Derek wanted carried out in case he died. The friend was a contact with Alcor, an organization dedicated to freezing people when they die, in hopes that medicine would one day advance to such a degree that ailments could be healed that are incurable today, and that new bodies could be grown and used to re-implant the memories of one who had previously been declared dead. They wouldn't be much help if there is no body, nor if the body ended up being 36 hours away from their facility in Arizona. No need to activate *that* particular network, Gabe thought. Besides, he wasn't in favor of the whole freezing thing anyway. And if Derek were dead, he'd not know he never got frozen.

But a call to Roy would be a good idea. Calling the number on the sticky paper, he got voicemail and left a message with his cell number, and a request for a return call. He mentioned Derek was overdue returning from Thailand, and then hung up. Now he was out of ideas. He had no contact number for Derek in Thailand, he bought a new SIM card for his Thai phone every trip, and since this was a short (7 day) trip he hadn't bothered to give Gabe the number after he arrived. Gabe just had to be patient.

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If Neung were to talk with Gai before taking breakfast to the *falang*, he would be late with the meal by about an hour. He had tried to decide if that was acceptable or not, and finally concluded that it was. Deep down, he was thinking of himself more than the *falang*, but it helped that there was no way for the prisoner to know the time precisely, he'd probably not notice if food was late in coming. Neung finished the rest of his early morning chores then hung around the kitchen waiting

to see Gai enter the compound. While he was waiting, other guards were arriving slowly. A few giggled as they passed by Neung, and he just knew they were remembering yesterday's scene. Each time he blushed; embarrassed by his lack of understanding of the grown-up life experiences he had missed being stuck here in the prison every day. That was another reason he should consider leaving, even if it meant not having Rangsan around.

Soon enough, Gai arrived. He saw Neung, and changed direction towards the administration building. Neung started to walk in that direction also, and Gai checked once over his shoulder to be sure he was being followed. He disappeared through the front door about 15 steps ahead of Neung.

Neung entered just in time to see Gai open an office door near his sleeping room, and go inside. The door was still open when Neung approached, so he entered. Gai motioned for him to close the door behind him, then take a seat in front of the desk. The desk and chair were the only pieces of furniture in the small room, and as there were no other items present, it felt abandoned. "I imagine you are curious about the talk yesterday?" It was a question Neung didn't deign to answer.

"Our friend says he was framed, of course." Gai went on to briefly describe the story Joe had told, He left out many of the details, but just by hitting on the high points, he managed to convince Neung that the *falang* was not a child molester. The look of relief on Neung's face was worth the time out his day, Gai thought.

"Now let's get back to work," he said, rising and moving to open the door.

"OK," Neung replied. He was very pleased to not have to worry about the prisoner being some evil man. He actually felt pity for a man who had fallen victim to a Thai lady who had been wronged and lost face. The foreigner obviously didn't understand *nam jai*. It sucks to be him.

Neung ran to the kitchen, and was very sweaty when he finally brought breakfast to Derek. But he was smiling, and actually carried part of the conversation this morning. Derek was pleased, he had expected to see the reaction to the conversation with Gai. On their next walk, he needed to learn more about the prison, and in particular, Neung. He wanted to find ways to demonstrate his compassion with all he came into contact with.

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Roy's cell phone announced receipt of a text message from Gina, his wife. He was in a meeting planning a talk he would be giving at the National Librarian's Association convention three months hence, so he made a mental note to check it later.

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Ron was early arriving at the Embassy, not out of sense of duty, but out of necessity. If he were to be sure of talking with Lisa about a potential Saturday date, it needed to happen before she began work. He'd not be able to speak of this in her cubicle, too many prying eyes and sensitive ears nearby. And he'd not be guaranteed of being back before she ended her day, if the busses didn't keep to their schedule like yesterday.

He had forgotten all about Lip, until the moment he saw Jason coming through the front door. Before he could hide, he really didn't want to answer Jason's sneered questions about the fruitless hunt, he was spotted, and Jason came straight towards him.

"What did you say to Lip?" he hissed under his breath when he was a few feet away from Ron.

Ron was caught off-guard, he had expected a civilized 'hello, how are you?' kind of greeting, not an accusation. "Only what you told me to say!" he blurted out.

"Tell me exactly what you said. Lip is spreading stories about me that are impacting my other informants, saying I am indiscreet, among other things. What did you say?"

"I said 'Jason from the US Embassy told me to call you. I'm looking for Derek Stevenson. Here's my cell number.' That's all."

"Are you positive that's all you said?"

"Not another word, I swear."

Jason was silent for a moment. "Has he called you since?"

"No."

"Don't call him again. Forget I ever told you about him. Tear up his number, but he's probably dumped that number for a new one now anyway. It sounds like he's getting pressure from someone not to talk." Jason turned on his heels and walked away.

Ron stood dumbfounded for a moment, but then realized this meant he wouldn't be paying Lip a bounty. That freed him from one stress, at least.

Only a few moments went by before Lisa arrived. He joined her walking down the hall, and after pleasantries, asked if she'd go to a popular disco with him Saturday evening. She not only turned him down but also demanded that he not ask her out again. Friday wasn't getting off to a good start, Ron thought as he trudged back to his office. He'd not find any better luck with the remaining calls on his list.

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Derek was already falling into a routine, waking, eating, meditating, recalling all he had learned about the search for enlightenment, then repeating it all again. It didn't seem as hot in the cell now; it might be that he was becoming acclimatized to the weather here. It might also be that December is the beginning of the 'cool season' in Thailand. He would laugh when he saw Thais putting on jackets because the temperature was falling below 24° C (79° F). They would be shivering just when he was comfortable. Last year, the province he lived in had been declared a disaster area, and the military mounted an operation to bring blankets to those who didn't have enough to stay warm as the temperature dipped to 14° C (59° F). No one in the US would believe him when he told them this, but then they'd not seen how little in the way of warmth the Thai environment demanded it's people acquire.

He also found that by sitting between the two small windows, he'd benefit from the breeze that would often move through the cell. It had only rained a few times, and the floor under the window facing the rain would get wet. No matter, within a

few minutes of the end of the rain, it would again be dry. He was grateful that he was remembering so much of what he knew. He was thankful he had set upon the idea of putting it all together into a useable format, and to begin to use it in his life. Twenty years still seemed like an awfully long time, but he was confident events would unfold just as they were meant to be; he'd be out of here before he knew it.

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Roy checked the text message from Gina, and was immediately alarmed. He knew his brother would not fail to keep Gabriel informed of a change in plans, he was meticulous that way. This could only mean trouble. But without any phone numbers to call in Thailand, he was at a loss as to what to do. He sent a reply, instructing her to call Gabriel back and ask him to keep them posted on developments. He would try to think of something to do in the meantime.

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Susan also continued to strike out. She finished visiting every police station late Friday afternoon, and was at a loss as to what to do next. She thought about returning to the Embassy to speak with Mr. James, but he had been so unhelpful last time, that would be a waste of time. She finally hit on an idea, and a visit to an internet café quickly rewarded her with an address. A long taxi ride later, it was approaching dinnertime as she strode up the steps of the *Bangkok Post* building. The *Bangkok Post* is an English language newspaper. She quickly found someone inside who took down all she knew of the story, from the original voicemail through today's frustrating lack of leads. She allowed them scan her photo of Derek. They assured her a story would run over the weekend, and she asked if other local papers would also be able to carry the story. "No doubt they will pick it up from our lead," the reporter replied. "That often happens on stories we break."

She returned to the Elizabeth, trying to think of something else to do, and trying not to think of Derek, alone and feeling forgotten, in some horrible cell.

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Giving. And receiving, he knew. It was as important to receive well as to give well. You allow others the gifts bestowed on those who give, when you receive.

He had always been generous, compared to most, with money as well as time. He passionately believed that volunteering in the community was required of everyone, and had spent time working with many organizations to help others. From being a volunteer firefighter, to donating food to a local food bank, he was always looking for ways to help others. But he had lots of room to increase his giving, he knew.

Many of the quotes that served as mantras for his life concerned generosity:

- "Look what I have, and it's all for you!" --Edna St. Vincent Millay
- "...the more he does for others, the greater his existence. The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance." - Lao Tzu
- "The result of generosity is always richness. The result of miserliness is always poverty. This principle is constant." Sakya Pandita

- “We cannot all do great things, but we can all do small things with great love” – Mother Teresa
- “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” – The Dalai Lama
- “The problem with the world is we draw our family circle too small.” – Mother Teresa

Life is not about “he who dies with the most toys wins”. In fact, when reviewing one’s life and looking for regrets, few if any regret not spending more time at work or owning more cars. We regret not spending enough time with our family, not saying what’s in our hearts to those we love, or not giving enough of ourselves to others. Truly we regret not be generous enough.

Many hesitate to give out of insecurity, fearing the loss of something that can’t be replaced. Yet giving to others is giving to one’s self, as we are all part of The One, just more of God manifest. Giving moves energy along; it taps into the universal ‘flow’ of energy and brings us closer to the ‘flow’ ourselves. The universe already provides for us, through the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the food we eat. It’s not a far stretch to trust that whatever we need to grow will also be provided if we work towards it and trust in it.

Helping someone in need is the most gratifying act one can perform. It is actually being an instrument of God, an agent helping to provide what is required by another person. What greater good can be served than to be a tool of The One?

Giving releases one’s feelings of attachment, and therefore serves as a complement to the mindfulness work we do to come to a closer understanding of reality. We quickly learn that when we exercise our bodies, we are left feeling more energized than we started. This counter-intuitive concept also plays out while being generous. The more we give, the more we receive to be able to give again.

We must be generous not just with food or money, material things, or with energy, helping others with our work. We must also be generous with our words, especially those concerning forgiveness and thanks. It is good to communicate our feelings, so others know we appreciate their gifts. The old adage concerning gifts, ‘It’s the thought that counts’, points to the fact that what people remember is not the physical article they receive, but the feeling of love and acceptance the gift gave them.

How can I express generosity? What ways have I been overlooking recently? Derek thought about this for a few moments, and began a list:

- I can share more of myself with others. Be more transparent in my motives and desires, and communicate my perspective to those who are willing to listen
- I can discuss meaningful things, and spend less time with idle chatter. We have a limited amount of time in this life to learn and grow, we need to make the most of what is left
- I can encourage others to pay attention to what life is trying to teach them, and to act on what they learn
- I can be a role model for others, I can ‘walk my talk’, ‘do as I say’

Taking these steps will help to align my actions with my beliefs and feelings, he thought. He remembered the story of Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese monk, who in 1963 set himself on fire to protest the persecution of Buddhists. Others also performed this ultimate act of generosity. It required that they had realized their ultimate true nature, that they could see with absolute clarity and wisdom the results of their actions. Because of their understanding they were no longer attached to the idea of the physical body being the Self, and therefore they were free to use their body to make a statement. They created the image of destruction to point to the destruction of

spirit occurring around them. Thich Nhat Hanh saw it this way, “It was made not out of despair, but out of the wish to help, out of [their] great love of mankind.”

I’m not ready for that, Derek thought. But as Mother Teresa says, I can start where I am and move forward, always. That I *can* do, he promised himself.

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Neung saw some guards looking through the magazine again while on afternoon break, but no one was outside the kitchen when he approached to get dinner for the *falang*. The magazine lay open to a picture of a beautiful *falang* lady, in a very skimpy swimsuit, on a boat. The picture seemed to be about a movie, but Neung wasn’t sure. Looking at the picture, he felt a sensation in his belly he’d not felt before. It felt like his stomach was trying to float up into his throat, and he felt a sudden heat between his legs. He found himself staring at the picture, imagining how it would feel to touch this lady. He was so engrossed in the fantasy that he failed to notice Sawat approach from behind. He was startled when Sawat spoke into his ear from only inches away, “Take it back to your room, little boy. Just don’t get it dirty while you rub yourself, OK?”

Neung was mortified. He was totally embarrassed, unsure if Ransan would let him keep the magazine in the room, and sure that he would be the laughing stock of the prison within minutes. All three emotions played across his face, and Sawat began to chuckle. “Go, and bring back the magazine tonight when you’ve finished having your fun” was all he said, as he waved a hand in dismissal.

Neung grabbed the magazine, clutched it to his chest, and hurried away.

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“*Tonight, not hungry. Thank you.*” Neung seemed to be in an exceptional hurry tonight, and Derek didn’t know if this was just an excuse to cover for something or if it was actually true. He had been giving him food for several days; it’s entirely possible that he’s catching up and not hungry. Maybe someone brought along a special treat for the staff today, who knows? Derek was grateful for the extra food, and so he received the gift from Neung graciously.

“*Thank you, my friend.*”

Leaving no time for chatter, Neung grabbed the bucket by the door and was back in record time. As he was leaving, Derek noticed a magazine rolled up and tucked into the back of his *longyi*. He didn’t think another bit about it.

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Neung had barely had time to look at the first pictures in the magazine when Ransan came into the room. A quick glance at the magazine, Ransan exclaimed, “Get that thing out of here! Don’t you be wasting your time with that trash! Those pictures are not good for you, you get rid of that. I don’t want to catch you with it again.”

Neung was not happy, but would do nothing to anger Ransan. Seeing his friend, arm upraised as if ready to strike him across the face, was too much. He burst into tears and ran from the room. He returned the magazine to the table outside the kitchen, and then walked around the courtyard till well after dark. He wanted to be sure Ransan had calmed down before returning to their room. When he



finally crept to bed, he was unaware that Rangsan lay awake, eyes closed, worrying about how to tell his little friend that he wanted to leave the prison. The little 'punishment' sessions hosted by the warden were getting to be too much. He didn't think he could endure another, but telling Neung he was leaving was a pain he also couldn't bear. He'd have to decide soon which pain to live with.

## Saturday

Roy had waited all day for a call from Derek or Gabriel, telling him everything was OK. It hadn't come. The only thing he could think of was to call the Embassy in Bangkok. Googling brought up a phone number, and soon he was talking with a person named Jason about his brother's disappearance. Jason had taken his information, and then informed him that they were searching for Derek because a citizen had reported he 'might be in jail'. Jason made it clear there was no information to confirm this, and stated the Embassy had used many man-hours trying to verify or disprove this without success. He'd be sure to note in the file, that Roy had called, and this would guarantee a call should Derek be located. Roy hung up the phone deeply troubled. That fact that someone had reported Derek was in jail was too specific to be a hoax, he thought. It would not be surprising if the Embassy had been unable to find him, Roy didn't hold any government agency in much esteem. But he naively trusted that the embassy's efforts had been sufficient, and hoped Derek would turn up soon. He'd be laughing off the whole incident because he had decided to reconcile with his ex and had spent extra time making up to her, Roy hoped.

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Gabriel also had no idea what to do next, and so nothing got done. He was not his usual joyful self around his daughters, while visiting them after school, but otherwise life went on as normal. No news is good news, he hoped.

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Derek had always believed 'you are what you do in the dark'. He always tried to do the right thing, whether he thought anyone would find out or not. You can never regain a pristine reputation once you have tarnished it. But its not always clear what the right thing is, and sometimes in spite of his best intentions, he would do something that may not actually be right, or good. And he has to monitor his thoughts closely, or soon they would run away and have a great time judging and denigrating others.

But ethics includes more than just 'doing the right thing'. Integrity, self-discipline, justice and moderation also must be considered. When I know what to do, but do something different, that is unethical, Derek knew. This whole project, the Bodhisattva Vow, requires constant work; in those moments when it seems easier to just take a pass, self-discipline is needed to keep me on the right path. Right action will lead to the right result, and that is justice. And as in all the virtues, the Middle Way, not too much and not too little, is the best choice.

It should be easy to see the right path, he thought. "Seeing myself in others and others in myself, whom would I harm, whom could I exploit?" the Buddha said. Indeed, whom? At any point, when you are about to say or do something, checking with yourself to foresee harm to yourself or others is a good measuring stick to use to engrain ethical behavior. Simply put, if harm will be the result, choose another path.

"The great person understands Yi (morality, duty to one's neighbor altruism and politeness). The small person understands on Li (profit and personal advantage)." Commented Confucius many centuries ago. Altruism is a concept we see too rarely today. Acting for the benefit of another, without consideration of any benefit for oneself. Yet altruism often leads to the greatest satisfaction and love.

Sometimes doing the right thing means standing up to a giant, like David did against Goliath. We each can only do what we understand to be right for the situation, but we should allow ourselves the will and freedom to stretch our boundaries every moment, to tackle tasks we may consider beyond our reach. We place trust in The One to give us the strength to grow and expand our abilities and awareness. Right here in Thailand, Derek thought, we are acutely aware of the struggle of Aung San Suu Kyi against an oppressive military dictatorship in neighboring Burma. She said in her written acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, “To live the fully responsible life, one must have the courage to bear responsibility for the needs of others....one must *want* to bear this responsibility. Concepts such as truth, justice and compassion cannot be dismissed as trite when these often are the only bulwarks which stand against ruthless power.” I don’t know if I have the strength to take a stand as she has, Derek thought, but I hope I would find it within myself to try. Of course, there are certain precepts that are given to steer people into making the right decisions:

- Do not kill
- Do not steal
- Do not deceive
- Do not engage in sexual misconduct
- Do not indulge in intoxicants.

The first three are pretty clear, although these are just ‘precepts’, not inviolable laws. That means they give direction but are not absolute. Every situation deserves to be examined, and the proper path chosen among the various options. In some cases, a precept might be violated to serve the common good. Do not kill does not require one to be vegetarian, for example. It is incredibly difficult to eat without causing harm to some being, even insects and worms are killed by farming vegetables. What is critical is to avoid violence and unnecessary abuse of the animals one chooses to eat, to avoid excessive eating, and to be thankful for the food the Universe has provided. We approach this using the ‘Middle Way’, all things in moderation. Interestingly, do not deceive is a difficult one to maintain, because we are accustomed to not wanting to sadden or anger another with our personal viewpoints. “Does this dress make me look fat?” is a loaded question; do you speak your mind, or try to avoid provoking the questioner? And do not steal, reminds Derek of the approach Buddhist monks take regarding their own subsistence: I will only take what is freely given. This means giving back the extra change to the cashier who has made a mistake, for example. The last two are less clear, and within our culture, emotionally charged as well. There are no guidelines written that he knows of that detail what exactly constitutes ‘misconduct’. But extrapolating from the other ethical teachings, he surmises that anything that abuses, demeans, misleads or objectifies another would be ethically wrong. And ‘intoxicants’ means not only the obvious, liquor and drugs, but the less obvious, something that distracts from the task at hand (seeking enlightenment) or that numbs the mind, body or soul. TV, computer games, Internet chat rooms, these are all examples of ways to avoid dealing with the current situation, and would violate the last precept.

He had always agreed with the statement, ‘What goes around, comes around’, even before he had ever heard of karma. ‘As you sow, so shall you reap’ expresses the same viewpoint. This points out another reason, besides enlightenment, to act in an ethical manner. The energy you put forth demonstrates where you are placing your attention, and that’s what you will be looking for, what you perceive more readily, and what will seem to come flying back into your life. ‘I’d rather that all be good,’ he thought. Yet despite karma, the deepest part of me is, now and always, perfect and uncorrupted by past mistakes. Establishing a connection to that source, to the Now, to the truth enables me to enjoy the purity of The One, despite past transgressions.

When I am faced with a decision, I can ask myself, 'What is the loving action?' Derek thought. Also, 'What is true? What motivates me? What motivates the others? Where can our motivations meet?' And walk the talk, just do it, he thought.

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Neung woke to find himself alone in the room. Rangsan had already left for the day, and Neung felt a sudden loneliness. This is what it will be like when I'm no longer living here, he thought. I'll awaken everyday, alone. Quickly, he jumped to his feet, folded the pads against the wall, and left the room.

He set about his duties as expected; even the thought of serving the *falang* was becoming normal. He was embarrassed when he remembered how he had acted in the cell last evening, claiming to not be hungry just so he could get back to his room with that magazine. Rangsan was right; he shouldn't look at such things. But his mind (and another part of his body) kept remembering what he had seen, and wanted to see more. He couldn't afford to anger Rangsan, but he was drawn to the photos like flies to honey.

Suddenly, it came to him: he would take the magazine to the *falang*. It was in English after all, he would enjoy reading something, Neung was sure. And if it were in the *falang*'s cell, he could look through it while he waited for the prisoner to finish his meals. Rangsan would never know. Sounds like a plan, he told himself.

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Susan was pleased with the article in the Bangkok Post about Derek's disappearance. Much information had been added to fill space, but it was all fluff, and didn't help her decide what steps to take next. She hated the thought of giving up, returning home unsuccessful, but she had no other ideas to try. Her time that she could take off from work was also rapidly dwindling, by Monday (or Tuesday at the latest) she'd have to leave no matter what. She spent the morning brainstorming ideas, but found none of any use. She'd have to wait and see if the newspapers would bring in any tips.

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Ron had planned on working today, he truly had. Since Lisa wasn't interested in a date, and his Friday had ended relatively on time, he felt an obligation to continue the hunt. But Friday's barhopping had left him with a splitting headache, and he found himself dizzy when he tried to get to the bathroom to empty his bladder around 9 am. He gargled with Listerine to get the foul taste out of his mouth, took more aspirin than he should for his pounding head, and fell back asleep. By the time he woke feeling able to move without pain, the day was long past working. His only concern became food, something bland, as his stomach was prepared to reject anything it didn't like. There's always Monday, he decided.

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Neung went by the table where he had left the magazine several times throughout the day, on the lookout for the magazine. Finally, around 4 in the afternoon, it appeared again. He rolled it and tucked into the waistband of his

*longyi*, and made himself scarce. He didn't want Rangsan to find him with it, and it was too early to take dinner to the *falang*.

He managed to avoid talking with anyone, and soon enough he decided it was a fine time for the prisoner to shower and wash clothes. He went to the cell, looked all around to be sure they would not be overheard, and slipped inside. As usual, the *falang* was expecting him, no matter how quiet he tried to be.

He pulled the magazine out from his waistband, and presented it to the prisoner. Expecting him to grab it from his hands in joy, he was disappointed that there was no immediate reaction. Finally, the *falang* spoke, "Give this who?"

"I give you." Neung answered.

"No, this give to you, who?"

Neung almost answered 'Sawat', remembering last night, but he didn't. "Think you will like. I give you."

The *falang* sighed, and leaned back against the wall. "Not want. Want if belong to you. Steal, very bad. You not steal for me. Understand?"

Neung understood, but didn't believe it. Again he thrust the magazine forward, trying to urge the prisoner to take it from his hand. There was no move to accept it.

After unbearable seconds Neung rolled it and stuck it back into his waistband.

"Shower now." He turned and left the cell, waiting outside for the *falang* to follow.

Nothing is ever easy, he thought to himself as the prisoner emerged. They trudged to the shower area in silence.

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Neung returned the magazine on his way to pick up the food, following the shower. He hadn't mentioned washing clothes to the *falang*, a sign of his displeasure over the rejection of his gift. No one saw him leave it on the table, but as he emerged from the kitchen food on the tray in his hand, he saw Sawat approach. He paused, still thinking about the magazine, and watched him come close.

"Give me the magazine when you are finished?" he asked.

"Sure thing kid. You like the pictures, huh?"

Neung shrugged his shoulders, not wanting to commit to anything, but wanting the magazine nonetheless. He didn't see Sawat noticing four bowls of food on the tray, and knowing Sawat wasn't one of the most lenient of guards he should have been paying more attention.

## Sunday

In Thailand, Sunday is no different than any other day of the week for many people. Certainly this was true for Derek, given his current predicament. He had done the right thing, he was sure, by refusing to take something from Neung that wasn't his to give. But later last night, he pondered the food issue, and realized he may have missed the boat on that one. Allowing his growling stomach to override his common sense, he had ignored trying to find out if the food was being stolen.

When Neung arrived with breakfast, he went straight to the point. "*Extra food you take, yes?*"

Nueng looked up from the tray, he was still in the process of setting the food on the floor, and quickly replied, "*No! Cook give me. Not take.*"

"*OK. Good, good.*" And then changing the subject, "*Work every day, yes?*"

"*No problem. Live here. If not working, do what?*"

That would be true, Derek thought. What would one do if one didn't have work?

Visit family maybe? "*Parents are where?*"

"*Parents die already.*" Neung didn't appear to want to say anymore about that.

"*Live how many years?*"

"*19. And you?*" Derek had always admired curiosity, and was happy to see it spark in his guard.

"*53.*" Neung pondered this. The *falang* didn't look to be that old, certainly by Thai standards. Aside from his lack of flexibility, his inability to sit comfortably on the concrete, which most Thais could do, he looked to be fit. His face didn't have the lines and 'weathered' look of most people that old that Neung had met. Granted, he knew few people that old.

"*Read can you?*" Derek knew that many Thais were unable to read, because they had to leave school early (or never attended in the first place) to help support their family.

"*Little bit.*" Neung was embarrassed to admit he couldn't, so he fudged just a little.

"*Gai is friend, yes?*"

"*Yes. No have friend too many. Gai, Rangsang.....*" Neung paused, realizing he probably shouldn't have mentioned Rangsang, but it was too late.

"*Talk about Rangsang can?*"

Neung didn't know what to say. Rangsang was his only 'family', though not officially. "*Rangsang like brother for me.*"

Derek grunted in response to this then remained silent.

"*He takes care of me.*" Neung was uncomfortable talking about this with the *falang*, as much as he had grown to like him, discussing Rangsang wasn't something he wanted to do right now. "*Tomorrow, you walk with Gai again.*"

"*Yes. I like speaking with him. I am here why do you know already?*" Derek decided the direct approach is best.

"*Yes, but I not believe.*"

"*Not have to believe, wife speak lie.*" Derek stated the obvious.

"*No problem.*" Neung began to gather the bowls.

“*Thank you friend.*” Derek had watched Neung closely. He didn’t detect any hesitation or reason to doubt him when he said he didn’t believe the charges Mao had made.

“*Thank you friend.*” Neung looked the *falang* in the eye for the first time today, and meant what he said. He felt relieved to have had this conversation, opening up a little bit and talking of himself. He was beginning to feel what he said, that Derek was his friend. It felt good. He finished gathering bowls and left the cell.

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Susan finally slept most of the night, for the first time since her arrival. That could be good, becoming used to the time zone, or it could be bad, reaching a state where her exhaustion overcame her drive to help Derek. In either case, she woke Sunday morning refreshed.

But she still had no idea what to do next. After dressing, she went downstairs to the hotel lobby for breakfast at the buffet. The hotel provided both Asian and Western selections on the tables, but Susan had found that even when it looks like fried eggs and bacon, it tastes different here. She had settled on having fresh fruit and cereal after the first morning’s disappointment. Today, there were even more fruit choices than usual. She asked an attendant about two, and was told the small white fruit was *lom yai* and the larger white fruit *rambutan*. Both were very sweet and delicious, though she doubted she could find them in the US once she had returned. For now, she’d just have to eat her fill and enjoy it while she was here.

After dining, she located a Thai newspaper in the lobby and began to scan it for Derek’s picture. Not being able to read Thai she’d not be able to understand any article, but it would reassure her if she could see his photo reprinted. On the front page of the colorful daily were photos of bodies, one lying on a roadway, near a motorcycle crash, and one in a hospital bed. She was surprised to see this getting front-page treatment, and also noted the small indented photos of Thai IDs, presumably to indicate who was in the picture. Sad, she thought, that your name, address and birth date would be printed for all to see once you had passed away. Her own sense of privacy felt violated by that concept.

She found what she sought on page 23, though the photo had been quite degraded by being copied and printed in a newspaper. Still, if someone had seen Derek being arrested, she had no doubt they would recognize him from the article. Her hope now was that a tip would be forthcoming. She had seen enough of Bangkok during her search that she didn’t want to play the role of tourist today. It was a crowded, dirty city, and aside from the massage parlors seemingly on every corner, was like any large, old city in the states. Temple visits didn’t appeal to her; any more than touring churches would if she were home, and the only other tourist attraction she had seen advertised in the hotel lobby was the Snake Farm. *No thank you.* She returned to her room and watched BBC and Aljazeera the rest of the day. Sadly, there was no news of Derek on either news channel.

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Effort. Derek was told when he was young, “Good things come to those who wait.” While he understood how that relates to patience, he knew that some people mistook the saying as a justification for doing nothing. That wasn’t the point, in fact, it misses the point completely, he thought. Just as in karma, you get back what you put out, he knew. In order to receive blessing and bounty from the Universe, one must be contributing energy to the system. In other words, the Universe will help those who help themselves.

Just as he had found the universe always provided for him, he had diligently applied himself to make it easy. He often had worked two jobs, and thankfully seemed to have a reservoir of energy to draw upon that kept him from getting too tired. Though with work, volunteer work and family, his schedule was rarely clear. He watched very little TV, in fact he had a stack of VCR recordings, shows he really intended to watch when he set the timer to record, that he never found the time to actually view. One of his bosses had told him once she saw him much like the protagonist in “*The Inconvenient Traveler*”, multitasking all the time. The scene she cited from the book, the tourist stomping on his clothes in the shower to bathe and do laundry at the same time, never failed to amuse him. His take was: ‘...and the problem with that is...?’

Once he had landed a job with FEMA, the government agency providing relief services following disasters. He worked after several large hurricanes, the worst of which was Katrina, 29 August 2005. He was out working 4 months, the last 3 in Biloxi, Mississippi. Biloxi had been under 30 feet of storm surge in some places. His job with FEMA took at least 12 hours a day, 7 days a week for the first 2 ½ months. By mid-November, though, they began to get Sundays off. What did he do with a day off from work? He volunteered through an international relief organization, and spent all his days off until he returned home removing the wet furniture, drywall and carpets from houses so the owners could advance the process of rebuilding. His satisfaction came from seeing the relief on the faces of the residents as a major hurdle in their recovery was crossed in just a day. A crew of 15 or 20 people accomplished in hours what would take the survivor weeks or months to do on their own. It seems such a small thing, but he was available, had the energy and the motivation to help, and gave the recipients more than just a gutted house for his trouble, he gave them hope of a new beginning. Those he worked with and for, thought him crazy. After all the hours spent on the job, to see him add to his workload something so physically demanding. He just saw it as channeling energy, getting in the flow. He didn’t see himself as heroic, just doing what he saw needed to be done, making use of every opportunity to improve the world.

But he also knew that he needed the chance to recharge his batteries, to regroup once in awhile. He would tell a story to people he worked with, about the need to take breaks. It described a contest between two men, to see who could cut down the most trees in 24 hours. Both had identical chain saws, and started cutting. After awhile, one man took a break, eating, drinking and sharpening his saw. The other man felt good about this, because he kept working. He saw himself getting ahead while the other man rested. The second man continued to take regular breaks, giving the other hope of certain victory. But as the hours wore on, the second man began to catch up in number of trees cut, and by the tie the contest had ended, won by a comfortable margin. Asked how he had managed to take breaks and still win, his answer was short and simple, “I kept my saw sharp.” Likewise Derek ensured that he took time to enjoy life, to visit new places and try to see the world through new eyes whenever he could.

He also liked to recall an old Cherokee story, where an elder is instructing his grandson about a struggle every person faces. He described the battle as between two wolves: one is cowardly, vain, arrogant and lazy, full of anger, jealousy, sorrow and regret; the other diligent, humble and benevolent, full of joy, compassion and faith. Soon the grandson asked, ‘Which one wins?’ and the wise man answered, ‘The one you feed.’



Derek was all about feeding the second wolf in the story.

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Neung took his meager lunch and sat in the shade of the only tree in the compound. This was often a habit when it wasn't burning hot. He wished once again that he had the courage to leave this place, to get a real job and receive the money to buy himself a real lunch. As it was, he had to rely on handouts from the cook, leftovers really. The warden felt that a roof over his head at night was all the pay he needed, despite all the hard work, the dirty jobs and difficult conditions that he endured each day. No other money was forthcoming, and his rations were the same as any prisoner, actually.

After he had finished his rice and soup, he sat enjoying the butterflies that bobbed around the yard. They were a pretty orange and black this time of year, and larger than the yellow ones that were so common in May they were a hazard to motorcycle riders. He saw Sawat leave the administration building, and head towards the kitchen. He was carrying something in his hand, and when he noticed Neung under the tree, he raised that hand and waved the magazine at him. "*Here for you.*" He shouted across the yard.

Neung waved in response, and watched as Sawat set the magazine on the table outside the kitchen door. He didn't want to appear too eager, and waited for several minutes until Sawat had moved to the dispensary. Then he sauntered over to the table, scooped up the magazine, and quickly walked to his room. Without so much as glancing at it, he slid the magazine under the sleeping pads piled in the corner, and quickly left, returning to his afternoon chores. He didn't expect Rangsan to return during the afternoon, the magazine would be safe.

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Despite it being Sunday morning, Gabriel was awake even before his usual workday alarm. He was deeply troubled by his step-dad's disappearance. Roy's assurances that the Embassy was working on locating him did little to assuage the fear he felt. His discomfort was increased because he could think of nothing to do to help. He would have to talk with Roy again today; the mortgage payment Gabe shared with Derek was due to be withdrawn from Derek's checking account Monday. Normally, Gabe would deposit his half of the payment in a savings account they shared, and Derek would use online banking to move the money into the checking account for automatic debit payments. Gabe had no way to get into the accounts and do this himself, but he knew that Roy's name was on the checking account as executor of Derek's estate and he might be able to handle the transfer.

He really didn't want the bank foreclosing on the house they shared just because Derek had disappeared. That would really be turning a bad situation into a train wreck.

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Neung was especially watchful as he crept towards the room he shared with Rangsan. Being embarrassed by this whole magazine affair, the last thing he wanted was for someone to discover his plan. But the hall appeared clear. Quickly entering the room, he rolled the magazine easily; it was beginning to be familiar with taking this particular shape after all, and slipped it into the waist of his *longyi*. After returning to the kitchen and gathering the evening meal for himself and the *falang*, he headed out to make his delivery.

For some reason, it seemed that every guard in the prison managed to walk through the yard at the same time, and each one had to stop and have a few words with Neung. If he had been used to scheming and manipulating people, he probably would have realized this meant Sawat had been telling one and all about the magazine and Neung's profound interest in it. They knew he had possessed the item an entire afternoon, and were just curious if he had 'learned' anything from looking at the pictures.

As it was, though, he wasn't used to being manipulated and didn't think anything beyond silently bemoaning the inconvenience of having to chat with so many people while the magazine screamed to be presented to the prisoner. Eventually though, he worked his way through the throng and was at last approaching the cell. As the door came into view, he saw Rangsan leaning against the outer cell wall. He almost turned to leave and deliver the meal later, after Rangsan had gotten tired of waiting, but he had already been seen.

"Hey." Was all he could think of to say. It came out more as a grunt, than a word. "*Happened what?*" Rangsan's greeting was normal, and didn't require a specific answer.

"*Nothing. And you, do what?*"

"*Wait for you. You have to know, Sawat talk about you. Say you do nasty things with magazine. Best if you give it back.*"

"*But I not do!*" Neung's protest was louder than it needed to be, and with a glance around, Rangsan brought a finger to his lips in the universal sign for quiet.

"*Believe. But other people, not believe. I not care. Only want for you the best. Up to you, keep or give.*"

"*After tonight, I not have, OK?*" The plea was clear on Neung's face: Please, tell the others I don't have it anymore.

"*Up to you.*" Rangsan shrugged and moved back towards the administration building. "*See you tonight.*"

Neung watched him leave for a few seconds, then paid attention to opening the door. The magazine suddenly felt heavy, more trouble than it was possibly worth. Once the door was open, he perfunctorily offered it to the *falang*.

"*He give me, I give you,*" he said so the prisoner would not question him again about it. He had planned to ask that he be allowed to look at it from time to time, but now wanted nothing more to do with it.

The *falang* watched him for a few seconds, trying to look into his eyes. He kept them on the floor as the magazine was taken from his hands. The prisoner placed it on the floor to his left. Neung realized he had also lost his appetite, again, so he set all bowls down and turned to pick up the bucket for cleaning.

"*For this, thank you. Not hungry?*" The *falang* inquired.

“No.” He grasped the bucket’s handle and fled.

When he returned, the magazine lay in the same place, untouched. All the bowls were empty, it seemed the prisoner was hungry. And I imagine he would be, being so big and eating so little, Neung thought bitterly. Again he began to hate himself for taking food the cook was giving for the prisoner. Suddenly, being in the cell with the *falang* was the last place he wanted to be. He nearly dropped the bucket in his haste to leave.

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Derek heard Neung approach the cell, then he seemed to loiter outside the door for quite some time. Eventually, he heard another approach, and when the conversation began, he realized it had not been Neung waiting, someone else had been waiting for Neung.

The conversation had been hard to hear, they were trying to be inconspicuous, he imagined, and were speaking rapidly, as people who know their language are wont to do. But he did understand there was a problem because of a magazine. Someone was talking about Neung and the magazine. So Derek was surprised, when Neung presented the magazine to him just moments later. Neung had said, he’d not have it after tonight, and here he was, giving it to me, Derek thought. He glanced at it, a copy of *‘Entertainment’*, and set it aside. There were more important things going on here than just a magazine.

But Neung was not a happy camper. He rushed about his duties, doing only what was mandatory, and not even pausing to eat. This was quite like him when he was under stress for helping the prisoner, Derek realized, thinking back to the last time this had occurred. The sad part was, Derek knew he’d not spend 10 seconds looking at the magazine, no matter the good intentions Neung had when giving it to him. He’d not say this to Neung, it is the thought that counts, not the gift itself. For the high price Neung was seemingly paying, Derek wouldn’t rob him of that satisfaction. Tomorrow he’d try to find out from Gai, what Neung was having to do in return for all the recent favors. Hopefully he could bear to pay, whatever it was.

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Gabriel called Roy, and after inquiring as to new news (there was none), his family’s health (all were fine), got right to the point of the call: how to access the bank accounts. “I’m on the account,” Roy acknowledged, “but only as P.O.D., which stands for ‘Pay on Death’. It means I can get into the account if I have a death certificate for my brother, but otherwise I can’t do anything you can’t do.” “Damn!” Gabriel exclaimed. “I need to get this deposit into the checking account tomorrow.”

“I can come down there and get into the safe deposit box.” Roy had a sudden idea. “Derek has placed a paper there with all his passwords for his online activities, including bank access. I could get into the online account that way. I can be there by noon, if that’s OK?”

“That would be great,” Gabriel breathed a sigh of relief. At least that problem could be solved in time. “Thanks so much.”

“I doubt this was something my brother foresaw when he put the passwords in the box, but it’s a good thing he did, huh?” Roy said as he hung up. Funny how proper prior planning prevents poor performance, he thought.

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Sawat had kept a close eye on Neung, first as he moved through the yard, magazine tucked into his *longyi* as if he thought no one would see it there, then as he returned from delivering dinner to the *falang*, this time without the magazine. Tomorrow we can teach them both a lesson, he thought with a smile. He liked giving lessons.

## Monday

Derek still had a few new mosquito bites each morning, but was growing resistant to the urge to scratch them. The cooler weather was probably stunting their ability to reproduce, he thought as he worked on not scratching today's crop.

He moved the magazine over next to the bucket. He didn't even open the cover, Hollywood gossip not being high on his list of curiosities. The birds were especially vocal in greeting the dawn today, and he even had to admit he was just a bit chilled for the first time. The weather is just like everything else, he thought. It too, shall change.

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Susan wanted to find out if there was any news from the Embassy, and if none, she decided she would try to book her return flight. She could not think of anything else to do here, her work couldn't be neglected forever, and she had no new leads. She would be glad to be rid of this filthy city, she thought as she looked out from her hotel room on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. Even the white stucco buildings had black stains running down their sides from the rain and humidity. And if it wasn't a high rise or a gilded temple, it was a tin roof. She shuddered to think of living here any length of time, and dreamed of getting back to real eggs and bacon for breakfast. Sorry Derek my friend, I tried to find you. Why'd you have to come to a place this ugly in the first place?

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Wisdom is the virtue that must be present in any other virtue for effectiveness. It is one thing to be generous, but giving without knowing true need, without understanding non-attachment, is pointless and potentially harmful. Patience without knowing when to act can lead to sloth or missed opportunities. Mindfulness, if focused on the annoyance of the gnat buzzing around one's ear while on the meditation cushion, may lead nowhere. How can one make ethical decisions without knowing truth and consequences? It is wisdom that informs and facilitates all the other virtues.

Wisdom is the opposite of delusion. Overcoming delusion, understanding reality in all its forms and levels, is the goal of enlightenment. Therefore, wisdom must be cultivated. Lao Tzu's '*Tao Te Ching*' is still fresh after more than 2500 years, and it's basic premise is; "Knowing others is knowledge, knowing oneself is wisdom." Knowledge is about knowing the exterior, what's outside of me. Wisdom is knowing the interior, my true nature, being able to use both my understanding of cause and effect, and deep awareness of the Now, the eternal, deathless One Taste to forge a Middle Path that uses both to grow enlightenment in myself as well as others. Wisdom can see things in their radiant endless nature, while simultaneously seeing how they interrelate with other things in the universe. Wisdom in action is compassion. "The foolish and the ignorant are bound to emotional choices that in turn attach them more fiercely to their ignorance. The wise person, on the other hand, walks through life unswayed and nonreactive, yet free to act compassionately and with equanimity." (Mu Soeng) In other words, the ignorant are on autopilot, subject to whatever their emotions or subconscious subject them to. The wise are able to select the appropriate action to benefit all.

Ignorance forces us to act out of craziness and misunderstanding, and leads inevitably to actions with unintended results. If you only view the world from a limited perspective, if your reality is comprised of prejudices and misconceptions, how can you possibly make good choices? If you rationalize questionable behavior, tell half-truths, practice denial, or manipulate the truth; these habits will prevent you from reaching your goal. Wisdom is the cure for these ills.

“We are already like Buddhas, endowed with the Buddha qualities or perfections the moment we are born; this is the main message of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. The only problem is that our wisdom is obscured like a sun behind the clouds.” (Tulku Thubren Rinpoche) We need only contact the Now, The One, for guidance to our treasure of wisdom, available at all times. This enables us to act from a position of knowing, of truth, of effective compassion. It also allows us to help others; “The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.” (Benjamin Disraeli)

What are steps to increase wisdom, to improve my communication with the Divine? I must learn about my inner world, get off the autopilot, reactive, subconscious roller coaster, and learn exactly what inspires and motivates me, so that I may do more of those kinds of activities. Next, I must practice what I have learned, put the ball in play and allow compassion to radiate through every action. As the first step improves my ability to choose the best course of action, the second step will become second nature, and I won't need to consciously choose that step, it will flow from every action naturally. As Goethe says, “Boldness has its own power and magic.”

What does wisdom look like? It takes the shape of teaching, mentoring, parenting, volunteering, helping others, healing whenever possible. It is inspiring others to do the same. Dorothy Thompson sums it up nicely, “One cannot exist today as a person, one cannot exist in full consciousness, without having a showdown with one's self, without having to define what it is that one lives by, without being clear in one's mind what matters and what does not matter.” Wisdom informs us what we need to do as well as what we need to leave behind.

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Ron came to work refreshed after the weekend, and in a good mood, despite the large amount of alcohol he had consumed the previous 60 hours. He had discovered an anti-hangover tablet being sold at the local 7-11, and it appeared to work very well. Take one before drinking, and another every few hours while drinking, problem solved.

He swept into his office to prepare for the weekly staff meeting at 10 am. There would be lots of meaningless chatter about what hadn't been accomplished last week, more about what should happen this week (but wouldn't, Ron knew), and if he were lucky, it would adjourn before there were only scraps left in the Embassy cafeteria. For sure, it would not leave any time for traveling around the countryside looking for more jails; the task of finding a supposedly missing citizen would have to wait until tomorrow. That alone was cause for celebration.

He began to assemble a list of all the jails he had visited or called since this hunt began. It might be needed at the meeting, since he had little else to show for having been paid to work last week. “Covering My Ass” was how Ron termed this morning's detail. Ron was all about CMA.

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Susan was waiting in line as the turnstile opened for the morning's visitors to the Embassy. Knowing the drill, she was soon standing outside the door of Mr.

James' office. The door was closed, and there had been no response to her knocks.

A friendly lady with a nametag that said 'Lisa' happened by, and asked if Susan was there to see Mr. James. When Susan answered, Lisa directed her to a conference room at the end of the hall. "He's preparing for a meeting, but you can go in and speak with him for a few minutes" she said in her most helpful voice.

The door to the conference room was open, and Susan could see that he was alone. She knocked on the doorframe; he looked up, smiled and motioned for her to enter. "Good morning" he said, as he shuffled some papers to cover up what he had been working on.

"Good morning. I don't mean to intrude, but Lisa said it was OK to come here to talk with you." She took a seat several chairs away from Mr. James.

"No excuse needed, I'm always happy to be of service." Susan doubted that, but plowed ahead anyway.

"I'm hoping you have news for me, or at least some idea of how I might be some help in locating Derek?"

"Despite all the time and effort we have spent on this, I'm afraid there's still no word on where he is. You must understand, in Thailand, women are relatively new to the workforce, generally not respected very much and to have you poking around is bound to only cause problems for Derek. It's best if you leave the inquiries to my staff."

Susan sighed and sat back in her chair. She clasped her hands in her lap, and looked briefly up at the ceiling. Then she fixed Mr. James with a stern stare.

"I'm afraid I've done all I can here, given your unwillingness to let me help. I'll return to San Diego soon, and you shouldn't be surprised if I manage to raise the alarm among media there. Maybe this situation needs some international heat before the Thais will cooperate, do you think?"

"Of course, you are free to do what you think is right, But I have to tell you, I don't think international attention is going to solve this. It's going to take legwork that my staff has undertaken and is performing even as we speak. Please go back to your home, go back to work, and wait for our call that he has been located."

"Thank you for your time." Susan wouldn't thank him for helping, he had been more of a hindrance, she thought. She rose and left the room without another word.

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Ron's phone rang. He finished the line he was writing, and picked it up on the fourth ring. "Hello."

"Meet me now in the conference room." The phone went dead. This was not a happy sign, being summoned by his boss in such terse language. Well, Ron sighed, I was expecting something like this.

He finished writing out two more lines about jail visitations, gathered a notebook and his partial list, and walked slowly to the conference room. Pausing at the open door, his boss became aware of him outside and asked him to enter.

“Susan was just here, and she said she would return to San Diego soon. She threatened to raise an ‘international scene’, as she put it, over our inability to locate this man. What’s the status of your search?”

Padding the account as much as possible, Ron detailed his past week’s activities. Despite his best efforts, it sounded rather paltry, once he had finished. There was a moment of silence.

“So your plan is to visit jails, in ever-widening circles around Bangkok, for the rest of time?” The sneer in Mr. James’ voice made Ron cringe.

“I’m not getting any cooperation from Thai authorities” he said, nor any from you, he thought. What do you expect me to do? “I imagine they have ways of locating a foreigner if they put their minds to it, they just aren’t to that point yet.”

“Keep with your plan, but I’ve given you all the time I can to work this out by yourself. I’m going to put more staff on the case, until we find this guy. It’s not necessary for you to be at the meeting this morning; I already know what I need for today. Go get started on your next province.” Mr. James quickly turned his attention back to the papers in front of him, and Ron knew he had been dismissed.

“Yes, sir.” That’s one way to ruin a good Monday, he thought as he left the room.

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Susan had packed her bags, just in case, before going to the Embassy. When the taxi dropped her in front of the Elizabeth, she had only to collect them from the room and pay her bill, before heading to the airport. She arrived at 10:45 am, and got on the standby list for the 12:15 flight to Los Angeles. There were seats on the 4:10 pm, she was given one of those, but if there was an opening she might get out a bit earlier. Unfortunately, she remained in the new international terminal until the later flight. She watched CNN on a large plasma screen in a restaurant, until some soccer game started and the men at one of the tables badgered the waitress to change the channel. She browsed the bookshops, there were three in this wing of the terminal, and thought about buying some of the flowers ‘certified pest free, allowable through any customs station’ as a souvenir of this trip, but they were US\$65 dollars. I can’t spend that much on something that may not make it home, she thought as she turned and moved along to her gate. She had just managed to get her body used to this time zone, and now she was returning. This direction, though, she would leave at 4 pm and get into LA 6 pm the same day, Monday. She’d be exhausted, but that would work in her favor. She would sleep as soon as she got home, and get back on Pacific Standard Time quickly. She called ahead and made a reservation for the short hop to San Diego. As her flight began to board, she took one last look around the terminal, tears filling her eyes. ‘I’m so sorry, Derek. I tried everything I could, I’m sorry I couldn’t find you’ she thought as she walked down the jet way into the plane.

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Wang had worried about Joe all weekend. She couldn’t stand the thought that he was locked up; with no one to provide him with the little necessities we all take for granted, until we can no longer buy them ourselves. And she knew, his Thai



was passable at best; he'd be virtually alone the whole time he was locked up. Just after noon Monday, she thought of a plan to help.

She rode her motorcycle into town, and stopped to visit Kay. Kay ran a beauty salon in the front of her house, but had gone to university before realizing that a hairstyling career was more appealing. Due to her schooling, she knew English, at least much better than Wang. Wang explained what she wanted, Kay happily obliged, and Wang was back home before Kan returned home from school.

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Neung had finished his afternoon rounds, and was headed for the tree to rest a bit in the shade of the afternoon before meeting Gai for their walk with the *falang*. He was surprised to see Sawat with two other guards, Bird and Ting, in tow and heading straight for him. As they approached, Ting and Bird hurried ahead to either side of Neung, and before he could react, had each grabbed him by an arm.

"*Time for a lesson,*" Sawat said, in a tone Neung recognized as angry. The two guards on either side of him began to march him in the direction of the *falang's* cell. As they walked along, Neung noticed Sawat was tapping his left palm with two bamboo switches, usually used when a beating is to be administered that is not intended to leave any marks. They would leave painful welts, and it would be difficult for one to sit for a few days afterwards. If they beat the prisoner this way, he'd be especially hurt, because he's unable to stand comfortably in the small cell, Neung foresaw. He'd have to choose between sitting on welts or standing with an aching back and neck.

As they approached the cell, Sawat turned to Neung and said in a low voice, "This is for you as much as him."

Neung wondered what he meant by that, but didn't have long to ponder. When they neared the door, Ting broke formation and ran to open it and tell the prisoner to come out. Neung saw the *falang* stoop to get through the door, stand straight up and stretch just a bit as he took in the scene.

Miming the action required, Ting told the prisoner to take off his clothes. Without hesitation, the *falang* did as instructed. He has no shame, Neung thought. He stands there naked as the day he was born, without any sign of discomfort. By now he has to have seen the switches. Yet he's calm as if we are here to talk about the rain tomorrow.

Sawat stepped through the door and emerged just seconds later with the magazine in his hand. He shoved it into the *falang's* face, and angrily asked.

"*This what is?*"

"*Magazine.*" His face was impassive, not giving any clue to what he was thinking.

"*Get it from who?*"

"*Did ask Neung for it.*" If there was any way he could take heat off his young friend Derek was willing to do it.

"This cannot have." Sawat tried to tear the magazine in half, but after struggling for a few seconds, just threw it into the dirt. With a nod of his head, he handed the switches to Ting and Bird. Ting turned the prisoner around so that his backside was in view of all. Each in turn, the two guards began to thrash Derek's

back, buttocks and thighs with the switches. Neung noticed immediately, the *falang* didn't even flinch. It was as if he weren't in his body, as the bamboo *thwacked* against his skin. He radiated calm, accepting what was happening, and not resisting in the least. The wind quickly left Bird and Ting, what anger had stoked the first few strokes quickly dissipated and they were left feebly swinging the bamboo. Neung had seen more than a few beatings, but none as mild as this one. They're teaching me a lesson with this, he thought. They aren't, but *he is*. After a few more feeble attempts to swing the sticks, Ting and Bird stepped back and looked at Sawat. He grabbed one of the switches, turned to Neung, and ordered him to strip also. Neung tried to practice what he had just seen, and quickly stripped and stood as if this happened every day. He told himself that this would only hurt for a short time, then the pain would pass, It always did. All he had to do was let what would happen, happen. Don't fight back, just let Sawat do his thing, and this will be over soon. He kept repeating these thoughts as if they were mantras, as the beating commenced. But despite having every intention to make Neung hurt for giving the magazine to the *falang*, Sawat also found himself losing the anger in the face of no resistance. It's hard to beat someone who appears not to care one way or another.

Sawat finally dropped his arm, and let the switch fall from his fingers. He spun on his heels and stomped to the administration building. Ting grabbed the *falang's* clothing from the ground, threw it into the cell, and told him to enter. After locking the door behind him, he and Bird also beat a hasty retreat. Neung stood a few moments, alone in the sun, feeling the flush of victory. He had met Sawat on his terms, and beaten him at the game. The few welts that had been raised were well worth it he thought, as he slowly dressed. He would have an interesting tale for Gai before the walk this evening.

As he walked back to his room, the magazine pages lay bleaching in the afternoon sun.

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Derek heard a few people moving along the sidewalk towards his cell, then the lock being opened. A guard he'd not seen before swung the door wide, and said, "*Come here*" pointing to the ground outside the cell. Derek complied.

Miming removing his shirt, the guard said something Derek didn't recognize, other than the word for clothing, so he assumed he was to strip. Neung had the look of a deer caught in headlights, unsure whether to run or crawl under a rock. He noticed one guard close to Neung, tapping his palm with two bamboo switches. Ah, Derek thought, this is a beating. He quickly began to touch the peace and equanimity his meditation had created within. He knew this would only hurt a little bit, and for a short time. He had a high tolerance for pain, and saw a golden opportunity to show Neung what life *could* be like.

He had no issue with being naked, he loved spending time in saunas and hot tubs, and that was the rule rather than the exception. Besides, he didn't have any equipment that was unusual or different from anyone else's, so why be concerned? He also knew the battle had already begun, and just as he wasn't

going to show any emotion during the beating, he'd not show discomfort just from being stripped.

*"This what is?"*

*"Magazine."* His face was impassive, not giving any clue to what he was thinking.

*"Get it from who?"*

*"Did ask Neung for it."* If there was any way he could take heat off his young friend Derek was willing to do it.

"This cannot have." Why am I not surprised? Derek managed to keep his thoughts to himself. He worked on taking the perspective of someone looking down on the whole scene, seeing the positioning of each person, the sunlight reflecting from a window on the top floor of the barracks, a beautiful orange and black butterfly gently moving across the yard in herky-jerky fashion.....

Then, as the guard tried to tear the magazine in half and failed, Derek almost lost the equanimity he had worked so hard to maintain, by laughing. Knowing that would just make the guard more angry, and the goal was to keep all the energy of this situation as calm as possible, he managed to stuff the laughter into his memory, so that he could enjoy the scene later in his cell. He passively watched the guard throw the magazine into the dirt, turned as he was urged to do, and sent his mind off to watch the beating.

He opened his heart, flooding the area around him with calm loving energy. He'd not done this intentionally before, especially under such conditions, but was amazed at how quickly the anger the two guards used to power their swings dissipated. It really hadn't hurt, though he knew there were welts that would be annoying for a few days. Small price to pay, if Neung had paid attention.

Once his beating stopped, it was clear that Neung was about to get one too.

Derek turned to watch, and was thrilled to see Neung strip and stand calmly, accepting the beating just as Derek had, and having it stop just as quickly. Great job! Derek almost shouted his praise. Quickly he was put back into the cell, and he heard the others leave. He wondered if this was the end of the punishment, or would he now lose privileges too? He'd hate to lose this evening's talk with Gai, it would more interesting than he had hoped, following this little scene.

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Neung was waiting just outside the door to the dispensary when Gai finished his shift. Gai wore a big smile, and when he saw Neung, it got even bigger. "My little friend," he said with a small chuckle, "I've already heard one version of the story, a version that makes it appear you actually enjoy being beaten, and I'd love to hear if that's true or not?"

"Of course not!" Neung blurted out. "These things hurt" he said while pointing at, but not touching, his backside, "but I think they'll only hurt a day or two!"

Gai allowed one more chuckle, and then turned serious. "I only hope, young friend, that you haven't made an enemy of Sawat. He is not a man to take lightly, he can make things ugly for you here."

That took the wind from Neung's sails, and he was easily able to imagine how difficult life could be with Sawat working against him. He remained silent while he

pondered this. Gai gently took his elbow, and steered him towards the *falang's* cell. "Best for now, to stay out of sight of him as much as you can."

They remained silent as they moved through the yard to the cell, and Gai was not surprised to see the prisoner had been expecting them.

"Hello, how are you?" Gai began.

"I am fine. And how is Neung?"

"He is fine. I am, what's the word, '*surprise?*' that he took his beating so calmly.

He's not had many, but before he always fights it like a wild horse fights the bit."

Derek just smiled at this. Gai continued, "I hear you also took the beating quietly."

"Indeed. I understand it is temporary discomfort, and nothing much to get excited about. In the bigger picture, it matters not at all. Why fight it? This also will pass."

"You speak wise words, I agree. I think it is Neung's good luck that he was able to watch you before he got his."

And speaking of Neung, how is it that he's here in the prison?" Derek was most interested in this answer.

"His parents died when he was very young. He lived with Grandmother. He was always stealing food, and small amounts of money when he saw a chance, because his Grandmother did not have enough money for both of them. Then one day he was tricked into carrying drugs for a drug seller. He was caught but because he was so young, he was only given 8 years here. But after he was released, he had nowhere to go. The warden offered him a place to sleep, and asked him to do a few chores around the prison. Over the last three years, he has been given more to do, and less to eat, it seems. I fear for him, the warden now likes to spend some time each several days with Rangsan, an older boy who also served sentence here, but I think soon Rangsan will leave or warden will tire of him, and Neung will be next in line."

Derek had a quizzical look on his face, and then realized just what Gai was talking about. His jaw tightened, as he too shared a fear for Neung. The last thing he wanted is for his friend to be abused by an old man.

"Does he have any way to leave the prison? Any one who would help him get started outside?"

"I think no."

Derek was thoughtful for a few minutes. "How much would he need to get a place to stay, and have food to eat, for some time while he learns a job?"

Now it was Gai's turn to be thoughtful. "Probably, if he were to go to a smaller town outside Bangkok, about 4000 baht each month."

Derek's quick mind came up with the answer, about US\$135 at the current exchange rate. "Are you willing to help me, help him?"

Gai looked into Derek's eyes for just a moment, and then resumed walking.

"What do you think of doing?"

"I will provide the 4000 baht each month to him, but I need you to do 2 things to help me. One, I need the Embassy to know where I am, so that I can get word to friends in America. They will ensure the money is made available on my behalf. Also, I need your help convincing him this is a good thing for him to do. I imagine, after spending nearly his whole life here, he's not going to want to leave."

“It is a generous thing you offer, to help someone you’ve only just met. I will have to think about this, it will not be good for me if they know I contacted the Embassy for you. How do I know you will give this money, after I have helped you?”

Now Derek stopped, and looked into Gai’s eyes. “I can only promise you, and I do promise you, that I will help the boy. He deserves a chance for a decent life. I am *falang*...I have lots of money, right?” Derek chuckled at the last comment. Gai paused only a second, before he too began to laugh. “Indeed, you are *falang*. But you are not like any *falang* I have ever met. Let me think on this, I will answer you soon.”

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Neung brought dinner, following the *falang*’s shower, and the conversation was light and airy. Both were elated at what had transpired, but the *falang* didn’t possess the Thai vocabulary to express anything beyond ‘*Good job!*’. Neung, for his part, thanked the prisoner, and trusted that he would understand what the thanks were for. He would think about what had happened for days, and try to understand the concepts and to see how he could use this new idea in other areas of his life. He knew without being told, that not many people would have reacted as the *falang* did to the beating. That it had been so successful was the lesson. He thought he might thank Sawat for teaching him so well, but thought better of it.

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Wang told Kan she had to go to Chiang Mai for work Tuesday evening. She hoped to be back Wednesday night, but one could never be sure with these things. It may be Thursday before she was home. In the meantime, her Mother would help Kan if needed. And Kan could always go to Leo’s house if she wanted something more to eat.

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Derek lay awake, listening to the frogs call to each other in the night. The wind began to stir, and swirling around the yard, announced a rain would soon fall. He could just make out the sound of magazine pages flapping in the wind, before the pelting rain drowned out all other noises for several minutes. It mellowed, and a quiet rain fell for a few hours. He was actually very content, here, tonight. He was pleased with how his meditations and memory were functioning; happy with the growth he felt arising from his dedication to the process. It had been a great day, he thought, as the frogs once again sang him to sleep.

Tuesday

Gai woke with a small headache, the result of not sleeping well. He had worried about Neung the entire night. He was grateful he'd managed a few hours sleep, but knew he would pay the price for his concern the rest of the day. He knew things would turn ugly for Neung if he stayed at the prison. Sawat would not let this go unanswered. Gai still had contact with friends from his university years, and knew a few would gladly help give the young man a fresh start. One friend in particular, Rabat, would be a good choice. Rabat had received an engineering degree, and now practiced his craft in Khampaeng Phet, several hours' drive north of Bangkok. He and his wife had wanted kids, but been unable to have any for some reason. Gai was sure Rabat would welcome Neung and give him the chance for a good life.

But convincing Neung that leaving is a good idea, that is harder to do. Gai knew Neung looked up to Rangsana as a brother, and would not be willing to leave without severe provocation. Gai didn't want to have to wait until Rangsana left, that would expose Neung to the warden's 'punishment' sessions, and that was to be avoided if at all possible. Gai didn't want to have to explain to Neung what went on in those perverse sessions; no need for him to grasp what Rangsana had endured these last few years. He would have to focus on the merits of leaving, the chance to learn about the real world, to have more friendships, to have enough food to eat, for example. If Neung were hungry enough, that last might be the key.

And the *falang*, what to do about him? Gai wanted very much to believe him when he promised to give Neung the funds he'd need to strike out on his own. Gai was also sure the *falang* had the means to make good on the promise. All *falangs* are rich, at least by Thai standards. But he worried that once the Embassy knew where the *falang* was, he'd be transferred, probably to a prison close to the Embassy to facilitate frequent visits by the American staff to check on him. Gai had even heard of foreigners being transferred to prison in their home country, to finish their sentence. Once the *falang* was out of this prison, Gai would have no leverage should he renege on his promise. While not likely, he trusted the prisoner and had looked into those sincere eyes while the promise was made, it was still a possibility that must be considered.

And, what if he were known to have disclosed the prisoner's location? He'd be transferred to some small pit of a prison, at the best, or hounded to death, literally, at worst. If he decided to accept the *falang's* offer, he'd have to find a way to notify the Embassy without it being traced back to him. An anonymous letter, perhaps?

He took two paracetamol for his headache, and dressed quickly for work. This wasn't going to be solved lying in bed.

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Susan landed at Los Angeles International, and while awaiting her connection to San Diego, called her boyfriend. He had traveled to Boston for a meeting, and was preparing for bed. She was further depressed realizing he wouldn't be home

before the weekend to comfort her in her disappointment. It would be a long, lonely week.

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Derek was very pleased with what he had accomplished his first week here at the prison. Recalling all that he could about the six virtues, he found he knew more than he had thought. There were four more aspects of the Bodhisattva practice that began to put the virtues together into a coherent package.

First, there was the concept of 'skillful means'. This he understood to mean that patience and wisdom allowed one to choose the appropriate time, and to see what needed to be accomplished. Skillful means was selecting the 'right action' for the situation. It helps the Bodhisattva be the right person, at the right place, at the right time. This requires the person to be attentive to the different needs of each situation, one solution does not fit all. Indeed, one may find oneself dealing with a group with multiple, even conflicting needs. Skillful means is reaching each of them at their level, whatever that might be. Derek remembered a favorite quote, from Zen Master Takuan, speaking to a samurai warrior. Though specific to the warrior's craft, it remains appropriate today; "Try not to localize the mind anywhere, but let it fill up the whole body, let it flow throughout the totality of your being. When this happens, you use the hands where they are needed, you use the legs or eyes where they are needed, and no time or energy will go to waste."

With the understanding of the pervasive oneness, and a simultaneous grasping of karma and the interrelatedness of everything and everyone, the proper choices are made and the result is skillful means, or right action. Accomplishing this means one must break out of autopilot, identify and eliminate those behavior patterns that are triggered without thinking or subconsciously.

Derek also remembers being surprised, learning that while non-violence is the rule for someone on this path, it does not mean being passive, compliant or indifferent. One tool he can use, that made sense when he thought about it, is being 'fierce'. It is not necessary to keep one's voice low at all times, there are situations where it is appropriate to blaze with the voice of truth, to get someone's attention. It only requires one understand all aspects and choose the path of action that will result in everyone receiving what is needed.

Next is the virtue of 'spiritual aspiration'. This means making the path to enlightenment the focus of everything we do, not letting petty annoyances, thoughts or selfish deeds get in the way. It means walking the talk, and being a role model for others, in other words being a leader or a guide on the path. In the end, it means I can't give up, Derek thought. Once I know the path exists, and I have taken the first steps along it, I must have the persistence and determination to follow it every step of the way. And I have help, he remembered. The actual Bodhisattva Vow reads:

*I take refuge in and rely on the enlightened Buddha,  
the liberating Dharma,  
and the supportive sangha community;  
for the benefit of all beings,  
from now until reaching perfect enlightenment  
I shall wholeheartedly practice the  
transcendental paramita virtues.*

One of his favorite slogans in his younger years was 'Think cosmically, act locally'. This was just another riff on the idea of working towards personal enlightenment, yet striving to help all become enlightened, in the manner of the Vow.

Another virtue is 'higher accomplishments'. When one has attained an understanding of the true nature of reality, one has access to what we today think of as 'magical powers'. There are always

rumors of clairvoyance, teleportation, levitation and other such phenomena surrounding those who have attained a deeper grasp of truth. The Buddha himself was said to have a number of these types of abilities, yet he always discounted them, saying 'this is not the point'. He felt they were just 'special effects', and served mainly as distraction from the truth. If you remember that all beings are equally sacred, then your power will be expressed in an altruistic and compassionate way. Derek felt he was a long way from having these kinds of powers, but was confident that when the time came, he'd be able to handle them appropriately.

And finally, 'awakened awareness'. This is the sum of the other nine virtues, and is really just about 'being in this moment'. It is being alive and free, mindful of the truth of this moment and eternity. It is grasping the truth of ultimate reality and manifesting the One in this moment. It is the step before enlightenment, beyond delusion and attachment, it is being totally aware. Beyond this lies Buddhahood.

He decided to spend more time this week with the six virtues, cementing his understanding of them, before trying to integrate these 4 aspects into his practice. He has plenty of time, and a long way to travel. No need to rush, just be diligent he thought, as a butterfly flew into the cell. It bobbed around a few seconds, before leaving again. He smiled at the affirmation that he was on the right path.

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Neung moved through his chores slowly. He was keeping an eye out for Sawat, and trying not to irritate the welts on his rear. He sensed that the conversation between Gai and the *falang* last evening was all about him; not just because he heard his name, but because he expected they would discuss what had happened just a few hours before. But Gai had released the prisoner to him for the shower quicker than he had expected, and then disappeared before Neung could question him about it. Today, Gai was nowhere to be found. Neung was unconcerned, days often went by when he didn't see Gai, but it did try his patience. He was curious what had been discussed. Maybe tomorrow he'd find out.

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Rangsan had a particularly bad day. It seemed everything he did was wrong, at least if he believed the warden. He tried his best, and did his tasks the same as every other day, but today nothing pleased the old man. Deep in his heart, Rangsan knew what was going on, the warden was building up to a particularly nasty 'punishment' session tonight. After the last one, Rangsan never wanted to go through one again. In fact, he had lain awake these past few nights, listening to Neung breathing peacefully beside him, trying to work up the nerve to leave. Leaving wasn't an attractive idea, he was loath to abandon Neung, and he didn't have anyone or anywhere to go to, and had no money to start a new life. But he couldn't bear another evening spent in close quarters with the warden. When he had typed a letter for the warden and the warden insisted it be redone because the margins were too small, Rangsan had reached the end of his rope. He asked for permission to attend the bathroom before completing the task, which was begrudgingly granted. He rummaged through his desk for a clean piece of paper and a pen, and left the small room he called an office. Stopping in



a nearby room that was not occupied, he wrote a note to Neung. With tears in his eyes, he read over it once, folded the paper in half, and cautiously approached their sleeping room. Seeing no one who would observe him, he slipped inside and packed the few belongings he would take with him into a bundle. He tucked the note into folds of the sleeping pads, and took a last look around the room. Saying a short prayer, asking the Neung forgive him, and remembering how much he loved the younger man, he left the room for the last time.

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Neung came to the room after completing the day's work, as usual before Rangsana. As soon as he entered the room, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he froze in place. Something was wrong. He looked quickly around, noting that much of Rangsana's clothing was missing, and then saw a paper sticking out from the sleeping pads. This could only be a note bidding him goodbye, he thought. There were no guards left in the compound with whom he would trust the letter, and as he couldn't read, he'd have to wait till tomorrow to verify it. But he knew already, in his heart, that Rangsana had left. He slowly sank to the floor and cried. Large heaving sobs at first, then smaller gasping ones, and finally silent tears rolling down his cheeks. He'd not felt this alone, this small, this abandoned, since his first night in prison many years ago. It was a feeling he had prayed he'd never feel again. Eventually he moved over to the sleeping pads, and curled on top of them without even laying them out on the ground. No need, as Rangsana wouldn't be here to use his, Neung thought bitterly. Why did he leave? What did I do?

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Despite the good feelings earlier in the day, Derek felt a wave of sadness sweep over him shortly after dinner. He couldn't place it, but it felt as if the last train had left the station, with his Mother on board, while he stood rooted in place on the platform. Try as he might, it was all he could do to fall asleep. He had heard that as one traveled the path towards enlightenment, the brain occasionally reorganizes to best utilize what it has learned, by suddenly taking on a new and different perspective. These episodes often bring unconscious feelings to the surface to be dealt with, as they don't fit into the new paradigm. This must be one of those times, he thought, as he tried to not let it bother him. As much as he paid attention though, he was unable to find the cause. Thankfully, his dreams were of safety and warmth, on a beach in Bora Bora, the moon shining across the water, a palm tree bent out over the waves.

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Wang had looked through Kan's things while she was at school, and pulled out the birthday card. She slipped the paper Kay had written for her in the envelope and put it in her bag. She caught the late bus from Tak to Bangkok. It left at 10 pm, and with a 20 minute stop for a restroom and food, would arrive at Morchit about 5 am. She would be able to be at Mae Song Thim when they opened the counter for the morning's business. She hated taking the bus, but it only cost 313

baht (US\$10) If she were to drive herself, borrowing Lao's truck, she'd spend well over 2500 baht on gas. For 2200 baht, it was worth not being to sleep well, and arriving with a neck ache.

## Wednesday

Derek woke with the cock crowing in darkness as usual. He had a bitter taste in his mouth, and then remembered how funky he had felt last evening. Tonight would be his next shower, it was time he started working on a plan to stay physically fit. He was not experiencing pain anymore, from the beating at the police station, and it was important to keep up his strength. He would develop that later today, something he would do on days when he could shower. He'd have to work around the cast for the time being, but even a little exercise would be welcome. Hopefully whatever had caused him so much emotional pain last evening had been resolved, he'd not want that to continue with any regularity.

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Neung woke just before dawn, with the rooster making his usual complaints and the sky already bright. The first few minutes he didn't remember his loneliness, and lay listening to the sounds. He soon became aware that he couldn't hear Rangsang's breathing, and opened his eyes. The memory hit him and he almost started crying again. But he swallowed his heart, which had risen very close to his mouth, and reached down to pull the note from within the folds of the pads. No need to even look, he couldn't read it anyway. He folded it a few more times, tucked it into the waistband of his *longyi*, and went about his morning toilet and early duties as if sleepwalking. Numbing himself until he could see Gai, there was little else he could do.

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Wang arrived a bit later than she expected, there had been an accident on the way, and the traffic had been backed up for several miles. Also, there was a police roadblock just south of Nakhon Sawan, police were looking for Burmese migrant workers, in Thailand illegally. Everyone on the bus had to show ID, to prove they were legal. Annoying, but routine.

Still, she arrived at Mae Song Thim before the front doors had opened. She was the fifth person in line. She waited in the sun, patiently, as it wasn't yet hot. She was glad she'd worn a long sleeve shirt, though. She hadn't planned on standing a long time in the sun, but she knew the busses were kept about 20 ° and wore the shirt for that reason.

Finally the doors opened, and the rush was on. She was in no hurry, so she let others push past her and into the lobby. She took a number and sat down on the hard plastic seat to wait her turn. Looking around, the station quickly filled with people. Most looked like the kind of person Wang would cross the street to avoid. She became very uncomfortable, and as she pondered what she had come to do, she almost chickened out and left. But soon enough, her number was called, and she approached the service window. She fished out the envelope she had carefully prepared, and pulled out the three 1000 baht notes she had tucked inside.

She nodded to the officer behind the window, and announced her name. She slid the envelope, with the money sticking out, to him, and told him she had a

neighbor, a *falang*, who had been recently arrested and processed through this station. This letter had just arrived for him, and if he would be so kind as to tell her where he was being kept, she'd like to make sure he received the bad news. The officer opened the note inside the envelope, and read,

“Brother;  
Mother is very sick. Come home now.  
Your brother,  
Michael”

He tucked the note back inside, and turned the envelope over. He began to write something on the back, as he spoke, “*Tell you where he is cannot*”. He removed the money, and slid the envelope back to her. Without reading the note on the back, she tucked the envelope back into her shoulder bag. She said she understood, thanked him for his time, and left the building.

Once on the sidewalk outside, she removed the envelope and looked at the back. He has written, “Chuk Sii Lie” on the back. Wang waited a few moments, and stopped the next police officer she saw entering the building. “Where is Chuk Sii Lie?” she asked. He told her. She caught a taxi back to Morchit, and found the next bus to Ayutthaya would leave at 10 am, just 20 minutes from now. Buying her ticket, she went to the assigned stall and boarded her bus. She'd already be part way home when she finished her business at the prison. That was good luck, and forebode well for the rest of her plan.

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Gai was not the typical brutal, sadistic guard. He was also never one to be early for work, wanting to spend as little time as possible engulfed in other people's misery. He would usually leave home early enough to be sure he wasn't late, but then would sit on his motorcycle outside the front gates and have a cigarette before reporting to work.

Today, though, some intuition told him to enter the prison as soon as he arrived, about 10 minutes early. He was always grateful he had those extra minutes that morning.

He could tell just by his body language that something awful had happened to Neung this instant he saw him. Shoulders sagging as if under more weight than he could carry, puffy red eyes that had been crying recently, and the slouch that broadcast indifference to the world around him were the first clues. Neung saw him at the same time, and slowly reached for something in the waistband of his *longyi*. Gai could tell it was paper, and knowing Neung couldn't read, immediately deduced that Rangsang had left. His heart broke for the young man, left to fend on his own once again. He stretched both arms out as an invitation for Neung to come to him, and moved quickly in his direction.

Neung walked slowly, the pace of a doomed man going to the gallows, and motionlessly accepted a hug from Gai before holding up the paper.

“*Read*” was all he said.

Gai took the paper, but before unfolding it, he glanced quickly around. No one else was in the yard, and he took Neung by the elbow and walked him towards the kitchen. It was a risky place to go, other guards might be there, but he

especially didn't want anyone in the administration building to hear what he knew he had to say to Neung.

Opening the door slightly, a peek inside showed no one hanging around. The cook was cleaning some pans from the breakfast cooking, and Gai raised his finger to his lips asking for silence. The cook looked to Neung, then back to Gai and nodded once. The two men slipped inside and Gai closed the door.

Standing with his back to the door, he opened and quickly scanned the letter. It indeed said what was feared, and in a low voice he began to read,

"My brother; I am so sorry I have to leave without saying goodbye. Someday you may understand why I can't wait, why I have to leave this very minute before I am discovered. I will never get over the hurt in my heart now that I have to leave you. Maybe someday we will meet again, and you will always have a place with me. You are in my heart every moment. Watch yourself and take care, my brother."

It was signed and dated. Gai paused for a few moments to gather his breath; he had a nearly impossible task to read the note without crying himself. When he finally looked up at Neung, the young man was crying silent tears. Gai took him in his arms again, but Neung pushed himself free.

"I'm OK" he muttered, and turned to leave. Gai's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"My young friend, please wait just a moment." Gai looked over at the cook, who also appeared to have tears in his eyes. Looking back at Neung, he continued, "I know this isn't what you would have wanted a day ago, but I want you to think about leaving too. It is no longer safe for you here. You have made an enemy of Sawat, and the warden may soon make things very difficult for you as well. You already work harder than most of the people here, and for what? A few morsels and a pad? That's what prisoners get, not staff. You are no longer a child, and it's time you struck out on your own. Please, give me a few hours so that I can put together some money for you to use. Think about where you might like to go, and pack your things to be ready. I'll come to you as soon as I can, with more directions and a little bit of help."

"I can't leave, this is where I live." Neung was looking at the floor.

"Gai is right, little one. This is no place for you anymore." The cook came around from behind the work counter. "Let us help you, and don't look back as you leave."

Neung looked back and forth between the two men. Finally he nodded once, and turned again to leave. Gai let him go.

"How can I help?" the cook asked once the door had closed again.

"How much money can you give him, for a new start?" Gai answered as he pulled out his own wallet. There were only a few hundred baht in his, the cook pitched in another 55, and Gai went off to talk with a few other people, the *falang* in particular. His mind had been made up for him, he realized. Time to accept the offer and get on with life.

Perceptively, the cook asked, "Are you going by the *falang's* cell? Could you take him his breakfast? Neung was about to do that when you arrived."

Gai looked closely to determine if the cook knew more than he let on, without success. "Sure, I can do that if you want" he said, reaching for the tray setting on the counter. "Someone has to pick up the slack around here, now that Neung and Rangsan are gone."

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Derek felt breakfast was a tad bit late, and the steps along the path were of a different cadence than Neung's. He hoped everything was OK with his young friend. So it was no surprise when Gai opened the door and entered the cell.

"*Need to talk with you*" Gai said in Thai.

"*No problem*" Derek responded.

"*Neung has to leave. Problems, big ones. Need to know, you can promise again to help him?*"

"*Promise, And you, promise to help me?*"

"Promise." Gai switched to English. "Neung will leave in a few hours, probably not say goodbye to you. I will offer a friend in Khampeang Phet, for him to visit and live at. Now I gather money for him to get there. You give money how?"

Derek thought for a few seconds. "After you contact the Embassy, and they come to visit me, I will get a message to friends in America. I will tell them to open a bank account and send a card that will work in any ATM machine in Thailand. You get that card to Neung, and every month he can take 4000 baht from any ATM."

"And if the embassy gets you to a new prison, you still help Neung, right?"

"I promise to help him go to school and learn a trade. Once he can earn money on his own, I will let him do that."

"This is good." Gai noticed how the *falang* managed to ensure that the Embassy be contacted before giving any money, but he intended to call them anyway. He continued, "I will tell him you wish him well, when I tell him of your generosity."

"Tell him I will think of him everyday."

Gai nodded and left the cell. Derek hoped Neung would be OK having to leave like this. Under such short notice, something terrible must have happened, probably due to the magazine incident. He hoped Neung would forgive him, if he had caused this disruption in Neung's life, but he was confident it was for the best. The orange and black butterfly bobbed its way through the cell, looking for food Derek supposed. "Not enough to eat here for me, he thought, but if you'd like a bite or two...."

The butterfly ignored the offer, and went on with its day.

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Gai knew he needed some time outside the prison, before the warden discovered what was going on. He returned to the kitchen, and finding it empty, rummaged through some plastic bags on the counter top until he found some carrots.

Breaking off the tip of one, he slipped the bit between his teeth and his right cheek. He proceeded to the administration building, and as he entered, he began to gingerly hold his face with his right hand. He approached the warden's door, knocked once, and entered as bidden.

“Need to visit dentist” he said through clenched teeth as if in pain.

Seeing the swollen cheek, the warden only nodded and returned his attention to the papers on the desk in front of him. Gai quickly exited the room, and on the way out the front door, happily chewed on the carrot.

After leaving the prison, he stopped at a nearby phone store, and bought a SIM card that would fit his phone. Before swapping cards, he called Rabat, filled him on the details that explained his request, and was relieved when Rabat enthusiastically agreed to help. Telling him to expect a call with details of Neung’s bus schedule soon, he hung up the phone and switched SIM cards. Using the new card, he found a number for the American Embassy, and then placed a call. After getting through to an operator, he said only, “There is an American, Joe Stevenson, being held in the Chuk Sii Lie prison. Help him.” After hanging up, he again swapped out the SIM cards, throwing the new one away.

Returning to the prison, he parked the motorcycle around the corner from the front gate, and approached on foot. Chatting up the guards there, he watched the yard until he saw no one was outside, and then slipped through the gate. He moved quickly to the dispensary, where Met was stationed this morning. First he explained to Met that Neung was leaving. Met assumed it was because of the magazine episode, and was sympathetic to Neung’s plight. Gai asked for a bit of bus fare, and got another 150 baht. Then he asked Met to find Neung, and send him outside the front gate to wait for Gai.

Gai monitored the dispensary for Met, and after half an hour, Met returned. Neung had been hard to find, but he was finally located under some stairs on the second floor of the administration building. Gai quickly left, and found Neung at the front gate, unsure of whether to leave or stay.

“I’ve money for bus fare, and a place for you to stay. The *falang* is going to give you 4000 baht every month for food and school, for the time it takes you to learn a trade. Then you can truly take care of yourself. Ever been to Khampaeng Phet?”

“You know I haven’t” Neung said, but he was smiling for the first time today. “Can I say goodbye to the *falang*?”

“Best if you get on your way. We don’t want to risk the warden finding out you plan to leave too. I’ll take you to the bus station. Come on.”

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Mr. James took the Operator’s call, and immediately called Jason. “Chuk Sii Lie prison, ever heard of it?”

“Not the best of prisons, but not the worst. Usually tied in with Mae Song Thim, the worst police station. Located about two hours north of here. Why?”

“A Joe Stevenson is supposed being held there. Isn’t Stevenson the last name of the guy we’ve been looking for?”

“Joe’s his middle name. Want me to go check it out?”

“Please. And don’t tell Ron. I’ll handle that.” He hung up on Jason, waited for the line to be clear, and dialed Ron’s cell phone.

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Ron had almost managed to get the list of local prisons in a southern province from the Police Administration building in Chon Buri when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket. The display indicated the call was coming through the Embassy switchboard.

“Hello”

“Ron, let’s have a strategy session tomorrow first thing in my office, OK?” Ron almost groaned, ‘first thing’ would mean 7 am, not his usual 8:30.

“Sure thing.”

“See you then.” His boss hung up the phone. Ron turned back to the counter, and saw he had just annoyed the clerk sitting there by taking a phone call, ‘Too bad, my boss is more important than you ever will be’, he thought. But now it would take an extra 20 minutes to get what he came for. At least the air conditioning was up full blast, he thought as he waited.

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Derek wanted to move his awareness, his consciousness, into new territory with all this work he was doing. He had come across several references just before this trip to Thailand, about the need for a consistent *practice*. It was not enough to just ‘think’ about making changes. It also wasn’t enough to ‘imagine’ what life could be like under a new perspective. He needed to put in the time working with the various aspects of his being, not just the virtues, to construct the new framework. In fact, he would probably have to reconstruct his perspective multiple times before he was finished.

He understood the principle detailed in an interview with Ken Wilber: we all begin life at square one, and develop through predictable stages of growth from there. Some get farther along than others, of course. But what’s critical to understand is that the previous stage of development is incorporated into the next, forming part of the new foundation. Just as with the progression: particles into atoms into molecules into compounds, each level becomes more complex but can’t exist without what came before it. One can experience a stage far beyond their current ‘level’ momentarily, but can’t maintain it until all previous stages have been worked through, and are part of the foundation. This is where practice, a more controlled program of activities, becomes critical, to build that foundation as quickly as possible.

Besides the virtues, he must work on his mental state, by grasping the myriad of details in any situation. An event, an illness for example, involves more than just the sick person. Yes there are bacteria and such that must be addressed with current conventional medicine, but there are also the psychological conditions that may be contributing to the cause of the sickness, or hindering one’s recovery. And there may be societal issues, the lack of delivery systems of new drugs that may help, for instance, or the issue of health insurance and the availability of drugs to a particular person. And don’t forget the attitudes society has about some illnesses, and the rejection by one’s peers may adversely impact one’s recovery as well. You can see there are many stakeholders who must be satisfied if the solution is the one that’s best for everyone.

He must address fitness, as one who is unable to physically meet the demands of an expansive life will soon fade away. And he must consider the psychological issues, many of which are sub- or unconscious, that keep him bouncing from event to event, reacting without thinking or choosing, like a pinball in a machine about to go ‘tilt’.

In his particular case his physical fitness would be limited until he could get the cast off his right arm. But just before coming here, he had received information from Integral Institute ([www.integralinstitute.org](http://www.integralinstitute.org)) about dealing with psychological issues. They call their method the



3-2-1 Process. Basically, once one has identified an aspect of their being that has been denied, or repressed, usually as a way of coping with a problem, this process helps to identify it, and work out alternative ways to handle it in the future. You describe it, as if it existed outside yourself, defining the problem. This is using the third person perspective, 'it'. Then you hold a conversation with 'it', bringing it into the second person, he/she. Tell it how it makes you feel, for instance. Continue to define the problem. Finally, bring it into first person, 'I', by speaking from its perspective. They recommend that you consider throughout your day, those that you meet that particularly upset your equilibrium, and each evening, review those encounters using this process. Derek probably wouldn't have these types of problems, being so isolated for the next few decades, but he could remember similar situations from life 'before' his prison time and use them to work through the issues they represented.

So with mindfulness, or meditation, he'd be able to work on the virtues and seeing the many aspects of difficult problems. With a fitness routine and daily shadow work, he'd have a more complete practice. He was sure this would be a good start to his following the Bodhisattva Vow.

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Jason knew he had been tasked with Chuk Sii Lie prison because Mr. James knew Ron was incompetent. 'I won't be,' he thought to himself. Ron should have been checking the jails with the citizen's full name, in case the prison knew the prisoner as "Joe", he thought. What a mess Ron had made of this. No matter, in just a couple of hours the cavalry will arrive, hang in there, Derek.

Jason checked an SUV out of the motor pool, and began the long drive North. If it is Derek, he'd have to see about getting him transferred somewhere closer to the Embassy. Driving through poor, rural Thailand depressed him, and Jason wanted as little of that as possible.

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The warden was in a foul mood. First, Rangsan had disappeared yesterday afternoon, right before a session that the warden dearly wanted. He had worked himself into a lather all day, and was terribly disappointed that Rangsan had left. Now he'd not only have to find a new clerk, who could write as well as Rangsan did and still work for peanuts, he'd also have to find someone who could play his game at night. He might just have to use Neung, as he was the only man in the prison yard who was neither prisoner nor guard. It wouldn't be as interesting as it had been with Rangsan; part of the excitement with him had been their constant, daylong interaction. There was no way to bring the illiterate Neung inside, things would just never be the same, he thought. He didn't realize how right he was.

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Neung settled back into the bus seat and stared out the window. He wasn't seeing anything outside; his mind was trying to wrap itself around the events of the last two weeks. Things had been so calm, peaceful and routine, and then along came a *falang*, and *everything* had changed. He had lost his only remaining family, Rangsan, his home and job, at the prison, and his only friend, Gai, all in the space of 12 days. He had only felt this alone twice, his first night at prison and the night he found out his grandmother had died.

But oddly enough, while he felt sadness that life would never be the same, he could see that these changes were for the better. Well, most of them anyway. It was hard to figure how losing Rangsan would ever turn out to be good. But the rest well, he could only see good things coming from leaving the prison. And he'd still be in contact with Gai, Gai had promised him that. And he had learned much from the *falang* in the little time they were together, about generosity, acceptance and yes, love. He could never thank the *falang* enough, but then, he thought, 'I feel he knows already.'

He was right.

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Jason saw the guards at the front gate snap to when they saw an expensive, black SUV pull up. 'Bet you don't see many of these this far outside Bangkok,' he smiled to himself. He flashed his official ID, told them he was here to see the warden, words they didn't understand, but they waved him through anyway. One ducked back inside their booth and picked up the phone as Jason pulled the LandCruiser into the yard. It was easy to tell which building housed the office of the warden; it had a flag flapping in the breeze out front. He parked in the shade of the only tree available, pulling right up onto the crab grass trying to grow in the hard packed dirt. One problem with these black cars, they get hot as can be in the afternoon sun. Even with the shade, he decided to leave the vehicle running so the air conditioning would stay on. Only a small tactic in the battle to be fought today; a display of arrogance by one rich enough to pay US\$5.25 for a gallon of gas, a day's wages for many here, just to keep the air on.

He got out of the car stretching from the long drive, and looked around. It seemed peaceful enough, and very typical of rural Thai prisons. He noticed some small concrete bunkers at one end, and pitied the poor slobs who misbehaved and ended up there for their punishment. Those small, hot boxes must be unbearable, he thought. Deciding it was too hot to linger, he quickly moved into the administration building.

Surprisingly, there was no one around to send him to the warden. Wandering around, he found the office he wanted on his own. He knocked once and then opened the door without awaiting a response from the occupant.

The warden looked up quickly from his work, and started to say something, but stopped short when he saw the official ID Jason was holding out. "*Wait*" in Thai, was the only thing he could think of to say. "Damn Gai anyway! Why'd he have to pick today to get a toothache? Who will translate now?" the warden said to himself.

Jason was in no mood to wait at the beck and call of this backwater administrator. He pulled Derek's photo out from a manila envelope, dropped it on top of the papers in front of the warden, and said, "*Want to visit this person now.*" The warden looked down at the picture then back up at Jason. Jason watched surprise, fear, then anger wash over his face.

"*You think this person here how?*"

"*Want to visit this person now.*" Jason repeated. The warden looked back down at the picture, thinking about his chances of being able to lie about Derek's

presence here. Deciding he stood little chance of being able to hide the *falang*, now that the Embassy appeared to know where he was, he said one more time, “*Wait.*”

Hating not having someone who could run his errands, the warden got up from the desk and went off to find a guard who could bring the *falang* to his office. Jason followed only close enough to be sure his demand wasn’t being ignored. Soon they were both back in the office, awaiting the guard bringing in Derek.

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Quite a day for surprises, Derek thought, as he heard the shuffle of sandals on the sidewalk outside. Too early for dinner, wonder if this is Neung coming to say goodbye?

The cell door opened, and a new guard motioned for him to step outside. Derek stretched as he had learned to do these past days, and looked around. Seeing the LandCruiser parked under the tree, his heart leaped. That looks like an Embassy vehicle, he thought. Had he finally been found?

The guard prompted him to walk towards the administration building with a sharp poke in the ribs. Not needing much prompting to go into air conditioning, Derek walked as quickly as was seemly, given that rescue might well be nigh.

He was so focused on the goal; he almost missed seeing Gai come strolling back in through the front gate. Waving to get his attention, Derek then pointed to the vehicle parked under the tree, and motioned Gai to join him. As Gai got close enough to hear, he said, with a tiny smile “Do you think the Embassy knows I’m here?”

“I’ve been visiting a dentist, so I am sure I do not know” Gai said, also with the smallest of smiles. “Would you like for me to check with the warden and see?”

Derek turned to the guard escorting him and asked “*Go where?*”

“*Visit warden*” was the reply.

“Join me then?” Derek asked of Gai.

“I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

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The taxi driver stopped his vehicle, and pointed about 100 meters ahead.

“There’s the gate” was all he said. Wang paid him the exact amount on the meter and not a baht more as a way of expressing her displeasure with having to walk in the afternoon sun.

She approached the gate, and found two guards in eager conversation. It sounded like there was something happening inside, that involved the warden and one of the prisoners. She showed the picture she had of Derek, and explained she was there to visit this prisoner. The guards looked at each other, smiled, and one stepped to one side and motioned for her to enter. After she had passed through the gate, he joined her and steered her towards a building opposite the gate. The yard was hard packed dirt for the most part; there was one tree with an expensive truck parked under it. She wondered if Derek was watching them walk across the yard from one of the windows in the prison barracks. With the sun shining on them, it was impossible to see inside any of the

rooms. She hoped this next step would go well. She didn't have any money left for bribes.

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The silence was awkward. Jason wondered what he would do when Derek was brought to the office, as there appeared to be no one who could speak English in the prison. Looking around the office, it seemed to be the lair of someone who was convinced of his own importance. There were certificates and photos, mostly photos of the warden with someone in uniform, probably superior officers. What was missing Jason thought, were pictures of family.

They heard footsteps in the hall, and then saw two guards and Derek approach and enter the office. The warden appeared somewhat relieved when he saw Gai, though not entirely happy.

"I am Jason, from the American Embassy. We have been looking for you for some time now. How are they treating you here?"

"I'm getting along. The food is sparse, the cell is too small for someone as big as me, but otherwise, if you like mosquito bites, there's nothing to complain about really." The sense of relief Derek felt was shown by his ability to joke about the prison's conditions.

"Why are you here? What are the charges?"

Derek gave a brief recap of the circumstances of his 'arrest' and 'trial'. Jason was appalled, though he had heard of other cases involving foreigners being railroaded through a corrupt court system.

"So, supposedly your step-daughter told the police you had abused her, and that is the basis of the charges?"

"Since I wasn't awake for my trial, I don't know for sure. But I would imagine that is the case."

"Would you know how we could contact her?"

"Her phone number is in either one of my phones, if you can get the warden to let you have them."

Derek, ever mindful, heard the sound of more people arriving behind him. He turned, and found himself unable to believe who he saw, his neighbor from across the street back home in Tak.

"Wang! *How are you?*"

"*Fine. And you?*"

"*Right this moment, fine!*"

"*I came because I know you didn't harm Kan, she told me last week when she moved in with me, and I know you have no help here.*"

Derek held up a finger asking her to wait, while he translated what she had said for Jason. Jason understood enough Thai to feel confident the translation was accurate. The warden was looking very uncomfortable, fidgeting with a pen and trying to appear unconcerned.

"I think what we need to do is first get you moved to a prison closer to the Embassy, then see about either getting more information about your so-called trial, or getting you transferred to America to finish your sentence." Jason said.

"*Kan live with you? Kan say she lie?*" Derek asked Wang.

“Yes.” Wang didn’t know if she would be able to get Kan to tell this to anyone else, but now that the Embassy was involved, she was sure Kan would want to tell the truth.

Gai looked towards the warden, and said in a low voice, *“I think you should make a phone call and get this prisoner closer to the American Embassy. Your cooperation now may make things easier for you later.”*

The warden appeared about to protest this insubordination, but as the words sank in, he realized Gai was trying to help. He nodded once, got up from his chair, withdrew a notebook from the top desk drawer and left the room. Derek turned and gave Wang a big hug, then shook Jason’s hand.

Finally he turned to Gai, and with tears in his eyes, said, *“My friend, my promise will be good. Thank you for all you have done for me here. Your heart is big and kind. May your dreams come true.”*

Tuesday, 25 December 2007

Mr. James called in some help from the Ambassador, and Thai authorities quickly reviewed Derek's case. Kan did recant her testimony, the Thai officials prepared the divorce decree Derek had sought, and he was finally released to Embassy care on Christmas Day. Of course, being a Buddhist country, Christmas Day 2007 was just like any other Tuesday in Thailand. As Derek thanked Chris James for the work the Embassy staff had done to obtain his release, Chris told him of Susan's weeklong search for him.

Derek asked for his cell phones back, and immediately flipped open his US phone and pressed speed dial '6'. It was about 7:30 pm Christmas Eve in San Diego when Susan answered.

"Susan. Derek. I want to thank you for all you did."

Susan couldn't answer, overcome with relief, she sobbed into the phone.

## Epilogue

He was spending a few days with his granddaughter, Noon, before returning to the states. Nawy, his daughter-in-law, had suggested a trip to the market while Noon was at school. After browsing the stalls, and buying fresh prawns, octopus and oysters for dinner, he had begun the walk back to the car. He missed Nawy stopping at a stall and buying 2 turtles.

Shortly after leaving the market, on the way back to her home, Nawy pulled to the side of the road alongside the Mae Ping River. Reaching into the back seat, she retrieved the small bags. "*Come along*," she said as she opened the driver's door.

She walked to the water's edge, and squatted with her feet inches from the river passing slowly by. Hands held in prayer below her chin, she paused for a few moments. Then holding a bag open and tipping it forward, she urged one turtle to leave the bag. As the turtle hit the water, a clap of thunder heralded a rapidly approaching shower. She turned to him, and handed him the other bag.

"A Thai tradition says setting a turtle free helps grant you a long life."

He accepted the bag, and feeling gratitude in his heart for the chance to liberate a doomed being, he tipped his bag also. The turtle inside, head withdrawn into its shell, fell into the water and began to sink. Before reaching the bottom though, its head and legs appeared, and it swam away.

There were tears in his eyes as he stood. They were hidden from Nawy by the rain that began to fall. He felt as if his heart had expanded to include everything. For one instant, he touched the timeless Now, The One, and cried with joy and thankfulness. He had managed to extend a life another few moments, days, or weeks even if only a turtle. But who was he to judge the relative value of that life? It was enough to have set one free. That's generosity and effort and patience and wisdom, he knew. And he was thankful that he had the mindfulness to feel the moment, to see the connection between the turtle now out of sight, and the life he was about to return to.

'I have been set free.'

He turned to climb the bank, and carry on with his Vow.