

A Buddhist Tale

Eddie Sullivan was twenty-six years old when he and Chairat walked towards the waterfall that was located at the edge of a small, empty park on Samui Island, off the southeastern coast of Thailand. The untended park, about the size of half a football field, had overgrown grass which rose up to their waists and which partially concealed the concrete paths that stretched around the park and up to the waterfall. Eddie viewed a small but steady stream of water that began to fall twenty feet up, soaking the rocky mountain side and continually filling a small lagoon not far off from where they stood. While looking at the bottom of the waterfall and watching the water drip and splay into the lagoon below, it would have been an appropriately Far Eastern time for Eddie to tell Chairat the Hindu view of the afterlife as being like a raindrop falling into the ocean. That is, the individual is born and lives as if he or she were one raindrop in a sky that hovers over an ocean that is filled with billions of raindrops. When the individual dies, it is the same thing as a single raindrop falling into the ocean.

Slightly chubby Chairat, with jet-black hair and short, untrimmed beard, was one of a few dozen teachers who made up the faculty at Suratthani Teachers' College, Suratthani, Thailand, where Eddie spent his two years with the Peace Corps. Not long after the night train from Bangkok had chugged down the southeastern coast and Eddie had stepped out into an early morning in April as he grasped his green army bag and black trunk, the teachers' college organized a trip to neighboring Samui Island. It was a boat trip that first toured around other nearby islands in that day's glistening waters of the Gulf of Thailand, finally docking at the Samui port. From the port, the beaches that attracted tourists from the world over were several miles or more along a road that rose and fell between forests of trees and dense foliage, and circled the entire island. Everyone boarded transport, but Chairat had wanted to stop at the small national park that held the waterfall, so it came to be that it was only Chairat and Eddie in the empty park, with the driver waiting back with the van on the road where a vehicle passed by every ten minutes.

Without hearing anything, Eddie turned from the waterfall and saw Chairat standing completely erect and at attention, all five feet four inches of him surrounded by the waist-high grass. Chairat held his hands high up to his face, with palms placed together, as if praying, and with the tips of his fingers touching the bottom of his forehead. This was the Thai form of

greeting one another, but with Chairat's joined hands held up so high, it meant that he was greeting a dignitary. (In Buddhism, the head is revered as holy, while the feet are considered dirty, so the higher you put your hands up to your face when greeting someone, the more respect you are showing. Conversely, pointing the bottoms of your feet at someone is an insult.) A monk, with shaved head and traditional orange robe, came into view, walking quickly (so that Chairat would not have to hold his salute any longer) and also holding his joined hands up to his forehead. Two kings would not have shown more respect to each other. Chairat fixed his gaze to the monk and was smiling as widely as humanly possible. The monk half-sat, half-leaned against a rock, then wiped his brow. His head was not completely shaven, and Eddie noticed the barest of stubbles.

The ensuing conversation by the waterfall lasted less than five minutes. The monk, extremely similar to Chairat, spoke softly and slowly in a slightly British accent. With great care and reverence put into every word, he told Eddie that Eddie's interaction with the students and his giving them a different, Western perspective would provide a needed service and be a great thing for those students. Then the monk said something about New York City. Then he said that he had lived in India for some years. Eddie, looking down to the monk on this sunny day, asked a question which, in situations such as these, would usually have led to a string of questions. The monk communicated his one-sentence answer- softly, respectfully, and with absolute dignity. Then the monk said, "That's sufficient for me." He stood up from the rock and walked away.

Eddie cannot remember if it was minutes or days or even weeks after the meeting with the monk by the waterfall that he said this to himself: "I want to be like him. I want to live like that monk." As his two years in Thailand passed, and then as whole decades passed living back in the West, Eddie thought back to the monk on the rock and "That's sufficient for me," hundreds of times. As whole decades continue to pass, Eddie will recall the meeting with the monk hundreds of times more.
