



Essay

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Negotiating for a Life in a Buddhist Way A Case of Cross-Cultural Communication and Ecology

I was riding in a car with five of my Cambodian friends. We were headed to Koh Kong, a small town near the ocean and the border to Thailand. Small it is, and easy to miss, which we did, and instead we ended up right at the border crossing. We got out to have a look, but that was it, for even if we had wanted to, I was the only person in the group who could cross the border. My Cambodian friends had never been across the border. They couldn't go, as the Thai government would not let them in. Maybe the only country in the world that would let them enter relatively easily is Vietnam. Ordinary Cambodians are trapped in their own country; they cannot go much of anywhere else. The only Cambodians who can leave Cambodia are those with a lot of money and/or connections to something outside of Cambodia.

There are naturally many effects of this situation. A primary one is psychological – most Cambodians only know the Cambodian cultural mind. They are isolated psychologically from the rest of the world. This is changing a bit through the internet, but a slow bit, as many Cambodians cannot even read their own language, let alone read English or other languages. I had never been friends with an illiterate person until I started going to Cambodia.

One of the Cambodian friends told me a simple story that demonstrates this isolated Cambodian cultural mind. His name is M. and I met him when I did a counseling training seminar in Siem Reap, the town of Angkor Wat, in 2004. M. had managed to graduate from university with a B.A. and had learned English. The emphasis here is on “managed,” as he has recalled at times how during his childhood it was a normal and common thing for him to be hungry. He then managed to get a full scholarship to a Taiwanese university master's program, including a visa to go to Taiwan. The plane ride from Phnom Penh was full of shocks to him. One was looking down on the Cambodian countryside. He said the government has always boasted about how “green” Cambodia is. However, from the plane it was clear that there is a lot of brown and this became even more evident when he flew into a new country, Taiwan. The government has been lying, but very few Cambodians have the evidence to doubt what the government asserts.

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Returning to our car, we turned around, eventually found Koh Kong and a hotel, had a feast, and didn't get up until the next morning. We then set off on a five hour boat trip through a large, beautiful mangrove swamp to as pristine a beach as I have ever seen. The beach we arrived at was incredibly beautiful. No buildings, very little litter, clean pure white sand with turquoise water that the sunlight penetrated to great depths, a couple of kilometers long, lush rain forest and small hills behind it, and complete with a view of islands in forbidden Thailand in the distance. The whole area around this beach was also pristine. I was amazed it is not a protected area of some kind. Because of the state of Cambodian economics, it just hasn't been developed yet. When I find such places, including finding myself feeling incredibly lucky, I also tend to think it is only a matter of time before it does get "developed." In fact M. told me that Thaksin, the deposed prime minister of Thailand, had wanted to develop it and had been in negotiations with the Cambodian government to do so. However, various factors, including a historical distrust of Cambodians for Thais and Thaksin himself having plenty of his own problems, gave this beach and area a reprieve for a while longer.

After we had settled into lunch, a couple of men, who I was later told lived in the nearby jungle, approached our boat helmsman. They were dangling on a rope a large lizard of some kind that they had caught and tied up. They negotiated with our helmsman, who agreed to buy this lizard from them for US\$5. My Cambodian friends then explained to me that he had told them that he would re-sell the lizard in Koh Kung for US\$15. The lizard was left tied up on the beach to await its fate.

I got a chance to examine this lizard. It was big, approaching a meter in length, and also pretty, with long yellow stripes on its black back. It also had a grey stomach that was bulgingly round. I started thinking that there can't be too many of these kind of creatures left in the world these days. So I began asking questions about it. Indeed my friends said they thought there are not so many left. Furthermore, the bulging stomach was due to its being pregnant with eggs. It was about to give birth to a new generation.

All of my ecological values arose. Quickly my thinking changed: this lizard needed to be released back to its natural habitat. So using hand language, because the helmsman didn't speak English, I tried to buy the lizard from him. I was limited by how much money I had with me, but I was able to offer him US\$25, which I showed to him. This was clearly more than the US\$15 he was going to re-sell the lizard for, but it didn't work. I kept getting the "no" hand and body language in reply. I was perplexed, not knowing why he wouldn't sell me the lizard, and at a dead-end.

M. came to my rescue. First he explained the social situation to me. Our helmsman is part of a community network in the Koh Kung area, which is connected through various ways to a network in Thailand and then to much of the rest of the world. Our helmsman can sell this lizard to a person in Koh Kung who is part of an international network doing business in endangered species. Somehow,

it seems very strange to me, but while most Cambodian people can't get across the border, because the currency for endangered lizards is high, such lizards can easily cross the border. Furthermore, for our helmsman it is more than just one sale. He wants to keep both his business and social relationship network healthy and alive. This one transaction is only part of a bigger picture for him. I would really have to offer him more money than I did for the lizard if he was seriously to consider doing business with me instead of his usual community network. Essentially the lizard was not for sale to me. From a socio-political perspective this did not seem like too much of a leap for me to understand. What followed was a more dramatic leap.

M. next explained that the idea of protecting species was not one that our helmsman, or most Cambodians for that matter, normally had. He said, "We never think protecting wildlife is important. So what if a lizard like this disappears?" This was a shocker for me. I had unconsciously assumed, a common error in cross-cultural communications, that my friends and the helmsman would easily empathize with my desire to save this lizard. I wasn't the only person amazed by the beauty of this place. This was also the first visit for my Cambodian friends. They said several times they had never been to a place so clean and pristine before and joked about bringing their "sweet baby" here in the future. However, for them this appreciation of the beach and area did not translate into ideas and values that people should make an effort to preserve nature as-it-is in this place. They said there was already a similar protected area some distance down the coast towards Sihanoukville and that development of systems of electricity, clean water, waste disposal, and roads (paved roads, that is, as there are already plenty of dirt roads) was more important. Their associations with nature are those of poverty and discomfort. They laughed at my nostalgic memories of my own childhood growing up in a rural area, asking if any of it was living without modern electricity, clean water, and a secure house. My friends not sharing my priority for ecological values reflected a cultural mind that is quite different from my own. This is despite all of them in this group having had significant contact with ecologically-oriented non-Cambodian NGOs. Obviously the ecological values of myself and the helmsman were worlds apart. Trying to persuade the helmsman to sell me the lizard by using either my or the helmsman's ecological values would be an exercise in frustration. Talking in terms of the environment would not achieve my objective.

M. then suggested I approach the helmsman according to his religious values. He said, "The helmsman is a Buddhist. So why don't you talk to him according to Buddhist values?"

Now, I also consider myself to be a Buddhist. I have been engaged in Zen Buddhist meditation practice since 1974 and my Buddhist values have a large part of what has guided my life through its various adventures. However, this does not mean I could talk to the helmsman according to my Buddhist values. Buddhism is not a monolith; it has great cultural differences. In my case my Buddhist influences

are primarily from American and Japanese sources, both of which are different from Cambodia. As I pondered M.'s suggestion and listened to his explanation of Buddhism, I began thinking about these differences.

M. said that the Cambodian style of Buddhism is connected to ideas of karma, merit, and family. The family value means in this context that our helmsman thinks in terms of protecting himself and his family. Part of doing this is taking a long term view. Karma means that he has to do good in the present if he wants good to come to his family in the future. For Cambodian Buddhists, when one does good in the present, they accumulate "merit" that will become good karma for themselves in the future. And one of the primary ways of accruing merit is to act according to the basic Buddhist precepts, one of which is to protect the life of all sentient beings (any being that is alive). In this way the Buddhist precepts are connected to one's future well-being.

This is significantly different from my own understanding of Buddhism. In a simple version you might say my view of Buddhism is that it is an accurate way of understanding how the human mind functions. This could be called a scientific, non-superstitious approach to Buddhism. Being an American and a psychologist, I guess this is natural as it expresses the cultural context within which I have lived.

There is also a nice fit with this American-influenced view of mine and what I have learned from my Japanese Zen teachers. This Zen view emphasizes that everything happens in the world through simple cause and effect, called the doctrine of causality (*inga* 因果) or dependent co-origination (*engi* 縁起) in Japanese. Simple here refers to the absence of human preferences and interpretations. Cause and effect functions regardless of whether people like the results or not. Karma (**gō* 業) also is cause and effect, but rather than being "simple" cause and effect, karma functions according to good and bad. It adds the dimension of morality to simple causality. From a Zen point of view, karma adds human thinking to the workings of the universe. Thus, in Zen, moral karma is less emphasized than the neutral doctrine of causality.

A Zen priest, Nagashima Ryohin Roshi of Seigan-ji Temple in Maibara, once told me an example of how thinking in terms of karma leads to misunderstandings. He said the old Japanese idea was that a disabled person was the result of bad karma. He asserted that when this kind of concept prevailed in Japanese society, the effect was that a disabled person didn't have confidence in their lives and instead had a certain negative attitude towards their lives. However, he claimed that with the modern Japanese society's attitude toward human rights and how to lead a better life, the old idea of karma has been generally discredited.

Nagashima Roshi also said that the idea of karma leads to an overly rigid understanding of causality. Karma functions inviolably, leading to a passive approach to life. If your ancestors did something bad, then there is nothing you can do to change the bad effect that you will receive. However, causality in Zen terms

includes causes that are both direct and indirect, and particularly the indirect causes (*en* 縁) can be innumerable. And these many causes can include your own will and effort. Thus, a person can have some influence on the result if they try hard enough.

With these American and Japanese influences, my understanding of Buddhism did not jibe very well with the Cambodian understanding that M. had explained. While I can empathize with family values, and I certainly value protecting the life of all sentient beings, as it is both a Buddhist and ecological value, connecting these values to ideas of karma and merit seems very superstitious and out-of-date to me. This sounds more like the talk of my ancestor Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth century American Puritan minister. In one well-known fiery sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741), Edwards described humans, due to their sinful nature, as being like a spider dangling by one slender thread over the flames of the wrath of God, with only their repentance and turning to God saving them. I had discarded such good and bad, black and white, moralistic approaches to religion and life long ago.

Back on the beach, it was now clear to me that if I tried to talk to our helmsman according to my understanding of Buddhism, the reply would continue to be more of what I had already received – no. If I wanted to save this lizard, I would have to talk not only according to Buddhist values, but according to the Cambodian style of Buddhist values. In this specific situation whatever the rest of the world might think, only the Cambodian view was relevant. This was what was meaningful to our helmsman. Chances are he had never been outside Cambodia, at least legally. Maybe he had crossed the border sometimes in his boat. M. suggested the way to do this was to say that by saving the life of this sentient being (the lizard) our helmsman would be accruing merit for his family for their future protection. So I gave it a go. M. translated.

The change in response was quick and remarkable. After listening and then talking more with M. a bit, our helmsman kind of gave me a shy smile, a nod, and said okay. Furthermore, he said as long as I was buying the life of this sentient being, not the lizard itself, he would sell me its life for US\$10, US\$5 less than what he could get for selling the lizard in Koh Kung and US\$15 less than what I had previously offered him.

Our helmsman then started thinking about how to protect the lizard, a radical change for him from my point of view. He explained that we would have to let the lizard go a good distance from the area where we were. If we let it go right there, the jungle people would likely catch it again. So he proposed we release it at sea some distance down the coast while we were returning to Koh Kung. I then learned the lizard could swim, making it even more special in my eyes. So that is what we did. When we reached what the helmsman decided was a safe spot, he stopped the boat motor, carefully cut off the rope, leaned over the side of the boat, and opened his hands. Sure enough, the lizard quickly and gracefully swam into the depths of the ocean.

When we arrived back in Koh Kong and I paid for both the trip and the life of the lizard, I gave our helmsman a tip of US\$5, thus allowing the helmsman to receive the same for the life of the lizard as he would have received for the lizard. I thought this was only right and M. later said that was good. Again, he gave me a shy smile, bowed his head a bit, and said thank you.

What happened to the lizard after that, who knows? Hopefully the jungle people don't know. But not knowing is part of the mystery and beauty of life. And so is self-reflection, flexibility of ways of doing, and adaptability to the situation as-it-is in the moment. Interacting with the helmsman only from my own cultural point of view would never have accomplished my ecological objectives and saved this one endangered lizard. Appealing to the helmsman's values and way of thinking was the only way to accomplish my objectives. The lizard did not have much value for our helmsman. But its life did.