

More
Living
Thai
Ways
dos and don'ts & short stories *part III*



Michael Keller

MORE LIVING THAI WAYS

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Part II

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TSUNAMI

Khao Lak, Thailand—December 26, 2004—Boxing Day Holiday: The day after Christmas 07.58 a.m. local time, an earthquake measuring between 9.1 and 9.3 on the Richter scale cracked open the sea bed off Indonesia’s Sumatra Island. The seismic shock waves fanned out from the extreme western edge of the Ring of Fire in the Indian Ocean and headed toward the southern coast of Thailand.

Somjai and his wife, Nom, operated an elephant ride business on a jungle hillside directly behind the *Khao Lak Merlin Resort*. High up on the sturdy wood departure platform, the two cheerful Thai owners chatted with a next-in-line German man and his young teenage daughter. They and other tourists awaited the arrival of the *mahout* who would guide them on the next safari. It was Somjai and Nom’s responsibility to assist people unfamiliar with “elephant protocol” to step safely from the platform onto the undulating back of the pachyderm and settle securely into the elephant chair known as a *howdah*. Secured with leather straps, this cushioned wood seat rests comfortably on the animal’s brawny back. The excited young girl easily maneuvered into her seat with the help of the smiling *mahout* seated astride the elephant’s neck. A *mahout* is the elephant’s handler or driver who devotes many years training the elephant from birth. When the mahout gains the trust of the elephant, the animal obediently responds to the mahout’s commands. Just as the girl’s father was about to step off the platform, he heard a chilling sound. All the elephants in the compound erupted in a dirge of whimpering, as

if suddenly stabbed with pain.

Startled, the uneasy German tourist turned to Somjai and asked, “*Why are your elephants crying?*”

Somjai falteringly replied, “*I do not know. Never before do my elephants cry.*”

Somjai’s herd of elephants received the ominous first warning. The massive vibrational waves that spread out from the epicenter of the floor of the Indian Ocean’s Bay of Bengal traveled through the surface of the Earth to Thailand at 10 times the speed of sound. The elephant’s acute sensory abilities had detected the earthquake’s infrasonic sound waves, which are inaudible to humans.

Western tourists were just waking up following the previous night’s gala Christmas parties celebrated in all the luxury hotels strung in a line along the 6-mile (10 km) beach. They looked out from balconies of their five-star hotel rooms at the calm shimmering emerald sea. The mesmerizing scene invited them to wallow in another vacation day on sun drenched white sand beaches fronting their hotels. The balmy morning breeze caressed tourists as they made their way to open-air dining verandas. While delighting in the sparkling ocean view, they savored cornucopias of seasonal Thai fruits and delectable cuisine master chefs had prepared for their morning meal. Other eager guests chose to struggle into designer swimwear, lather their pale bodies with suntan lotion and be first to secure prime umbrella chairs on the beach. There in solitude, they lay back and basked in the morning sunshine while enjoying a simple continental breakfast.

At *La Flora Resort*, Khun Poom Jensen, the grandson of His Majesty the King of Thailand, stood geared up and ready to enjoy his exciting “Boxing Day” holiday with a morning of jet-skiing. Before he went down to the beach, perhaps he had time to play a game on his hand-held *Nintendo*, a holiday gift from his beloved mother. Poom was the 21-year-old son of Princess Ubolratana Ratchakanya. During the boy’s early growing years, doctors confirmed to the royal family the sad fact that he suffered from

autism. Throughout his life, Poom bravely fought the disease. He excelled at sports, developed various skills and steadily made progress. As was the habit of the boy, he kissed his dear mother's cheek and waved to his sisters Srikittiya and Ploypailin before he ran down to his jet-skis on the beach.

On Maikhao Beach on the island of Phuket, 10-year-old Tilly Smith strolled on the beach with her parents and younger sister. As the tourist brochure promised, she was thrilled to be on holiday in "*Amazing Thailand.*" The schoolgirl from Oxshott, Surrey in England suddenly noticed a peculiar bubbling action in the waves streaming oddly backwards from the shoreline. The frothing tidal waters powerfully rolled backwards out to sea with stunning velocity. Watercraft abruptly thudded to the exposed seafloor. The canted keels of fishing boats stuck oddly skewed in the dark muddy seabed. Many locals and tourists observed the mysterious phenomenon and raced down to the rapidly receding shoreline toting video cameras. Mindlessly, people viewed the eerie scene as if it were an amusing diversion. Playful Thai children gleefully ran onto the exposed beach and began collecting fish flopping in the wet sand.

Glancing farther out to sea, Tilly's eyes filled with alarm. She stood on the beach recalling the voice of her teacher, who only two weeks before explained to her geography class distinctive warning signs associated with giant killer waves known universally by the Japanese word--*tsunami*.

"The water started to go funny. There were bubbles and the tide went out all of a sudden," she later told reporters.

The sinister sight of boats silhouetted on the horizon violently bobbing up and down made her blood run cold. Because Tilly Smith had paid attention to her geography lesson, she understood the enormity of what was happening. The alarming portents were indisputable evidence that a monstrous tidal wave was roaring towards Phuket. She, her parents, sister and everyone on the beach was in imminent and mortal danger. The frightened girl stood rooted on Maikhao Beach looking seaward, listening and

expecting to hear wailing sirens that would provide tsunami warnings and alert unsuspecting people. Tilly nor anyone else would hear tsunami-warning sirens because they did not exist in coastal Thailand that dreadful day. Terrified, Tilly realized she was the only one on the beach that day who recognized the telling signs of impending disaster that was only minutes away.

She shouted frantically to her mother, “*Mummy, we must get off the beach! I know there’s a tsunami coming!*”

The idle chatter and happy vacation smiles of her parents and sibling faded when they saw Tilly’s ashen face stricken with fear never before seen. Their daughter’s insistent pleading persuaded Tilly’s stunned parents of the hellish cataclysm about to befall everyone in Phuket. Unaware passersby dallying on the beach listened and watched in shock as the family raced inland shouting at everyone to seek higher ground. The alarmed family rushed into the hotel lobby urgently crying out to wary hotel staff. Tilly’s adamant pleas convinced management to immediately evacuate all guests and run for their lives to the safety of hillsides sloping upward behind hotel premises. Not one soul on Maikhao Beach that Sunday morning in southern Thailand lost their lives, thanks to the enlightened awareness and intelligent response of vacationing schoolgirl Tilly Smith. Her courageous actions saved over 100 lives.

Meanwhile, up in the hills at Somjai’s elephant ride business at Khao Lak, the entire herd felt the second more powerful warning signs in a series of ground vibrations attacking the nerves in the mammal’s sensitive feet. Simultaneously, the elephants trumpeted with horrific shrieks. Restrained by a safety link of strong metal chain twined about one foot, frightened non-working elephants uprooted their huge wooden stakes as if they were mere twigs. Circling the compound, working elephants transporting unwary riders suddenly bolted. Terrified tourists screeched in panic. The wailing animals ignored shouted commands of their mahouts and stampeded. Panicked, most of Somjai’s herd of elephants paid no heed to threatened passengers and thundered

willy-nilly uphill into the shroud of dense jungle.

Confused by the volatile behavior of the elephants and not understanding the gravity of what was happening, Somjai and Nom tried to calm the mammoth animals. A few reluctantly yielded to the frantic orders shouted by the mahouts, but most of the frightened elephants fled. Nom glanced down toward the Khao Lak Merlin Resort and saw a group of Scandinavian and German tourists running helter-skelter up the hillside. Several of the dozen or so fearful tourists stumbled to the ground. Others quickly helped them up and together frenziedly wormed their way upwards into Somjai's worksite.

"Tsunami! Water! Nam! Nam! Big water coming! Tsunami! Tsunami!" shrieked panic-stricken evacuees begging Somjai and Nom somehow to save them from drowning.

Although the mahouts never before had heard the word *tsunami*, they began to understand the meaning behind the gibbering "water words" of desperate tourists. There was no time to get all the people onto the loading platform for an orderly escape. Somjai and his wife with the help of responsible duty-bound mahouts managed to round up the few shuddering elephants remaining at the site. Responding to mahout commands, the reluctant but compliant elephants used their trunks to wrap terrified foreigners in a gentle embrace. The giant mammals deftly lifted the helpless people from the ground onto their leathery broad backs. With the last of the escapees hanging on for dear life, Somjai sounded the signal and the elephants charged up the hill through snares of jungle growth and then suddenly stopped.

Dazed, the stranded tourists and mahouts turned about in utter disbelief and faced the surreal sight of the oncoming churning mountain of seawater. The leviathan wall of water mercilessly drove up from the beach 1,000 yards (1 km) tossing all human life into its turbulent vortex. It stopped just short of where the elephants and reeling tourists stood unharmed by the cataclysm.

In her hotel room at *La Flora Resort*, aides breathlessly

informed Princess Ubolratana that her son had returned safely to shore. Spotted fleeing the gigantic oncoming wave with two bodyguards, the relieved mother believed Poom was safe. The boy's mother and her entourage fled to the fourth floor of the five-storey hotel. It was a narrow escape. The mountainous roiling wave rose up like a fiendish specter three-storeys high. The thunderous roar of the demonic tsunami resonated as if one-hundred exploding jet planes crashed simultaneously over the coastal areas of Phang Nga. Swallowed up in the fury of that murderous first wave, the body of 21-year-old Khun Poom Jensen was found Monday morning about 100 metres from where he was last seen running toward the hotel.

The series of mercurial waves radiated from the earthquake's epicenter and charged along the ocean floor triggering the deadly tsunami that bored down over the coral reef atolls of the Maldivian Islands, submerging some islands permanently. Within hours, the tsunami had slammed into the coastline of several Indian Ocean countries bringing death and unspeakable carnage to India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

The Southeast Asia tsunami ripped into Phi Phi Island, smashed into the island of Phuket and tore through the town of Patong. The ferocity of the crippling waves wiped out a string of luxury hotels in Khao Lak, destroyed 47 villages, damaged coral reefs and marine coastal habitats. The wall of unrelenting seawater obliterated everything in its path, transforming the coastal areas of Phang Nga province into a nightmarish death zone of horror and destruction. In an instant, the drowning waters destroyed lives and entire communities. Stunned survivors faced the psychological trauma of coping with orphaned children, parents left childless and livelihoods lost. Within minutes, 5,395 human beings died in Thailand alone—more than half of them foreign tourists. 8,457 others fell injured. An estimated 216,000 souls from 12 countries perished that December morning in planet Earth's most catastrophic natural disaster in memory.

The grieved nation of Thailand plunged into mourning.

Screams of drowning, maimed, and homeless victims resounded around the world—and the world heard their despairing cries.

The Royal Thai Government was first to respond with effective crisis relief. Contributions from the sorrowing Thai public, the private sectors and local non-government organizations streamed into emergency relief programs. Within hours, financial and technical assistance worldwide began pouring into Thailand on an unprecedented scale.

Tsunami Thailand recovers—one year later

Khao Lak Thailand—December 26, 2005

Just as it was on that dreadful morning before unprecedented disaster struck one year before, the weather was picture-postcard perfect. On that anniversary day, however, there was one important difference. Positioned around the major beaches of Phuket and nearby smaller islands, 18 towers with warning sirens were now strategically placed and operational. In the event a tsunami again threatens the coastline, blaring sirens will wail. Simultaneously, the system is equipped to broadcast simple to understand emergency warning messages in Thai, English, German, Japanese and Chinese at a clamorous volume audible up to 1.5km distant from each tower.

Thai Princess Ubolratana and her daughters presided at the one-year tsunami memorial service at Bang Niang beach near Khao Lak. Following interfaith prayers led by Buddhist monks and Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh priests, several thousand Thais, foreign survivors and relatives of some of the victims known to have perished in Thailand listened to the humbling words of Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

Referring to the outpouring of caring from individuals around the world in the wake of the punishing tsunami, the Prime Minister said he learned “*the fact that much beauty lies in the hearts of Humankind. Life must still go on as it always has on other evenings like this one,*” said Thaksin. “*The only difference is that from this day on, we have been rejuvenated by a renewed*