

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CJW-2
When in Thailand,
It's Mai Pen Rai

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Dear Peter:

Animals in Thailand have little need for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). They have the Lord Buddha, whose commandment not to kill living creatures is taken seriously.

Consequently, thousands of strays, some of them rabid, roam Thailand's cities and villages, foraging on the food scraps left by humans. In restaurants in the prime commercial areas of Bangkok, the capital city of four million, cats of every description patrol the floors, keeping a look-out for dropped morsels or tidbits handed out by diners. While the scene might scandalize restaurant patrons elsewhere or send a sanitation inspector in Des Moines into a virtual spasm, the Thai response is "mai pen rai."

A solace, a defense, a verbal shoulder-shrug at the world, "mai pen rai" or "never mind" is the philosophy of overlooking what you probably can't change anyway. One of the most used phrases in the Thai language, mai pen rai can also mean "it doesn't matter," "it's not important," "don't worry about it," "you're welcome" or "don't mention it."

Mai pen rai is more than a catchy expression; it personifies the Buddhist attitude toward life, which is expected to involve difficulties, even suffering, and which is subject to change. Buddhists believe their present lives to be ones in a series that will eventually end in nirvana--or a blowing out (as with a flame), after which one no longer must return to earth. At least some of a Buddhist's lives will likely be as four-footed critters, giving present-day humans considerable empathy with the other forms of life around them. Mai pen rai indeed helps Buddhists to be less intense about their present situation than Christians, for instance, who believe each person lives one life, followed by his or her just reward. However, the philosophy in no way lives up to the

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stereotype westerners have of Buddhists, namely, that human life is cheap and animal life hardly counts at all. On the contrary, a visit to an animal shelter operated by that very bulwark of American animal lovers, the SPCA, would horrify a proper Buddhist, who can no more readily imagine rounding up stray animals and gassing them for their own good than an American can imagine returning to earth as a flea. However, westerners can take some comfort in knowing that Buddhists, like religious adherents the world over, don't always manage to follow their beliefs.

The potential clash in western and Asian ideas of "goodness" can be illustrated in the experience of an American who tried to find a veterinarian in Bangkok to put a deformed puppy to sleep. One after another, the Thai vets refused. Finally, at a Thai-American practice, the American vet concurred that a puppy that can't stand on its hind legs has no future and should be put out of its misery. However, the discussion was overheard by a Thai vet who asked if he could take the puppy home and see what he could do. The owner agreed, the vet worked with the dog over a period of months, and today the animal--the vet's pet--can walk as well as its litter-mates.

With the strong belief in transmigration between animals and humans, Buddhists can fairly readily detect likenesses of dead relatives in living animals. An American who lives in Thailand with his Buddhist wife takes care not to appear disrespectful to his wife's fussy little Pekinese. The woman believes the dog is the present form of her father, whom she lost at an early age; now she takes enormous pleasure in his return.

Government officials who flout the belief system can find themselves out of a job, if not a government. One Thai regime, that of Thanom Kittikachorn, fell from power after demonstrations were sparked by newspaper pictures of Thanom's son blazing away from a helicopter gunship at the wildlife in a forest preserve.

Such dastardly deeds can hardly earn merit for a Buddhist, who believes that the good deeds, i.e., merit, accumulated in the present life influence the next one. If one has a particularly difficult human life, through the accumulation of merit the individual might return as a human with considerable wealth or as a creature such as a hare, a pigeon or, in really extraordinary circumstances, a white elephant. Animals that are herbivores and thus totally follow the Buddhist ban on killing are regarded as desirable transmigrations (most Thais do eat meat). Being a white elephant is regarded as often being better than being human. When a white elephant is found in Thailand, it is donated to the king as a good luck symbol for the country and can thereafter look forward to a life of ease. During his 550 rebirths, the Buddha is thought to have returned as a white elephant, a hare and a pigeon.

Keeping a "cool heart" is another tenet of Buddhism, one which followers strive to achieve by following a "middle" way, avoiding extremes in emotions and behavior, good as well as bad. When a Thai Buddhist cannot resist doing physical or material harm to another, he or she may resort to elaborate subterfuge in order to rationalize the deed. One could call the system of avoiding blame for one's actions the "indirect" way.

Direct confrontation is to be conscientiously avoided. Only a true barbarian (as Thais and other Asians tend to classify Occidentals) would barge next door and have it out with the offender or, more incredible still, punch him in the nose. Ah, no. There are much more delicate ways, indirect, but well-fitted to the provocation.

Let's say your neighbor is filching mangoes from your tree. The first year or so this happened you said mai pen rai, but this is a poor year for mangoes and the neighbor is practically denuding your tree. When you're sure the culprit is within earshot, you deliver a loud harangue to your dog or your child on alleged misdeeds in the neighborhood, particularly the theft of goodies from the yards of others. The neighbor will get the message.

Or, if an employer consistently underpays employees, the latter may not respond directly, by stealing to make up the income, for example. However, the aggrieved one may take satisfaction in leaving a window ajar for thieves or ignore the sounds of a robbery in progress. "It's odd," said a U. S. Army Captain stationed in Thailand. "But the people who pay their help the least always seem to get robbed."

There is no lack of mayhem in Thailand but, again, the indirect way is favored. Someone who is wronged may hide contraband--drugs or illegal liquor or stolen goods--on the offender's property and then tip off the police. Even murder may be done indirectly, through poison (if the person chooses to select the poisoned dish among the harmless ones) or hired killers. So many of the murder stories in the Bangkok papers appear to be contract killings, there is virtually a stock phrase for the type. "Mr. So-and-So is thought to have had business conflicts," the story will read. "The police suspect hired killers."

Governments as well as individuals may elect to follow the indirect way. In Burma Buddhist soldiers once cleared Rangoon's streets of stray dogs by putting out poisoned meat. To ensure free choice, however, the soldiers mixed fresh meat with the fowl. A poor choice then became the animal's fault, as well as its demise.

Most of the time Buddhists manage to follow the "middle way," however, avoiding confrontation and fending off frustration with the gentle philosophy of "never mind." Westerners on occasion score the Thais, Burmese and Laotians, in particular, for what is perceived as passivity and inertia in the face of trouble (Frenchmen who returned to France from Laos when the latter was a colony were sometimes accused of falling under the influence of "Malaise Vientiane"). The Buddhists may have the last laugh, though, for doing nothing to retaliate against a persecutor is regarded as the penultimate in following the "indirect" way, for if the harmed one makes no attempt to get even, the oppressor will suffer doubly for his actions, if not in this world, then in the next.

Oddly enough, animals themselves seem to reciprocate, generally leaving humans (and each other) alone. Despite the hundreds of animals on the streets of Bangkok, they don't seem to bark or chase each other or fight. In fact, the only foul-tempered ones seem to be those kept in nice, fenced-in yards; they bark and growl up to Atlanta or Poughkeepsie standards. Bangkok, meanwhile, takes an occasional rabies death in stride. In death, as well as life, it's "mai pen rai."
