

ACTION FOR LIFE 2 NEWSLETTER #18
14th April, 2004

"The most important member of a Thai family is the guest"

Our hosts Naruemol Kunanoogool, a Buddhist, and Piyasuth Attipumipon (Poom), a Muslim, lived up to this Thai saying and took great care of us for our nine days in Thailand (2nd-11th April). Their vision was to give us a taste of Thai society, culture, and cuisine and to introduce us to people engaged in different aspects of health development in Thailand with the basic idea that "the health of a country is its real wealth."

Our first meeting was with Ajarn Sulak Sivalaksa, a well-known social campaigner who stands up for honesty in civil/political life. We heard from him about how monks are working for community development in villages and caring for the environment. They bless the water in the lakes so people respect them and will not pollute them. Sivalaksa also believes that world peace will not be possible until each one of us cultivates inner peace, and the first step is breathing consciously. He didn't see his work with the poor as sacrifice, because he learns so much more from them. He stressed the need for critical self-awareness, and having good friends that tell you what you don't want to hear. We were also very inspired by his humble attitude towards Thailand's neighbours, especially Cambodia when he said, 'We have been exploiting Cambodia. We have also looked down on their people. If we are sensitive we could become nice neighbours'

After that meeting we went for two days to Chimkul Scout Camp, north of Bangkok. There we met Muslim children and women, and learned how to survive in the wild! Meeting different sections of the Muslim community was a big part of the programme. Our visit to the Foundation of the Islamic Centre of Thailand gave us an understanding of the work their leaders are doing to help their community care for the whole country. Disturbances affecting the Islamic community in southern Thailand in the first months of this year have been the focus of media attention. Corruption rather than religion may be the cause but the latter at times becomes a convenient smoke-screen.

The rest of the days were spent in Bangkok; we lived in the downtown back-packers area. A visit to Wat Pra Keaw, the Royal Palace, gave us an insight into the splendid architecture and beauty of Thai history. The palace contains the famous Emerald Buddha, whose clothes are changed three times a season! Bangkok is full of temples and historical sites, and the river is a great way to get about the city.

Another encounter was with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. They believe that spirituality is the basis for everything and their aim is to help people realise their capacity to learn. All action, whether it be in business, politics, agriculture, can be used as a tool to develop people's spirits. They work with all sectors of society, giving training to businessmen, monks, and farmers.

We visited the National Health Foundation which was started 15 years ago to create organisations alongside the government to develop various aspects of society. They focus on health research, public policy, and bio-ethics. One of their forthcoming projects is to look at the spiritual health of Thai society. As materialism continues to undermine its basic fabric, this programme will specifically focus on care for the spirit. Major themes include peace, aging, death and dying, volunteerism, emotional love, the female perspective on spiritual health, deep ecology, agriculture, secular spirituality, the spiritual aspect of consumerism, art and architecture, art and music therapy, and inter-faith dialogue. The young scientist who will be heading up this program has asked us and IC generally for whatever assistance we can give.

We left for the Thai/Cambodian border early in the morning in air conditioned minibuses and spent the final three hours on the back of a truck with natural air conditioning for all! The sun was setting as we cruised through Cambodia, and was a very warm welcome to the next hot part of our adventure.

Greetings from Natasha, Frederic and Pilar, Rob (Wood), Wambui, Peter (Heyes), Violeta, Laura, Ngan, Vuth, Bhavesh