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Snowy Egret - Audubon, 1832



## **Unselfconscious Piety**

*Maggie Shaffer*

*photos by Mark Shaffer*

Our trip to Thailand and Laos is nearly half a year in the distant past. I can dimly recall the feeling I had of being, culturally speaking, a newborn babe.

Hundreds of Thai pilgrims ascended Doi Suthep with us, the beautiful forested hill overlooking the city of Chiang Mai., At the temple on top, they purchased lotus buds and incense. As we looked on wonderingly, they clasped these offerings in prayerful hands and walked with them around and around the tall golden chedi (the word means stupa, or shrine), murmuring, with downcast eyes. The many sculptured images of Buddha surrounding the chedi received offerings, prostrations, and prayers.

In an alcove of the temple, a priest gave spiritual instruction to a cluster of kneeling pilgrims. When the priest ended his talk, his listeners walked up to him one by one, still on their knees, and bowed their heads. The priest unreeled a length of string from a ball at his side, tied the string around each pilgrim's wrist, and snipped it off with scissors. We Shaffers were used to seeing strings tied around our Hmong friends' wrists, and had participated in the string-tying ritual ourselves; in that case, however, the strings are to connect one's spirit with the living body. The Buddhist ritual must have another meaning.



In another alcove, sticks rattled in a can and were cast on the floor, like jackstraws. The Rough Guide to Thailand calls these "fortune sticks," with no further explanation. At other temples we visited, we'd noticed women sitting on the porch with signs offering Tarot readings. And on the sidewalk, we'd seen sellers of amulets with their "miraculous medals" spread out on blankets; the prospective buyer would generally inspect many amulets before making his choice. (I have a plastic Thai amulet myself, on my key ring, given me by a Hmong friend in Eureka; it depicts, she told me, a Thai woman saint and her two children.)



We were seeing an unselfconscious piety on the part of many people that spoke of their trust in the life of the spirit. I was moved by this, and felt I had a lot to learn from the wisdom and simplicity of it. Also, it seemed that for many people religious practice was connected with having good luck and avoiding the bad. This was different from philosophical talk about two religious conceptions. The two were enacted before our eyes, could occupy the same space without discomfort, and

for all we knew could coexist in one person's mind.

Devotion to the Three Treasures may for some people be equaled by devotion to the royal family. Everywhere in Thailand, and especially in Bangkok, where the royal palace is, there are portraits of the King and Queen, and banners with slogans like, "We love our dear King." When we visited the magnificent palace precincts ourselves, we were surrounded by throngs of Thais, mainly women, dressed all in black. Groups of uniformed schoolchildren were there, too, with black armbands. We learned that the King's sister had recently died; these people were expressing their sympathy and grief. Outside the palace grounds, on a grassy promenade, workers were sorting and stacking great piles of boards. We read in the Bangkok Post that this was preparation for an expected eight months' labor to construct the Princess's funeral pyre. The pyre had been designed by an honored "State Artist." According to the Post, the flames were expected to carry the Princess's spirit to Heaven. Here was another cultural artifact to bewilder the student of Buddhism from the West.

We met Erika Makino and her friend Nancy in Chiang Mai, and walked with them to beautiful Wat Chedi Luang, where, at stone tables beneath shade trees, we were invited by signs to a Monk Chat. Our well-nourished, middle-aged monk wore glasses and had the word BUDDHISM, in English, tattooed on his upper arm. He said he had entered the monastery in his forties. I asked if he could tell about his earlier, worldly career, and immediately realized from his embarrassed laughter that I'd made a mistake; it must be that a monk's life begins when he puts on robes. We asked how Theravada Buddhism differs from Zen. He said that in his tradition, one sits in meditation flat on the floor, without a cushion, and this is a more stable position. He believed that Zen monks were able to teach as soon as they were ordained, instead of seeking their own enlightenment first. Erika asked what, in his opinion, was the Buddha's most important teaching; he said, "To do all good and avoid all evil."



More common than becoming a monk late in life, is leaving home to enter the monastery at the age of ten or eleven. Many poor families choose this way of providing for their sons' livelihood and education. The boys may leave, if they wish, when they are older. Across an alley from our guesthouse in Luang Prabang, Laos, was a temple; we walked through its grounds every day to reach the main street, and we became familiar with the routines of the mostly young monks who lived there. The novices had classes during the day, and worked on temple conservation projects. In the early evening we could hear the monks' chanting, which, unlike ours, is melodious, and pleasing to the ear.

We were lucky to be in Laos during one of the two monthly two-day Buddhist observances at the waxing and waning of the moon. At four o'clock in the morning we

were awakened by a sound of bells. Soon after the bells, drums began a distinctive rhythm, accompanied by a slurring of cymbals. The sound came out of utter stillness and gave way to silence again; it was hard for us to go back to sleep.

The next afternoon at 4:00 we went to the temple grounds. Bells rang from one of the buildings, just as they had in the dark morning, and some young novices prepared to sound the drum and cymbals. The boys were laughing and joshing a little at first, but when they began to beat the drum, it required serious attention. After a minute a deeper drumbeat joined the first one, and following the sound we found that an older monk had opened the doors of a little house for a larger drum; the big drum answered the smaller one.



This is one of our loveliest memories.

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### **Haiku**

*Lynda McDevitt (written for Maylie's memorial)*

*Whoosh of raven's wing  
Strong sounds in the clear, vast sky  
Three beats and then gone*





## **Lisu Village**

*story & sketch by Erika B. Makino*

The Lisu Hill Tribe and several other tribal communities migrated Southwards from Tibet about 300 years ago and gradually settled in Myanmar (Burma) Northern Thailand and neighboring countries. They kept their languages and animistic beliefs. "We talk to the trees," a tribesman explained to me in English, "and ask them to protect us."

In the village of Nong Thong in Northern Thailand, where I visited, the houses were at some distance from each other as if they wanted to catch every breeze. There was order around the houses and the hard dirt patches next to them were swept clean.

I noticed a woman sitting in front of her home. The bright orange ribbons around neck and shoulder of her maroon tunic let everyone know that she belonged to the Lisu tribe.

She waved and motioned me to sit down and have breakfast with her. I was surprised and sat down gingerly on the low stool she offered.

The woman got up, went to a separate structure, the kitchen, and returned with a bowl of rice for me. We loaded vegetables and scrambled eggs on our rice.

I wondered from where she got the security to invite a total stranger to join her, and why she was comfortable and enjoyed my company in a matter of fact way, while I, during the whole meal, felt as if I had arrived from another planet.

The woman motioned me to follow her up an outdoor stairway that lead to a terrace. The floor was of teak wood and so were the upper walls of the house and the handsome balustrade. My host spread a reed mat on the floor and we settled down. She pulled her

sewing basket close, while I took out my notepad and made a sketch of the kitchen. It was constructed of thin split bamboo stalks arranged in vertical panels. They had turned into a silvery grey. An iron roof had replaced the traditional palm leaf one. I also drew the motorcycle that was parked in front of the structure.

We sat there in silence. We were both grandmothers with many years of watching the arriving and departing of life and the miracle of it all. No need to talk.

She noticed that I was not comfortable sitting on the floor and got a pillow for me to lean on. She had sewn a ribbon to a small, colorful bag and was now attaching a zipper. She worked fast and steadily. I must have been fidgety because she got up once more and brought a folded bedspread in the vain hope to halt my Western restlessness.

Her husband came upstairs perhaps to greet me. His smile started slowly, not like ours. I noticed that some of his teeth were missing. His face opened up, he was not holding back anything, nothing interfered with his glance that connected soul to soul.

I left with the feeling that something precious had been given to me. There were also nagging self doubts and the wish I could really be the person those two people had honored.



*photo by Julie Clark*

## **Not Turning Away**

*Mneesha Gellman*

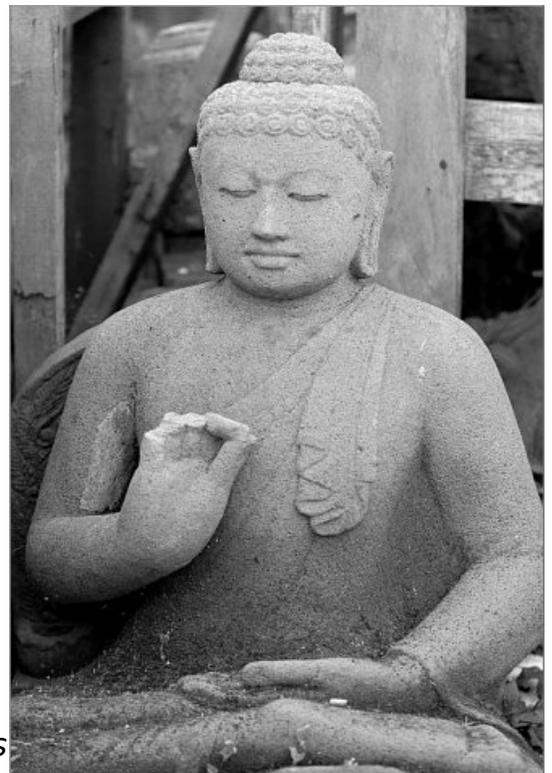
Sometimes it is easiest to turn away from the difficulties in front of me. Other times, I cannot do it. I know that being fully present in each moment is a core element of the practice. This is especially the case for me, as I am prone to live in the past and future in my head, and spiral into over-analysis.

But engaging in 'life as it is' is hard and it hurts because in such an engagement our true selves are reflected back in a most confronting manner. The neat package of how I prefer to present myself is undermined by the reality of how I respond to the immediate world.

There have been plenty of moments when I have justified my turning away. In Northern California for example, when I get tired of able-bodied white men panhandling me while on lunch break from my \$10 dollar an hour job. I even stopped saying 'I'm sorry' as I brushed by their outstretched cups. I turned away.

In Australia, I turned away from the Aboriginal folks who would get drunk in public and crank their music. I crossed to the other side of the street, preferring to research in books or theories how to address race relations because I felt like too much of an outsider to approach them and do it in person. Perhaps the drinking groups weren't the appropriate cross-cultural forum. But, disconcertingly, I was always able to make an excuse when I needed one.

In the last several months while traveling through Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico, it has been much harder to turn away, and I have pushed myself to engage more and more. In part, I felt a historical necessity, an obligation even, to engage with poverty and the after-effects of conflict. The US government - that body that ostensibly represents me, but whose policies I often feel distant - under President Reagan broadly funded right wing dictatorships in El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1980s in the name of halting communism.



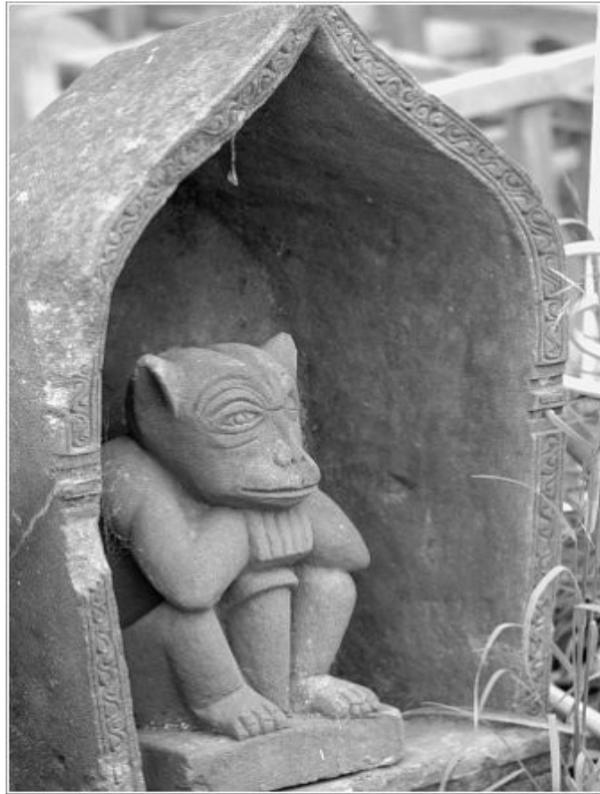
*photo by Pete Kayes*

However, no form of apology, let alone reparations, has ever been made for 'my' government's role in violent civil wars. My own sense of responsibility surfaces in each street kid's face as they scramble alongside me, asking "moneda," money, wearing dirt encrusted clothes and finishing people's leftovers on their plates in market eateries to survive. I see this at 10am on a weekday in Managua when their more privileged counterparts are in school, and I cannot turn away. I see single mothers who bring their sick babies onto public buses to beg for money to go to the hospital, or the war amputees who flash their raw limbs to conjure sympathy that might translate into a meal, or loose change.

The lucky ones have wheelchairs, some outfitted with umbrellas to cover them while they beg in the rain or scorching sun. The saddest cases are the legless men with no wheelchairs, who move around on their hands in the pouring rain, bits of plastic protecting their palms from the cobblestones, but no way to stay out of the overflowing gutters, the rain and filth of city life mingling on their curtailed pelvises. Cars honk for them to get out of the street. A million questions cross my mind about how they survive, but I fish a small bill out of my wallet and turn back to my atole and chuchitos, my hot corn drink and tamale-like meal, trying not to feel, trying to pretend that as a human being, let alone as an American tourist, I am not responsible for this somehow. I know intellectually the connection between war, poverty, and an unjust international system; but in the moment, I sit quietly and focus on my food. I turn away.

In post-war countries, I observe the rarity of old people, the preciousness of grandparents who have survived, their faces woven into webs of a thousand wrinkles but no social security will make sure they live out their days after what they have suffered. Then again, I wonder which side they were on. "Lucho por la revolucion? Did you fight for the revolution, or did you sell your soul to protect yourself and karma caught you in old age?" Suffering surrounds me on all sides as I travel through these worlds, my world, and yet sometimes I pretend it is not mine, but someone else's.

In the face of beggars, I try to give food when I can, especially to kids, from fear that parents will see the money they bring in as a reason to keep their children out there on the streets begging. Or to men who will add up the change to get a bottle, forget, and repeat the same tomorrow. Not a cycle I like to knowingly perpetuate, but one doesn't exactly interview the potential recipients of small change about their intentions prior to giving. Often, there are tortillas, bread rolls, or extra fruit in my purse to give, but food is bulky, and sometimes when I plan out little bags of things to give away, those are the miraculous days I see no one begging. Small change rattles constantly, in my purse and pockets, reminding me of my role: the dispenser, the tourist to be unofficially taxed for my privilege. When I don't turn away and pay up instead, sometimes I feel like I am just trying to buy off my conscience. For a few coins, I can turn back to my meal, my life of privilege feeling like I have 'made a difference.'



*photo by Pete Kayes*

But giving money or food necessitates engagement to the extent that it demands physicality. Eye contact is made, words exchanged, and then hands brush hands. Faces stay with me long into my rounds of insomnia, sometimes for years. In a pupuseria (or small restaurant that sells corn and cheese patties) in El Salvador, a boy of perhaps nine watched us as Josh and I ordered and tucked into our meal. Though lacking socks and warm pants in a driving rain, I didn't presume he was begging because the night before we had eaten in the same place and seen the kids of the cooks hanging around, all looking a bit tattered but certainly fed enough.

But this child's eyes followed our bites hungrily, and we invited him to our table. I ordered three more pupusas for him, and while we waited he told us his name was Abram and that he lived with his mom and three brothers and sisters not far away. We chatted about school, but when Josh and I finished with our own meal, we didn't stay to watch him eat, instead paying the tab and assuring him his meal was on its way. Engagement. His story lingers with me, as I wonder what happened to his father and how many nights he stands around on that sagging concrete floor hoping someone will fill his belly.

The next evening, an older man passed through our restaurant asking for money. I had only bills and a Nicaraguan .25 cent coin that was of no use to this Salvadoreño, but I gave it to him to give him something. He looked confused, irritated, but took the coin and left. I sat there feeling queasy, cheap. Why hadn't I just given him a dollar and made his day? It was pouring rain and it wouldn't break us, though I guess being constantly solicited makes it hard to evaluate each case with as much compassion as I should. Josh got up and walked all the way to the end of the block looking for him to rectify the

situation, or at least ease our consciences, but he had disappeared. Josh and I were left only with guilt and the reminder; engage in the moment, as the moment is fleeting.

There are countless times when I have made some split second decisions on whether or not to engage with the world around us. Sometimes the decision is based on such trivial circumstances as whether I need to find a bathroom, whether Josh and I have been fighting or meditating, or whether I remembered to put change somewhere easy to reach while maintaining forward momentum. Other times, the decision whether or not to engage depends on if my heart can take the eye contact, the visual reminder of my own privilege and the selfishness that comes with it.

Some days my heart cannot take it, and I avert my eyes, cross the street, and invent justifications. But I try to see others where they are at, not just the person as a recipient, but a person as a being, who like me, is searching for comfort, love, and understanding in this world. At a certain level, we both need the interaction to enter a relationship; this allows us to engage at a level of humanness that turning away denies. The Buddha-way is unattainable, I chant on the cushion, I vow to become it. In the now, Buddha-hood for me operates like primal flash photography, a blinding moment of clarity that is my determined engagement, followed by a blurring whirlwind, my brain enveloped in self-produced desire, greed, delusion. Each new country, a new cast of actors, but the same internal camera. A flash of clarity, compassion, right action, then the brightness fades, and the traps are there, waiting.



## **Walking Meditation**

*Louisa Rogers*

I'm walking barefoot on Mexican tiles. The tiles are cool, and my toes curve slightly. My

foot drops onto a rectangle of light from the dusty window. We are five today; I peek at the others from the corner of my eye. Lola, the ballet teacher. Ofelia, the dancer. Alfredo, the orchestra violinist. Bob, the retired American. And a woman named Laura.

My feet cup the tiles. They "hug" the floor, I decide, enjoying the image. They greet the floor, meet the floor, trust the floor, bask in its support, yield to it, lean into its strength.

But who is holding whom? The floor is holding me and I am holding the floor.

I remember other surfaces. The brick path Barry and I built, that wound around our garden in Palo Alto. I wore shoes when we walked there, and I missed the intimacy of feet meeting ground. But I'd pass our nandina bushes and always admire their pink and red berries. Every place has its beauties.

The old, fusty carpet of the First Christian Church where our meditation group meets in Eureka. The buttery oak floor of the zendo in Arcata.

I isolate the different fractions of my foot as they meet the ground. Heel, arch, toe. Heel, arch, toe. I follow my movements faithfully but not frantically.

Now, I take another step, musing on language. Step, stroll, saunter, stride, scamper. I wonder if there's a linguistic reason why so many words for walking start with 's.'

The way I'm walking here is nothing like how I tear around our local supermarket, Comercial Mexicana, where I'm often desperate to flee the artificial lights and throbbing music and unsupervised children playing tag in the aisles. Nor is it like how I pace when on the phone, or how I scramble up and down the hills above Guanajuato. Yet over the last ten years the practice has steeped into me, infusing all my walking experiences. Often I notice the texture beneath my feet. And what a delicious variety! Soil, grass, sand, brick, granite, tile, carpet, wood, linoleum, asphalt. Sometimes, as the surface receives my weight, I remember, not only in my brain tissue, but all the way down through the long tube of my body to the soles of my feet, that I'm a bipedal. I'm a bipedal, land-based mammal, and I warm to the earth beneath my feet.

Another step. That was a good salad I made last night. I have enough left for lunch today, too. I need to get some more garlic, though.

Amazing, the places my mind takes me in less than ten minutes. Who needs airline tickets or frequent flyer miles? (Actually, I do. Based on the results of my life!)

Suddenly, the sound of the bell cuts through my wanderings, piercing the air like a flute in the forest. I return to my cushion and bow.



## **The Ancient and Venerable Eureka Sitting Group**

*Louisa Rogers and Barry Evans*

Five years ago, at a general discussion at 740 Park, Gael suggested to Louisa to initiate a sitting group in Eureka. Within two weeks, a venue was found: the gallery of "Consider the Alternatives" bookstore in Old Town. Thus began an unbroken weekly sit in Eureka, with a loyal core group ranging from six to eight.

We are now at our fourth location, the gallery having been absorbed into the bookstore; the California Essence Yoga Center (our second home) converted into a studio apartment; and the Adorni Center a stop-gap only.

Each location had its own flavor. Paintings embellished the gallery walls (to be avoided or admired, depending on one's inclination), and we were often graced by the sound of neighborhood geese honking. At the yoga center, we entered by way of a latched wooden gate and a thick forest of a garden, walking down a dainty brick path to the doorway.

Our new home, an upstairs carpeted room in the rambling First Christian Church on 7th and K in Eureka, is the first place where we are able to leave our cushions and chairs in place. Having a dedicated location, where we don't have to set up, simplifies logistics. As we enter the building, the church pastor, Christine, an enthusiastic meditator herself, is often downstairs bustling about with church members, and greets us cheerily. No one else is on the second floor, so there are few noise distractions.

Our format is simple: we sit from six to six-thirty, walk kinhin for a few minutes, share for another ten minutes, and close with five minutes of silence. The closing in silence is a recent adaptation suggested by one member. We have experimented with format, sometimes strictly dividing "formal" sharing from



"informal," and more recently letting the two types of sharing interweave. This openness to different ways of doing things is an example of our operating style. We are essentially leaderless. One of us--usually Judith Louise, Barry or Travis--rings the bell and gives basic instruction to newcomers, but otherwise, we're a very democratic group.

After five years, the group is open and welcoming, yet intimate and family-like. We'd love you to join us.

DETAILS: 6:00 pm sharp Thursday evenings, First Christian Church, 7th and K, Eureka (ramp entrance, turn right, and up the stairs). Call Judith Louise (476 8919) or Barry (476 8317) for more information.

*(Photos by Barry)*

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***Dharma Gates are Boundless***, Michael Quam's column in which we share non-buddhist quotes that reflect the dharma, will be back next issue. Please send your submissions for the column, as well as for *Rin Shin-ji Voices*, to [Michael](#) by November 15.