

# Dreams Know No Boundaries

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Dreams know no boundaries. They are subjectively-personalised but objectively-perceived. Are dreams only meant to give people hope that something better awaits them, yet more often than not, unattainable due to a whole host of factors, the most common being financial sacrifice, relationship commitments and plain inertia?

Well, I had a dream, one that was unfathomable to many, and even considered immature and irrational to the older generation because it seemed to signal a step backwards in this age of rapid societal progress and development. However, I was determined to carve out a path that veered greatly off the route of conformity on which the last 26 years of my life have built upon. My dream was to discover a lifestyle set in a rural region of Thailand, where I could sustain my livelihood as a full-time paid (not volunteer) teacher.

When asked about what led me to take this path less travelled, I could only say that I have always been an adventurous person who seeks uniqueness to life by not wanting to live under the shadows of others. Teaching and living independently in a rural locality would create a new experience and challenge that few others might relate to in Singapore. Thailand was a viable choice to anchor my dreams due to three main reasons. Firstly, the country comprises of many provinces, some less urbanised than others, thus providing more options to cater to my locational preference. Secondly, it is a country situated not too far away from home. This was important because I was travelling all alone and could easily make a quick return should any emergency occur. Thirdly, the country offers an setting in which almost everyone communicates using only the local language (especially so in the rural areas). To adapt and face up to this linguistic challenge was something which I yearned for!

## **Stumbling Blocks at the Onset**

Months of diligence were spent in learning the Thai language at community centres in Singapore, and understanding Thailand's education system and employment rules. Moreover, the preparatory phase was fraught with the toughest obstacles that almost derailed my plans. It did not help that my request was so specific in the sense that I only wanted to teach in rural or village schools located away from big cities and urban centres.

I had initially wanted to secure a teaching position before even travelling to Thailand. However, I faced roadblocks while communicating with several schools and random teaching contacts recommended by my one and only Thai friend living in ChiangRai Province. In addition, I learnt that no school was willing to hire a foreigner unless he or she had obtained a teaching qualification of some sort, and the schools preferred someone who was already present in Thailand, rather than accepting an individual who was still based overseas.

An ex-colleague of mine in Singapore chanced upon and recommended an American-based programme which offered a Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), a qualification that many schools in Thailand were looking out for. I had to go through two weeks of training in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and two weeks of hands-on teaching experience in Pattaya, Thailand. Upon graduation, some job-search assistance would be provided too. I felt that this could be the safest way to embark on my journey rather than diving into the deep end without any organisational support.

On 5 March 2011, I touched down in Phnom Penh to begin my teacher-training course. My journey started off on a bad note when I realised that the red packet which my mother had given me for

good luck and protection had gone missing! Bearing in mind an advice from a friend back in Singapore that 'things can only get better', I struggled to stay positive for the rest of that day.

I was the only Asian in the group of trainee-teachers and faced difficulties integrating with the rest mainly because of social habits. Before long, two weeks were up and I headed on to Pattaya for my hands-on teaching experience. I felt more comfortable in Pattaya because I could speak some basic conversation Thai. Throughout this time, I remained very focused on my ultimate aim, which was to work closely with the American organisation to get me a rural or village school to hire me.



Figure 1: Writer (in yellow T-shirt) with the rest of his teacher-training course mates



Figure 2: Writer Crossing the Border between Cambodia and Thailand

Unfortunately, when I finally graduated, my trainers informed me that they had tried unsuccessfully to match my locational job preference with several schools in Thailand. My request was way too unorthodox, and schools situated in the less developed parts of Thailand were not well-positioned to hire foreign teachers because of various administrative reasons. It was unlikely that I could get what I wanted at that point in time. I lost faith and felt like giving up.

Just when I was considering a return to Singapore as a defeated soul, I received an email invitation to be interviewed by a school located in Thailand's northwestern provincial capital named Tak City (pronounced as 'Meuang Tak' in Thai language), some 870km away from Pattaya. I had earlier randomly applied to this school online on my own accord without the organisation's assistance.

Very few locals in Thailand have actually been to this province and I was informed by my course trainers that the location could more or less be what I was looking for. My only concern was travelling across the country for an interview which I might not even secure, but I also knew that this was a worthy shot at discovering what laid ahead for me. With much fervour and hope, I went ahead.

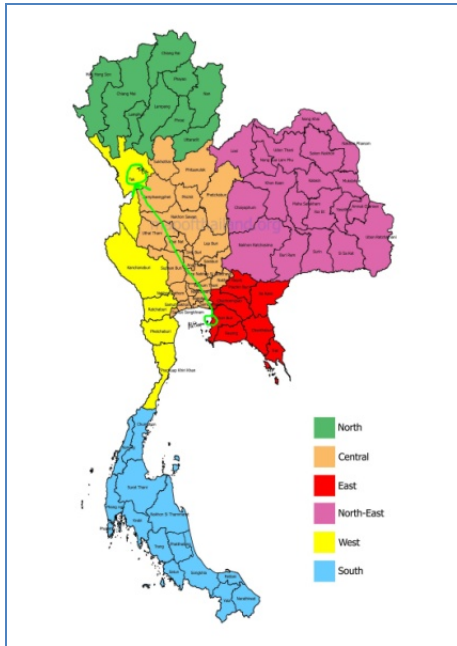


Figure 3: Graphic Representation of Tak City (capital of Tak Province, North-western Thailand) from Pattaya

**Travelling over 850km for a job interview**

The bus ride proved to be a 9-hour journey during which I hardly slept and arrived in Tak City at an unearthly time of 3.30am. The school, named 'Anubantak School' (meaning Tak's Kindergarten and Primary School) had kindly offered a room for interviewees to temporarily bunk while waiting for the interview next morning.



Figure 4: Taking a tuk-tuk (i.e. motorised rickshaw in Thailand) to the school compound in the wee hours of the morning

When I entered the room, there was another interviewee— an African— already resting within. To my horror, the room proved to be a mosquito-feeding site and I was literally swarmed by the insects for the three hours spent 'resting' in the room. Nevertheless, I remained thankful that the school actually provided an optional place interviewees, especially those who arrived at odd timings, to rest. Other interviewees, consisting of Filipinos and Africans who stayed at nearby guesthouses, arrived at the school compound the next morning.



Figure 5: Room provided by school for temporary rest



Figure 6: Writer's Mosquito-bitten arm

Ten interviewees fought for five job vacancies and we had to perform teaching demonstrations in the morning followed by attending interviews in the afternoon. Though I was extremely fatigued due to lack of rest, I believed that I did well in the tests because I was confident of my knowledge and ability, thanks to the world-class Singapore education system which I had been nurtured in. It was certainly a long, nervous wait for the selection results as my dream of teaching in a rural region like Tak Province hinged on this moment of truth! When the five names were finally read out, two Africans and two Filipinos were chosen, with my name being the last one announced! I was so elated as I had finally taken the first successful step in realising my dream!

### **Unexpected Surprises**

After securing a place in the school, there were still about two more weeks before Thailand's school semester began. It was also the period marking Thailand's traditional New Year (named 'Songkran Festival' or commonly known as the 'Water-splashing Festival').

My only Thai friend was residing in ChiangRai Province, though I did not know the exact locality. He was glad and willing to host me during this period. Therefore, immediately after the interview, I made another long-distance trip northwards and this part of the journey proved to be an interesting discovery for me.

When I boarded the bus heading to ChiangRai Province at another unearthly time of 1am, I was sure that I would fall asleep immediately because of my prolonged fatigue. However, when the bus arrived, I was shocked to see that all the seats were already fully occupied! The driver merely shoved the boarding passengers stools to sit on along the aisle. Obviously, due to the lack of space, I could not sleep because everyone kept hitting each other as the bus rolled on. When I arrived 7 hours later in ChiangRai City, you could imagine how I felt, mentally and physically. I later realised that this was a common scenario for certain long-distance buses, but what an experience it has been!

My friend picked me up at one of ChiangRai's districts named Chiang Saen and took me to somewhere near the Golden Triangle. To my surprise, I realised that he was living not in the city, but in a village! I did not expect a village stay but was extremely happy to be given such an opportunity. This was precisely the kind of environment that I sought to teach in! The village was set in a quiet and beautiful environment, occasionally covered by mist and surrounded by mountains bordering Thailand and Myanmar. Despite the breath-taking landscape, my friend informed me that it was impossible for me to teach in his village due to safety and culturally-sensitive reasons.



Figure 7: Golden Triangle —the confluence of two rivers and three nations



Figure 8: Village of the writer's friend and its surrounding scenery; extreme right picture shows an easily accessible river-crossing natural boundary between Myanmar and Thailand

From my two-weeks stay in my friend's village, I vividly remember the huge slope which I had to conquer whenever I entered or exited the village. Pushing my bicycle up the barren slope as vehicles sped past me and churn clouds of dust on my face was certainly unforgettable. I also experienced Thailand's Songkran Festival for the first time in my life. It was a privilege to enjoy both the traditional (e.g. visiting a hill-top temple to make offerings) and modern (i.e. water-splashing activities) celebrations in the village.

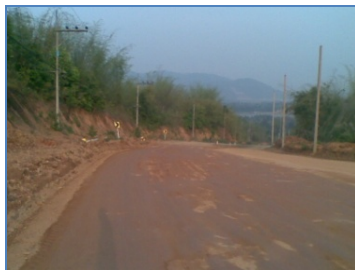


Figure 9: The formidable slope (taken from the top) leading into village of the writer's friend



Figure 10: Water-splashing during Songkran Festival in the village of the writer's friend

Before heading back to Tak Province towards the end of April 2011, I made a stop at a school located on the outskirts of Chiang Rai City. I had initially made contact with this school back in Singapore but was informed that foreign teachers could not be hired due to a couple of administrative reasons. As I was passing by Chiang Rai Province, I decided to pay the school's Vice-Principal a visit to put a face to her name following our email correspondences made in the past. Little did I expect her to gladly offer me a room in her house to stay for the night, and promises of specially-prepared Thai dishes to whet my appetite. Other than communicating online, I was a complete stranger to her, but I received great hospitality and generosity. I was touched. This welcoming gesture of hers was reflective of the kind-hearted and pleasant attitude of Thais towards others, which proved to be one of the numerous times of assistance I received while travelling alone in Thailand.

### **First Singaporean Employee in the Provincial Capital**

I have been on a tourism visa ever since I left Singapore and in order for me to legitimately extend my stay here in Thailand, there were various employment and immigration procedures that had to be sorted out. I needed to first obtain a Non-immigration VISA B from the capital (i.e. Bangkok), meaning the necessity to travel hundreds of kilometres back down south. After a couple of months, I had to visit the Labour Employment Office in Tak City to obtain a work permit and make another trip

to Bangkok to collect a compulsory Teaching Licence. Following that, I had to make my way to the nearest Immigration Office in Tak Province located at the border town of Mae Sot to apply for a Stay Permit (an official document to state that I am allowed to stay in the country up to the last day of the school's semester). I suddenly empathised with what a foreign worker or expatriate in Singapore had to go through with regard to immigration documentation.

This tedious but necessary procedure took place across many months and involved quite a few long-distance trips, but it at least ensured that I did not infringe the country's immigration laws and could live and work with a peace of mind. In the midst of this procedure, I was also informed by a Labour Employment Officer that I was the first Singaporean employee to be working in this provincial capital! Having created a mini-history for myself, I promised myself to carry the Singapore flag up high by working hard and leaving a good impression for others to see!

The process of finding accommodation in Tak City was a challenge and settling down in my temporary home could not have been more interesting. I chose a very affordable room on the fourth level of an apartment situated just 150 metres away from my school. Besides an old mop and a roll of toilet paper lying at a corner, the room was completely empty when I entered. No mattress (let alone a bed frame), no cabinet, no refrigerator, no television, no chairs, no table and no fan! It was also evident that the room had not been used for some time because of the filth accumulated within (moths, bird droppings, cockroaches etc.). It was indeed another memorable experience as I had to do a thorough clean-up of my room and make multiple short trips (using a bicycle as my form of transport since I did not know how to ride a motorbike or scooter) to the riverside market to scout, choose and bargain for basic household essentials and simple furniture. Do not get me wrong, I enjoyed the process so much as it gave me a chance to set up my home from scratch!



Figure 11: Writer's room, after some simple furnishing

### **Teaching and Living Life**

Most would deem the highlight of my journey to be the period of teaching and living in this quaint and peaceful town of Tak City. After settling down in my simple but cosy home, I started to learn cooking. I have always been 'forbidden' to use the kitchen back home in Singapore, so I struggled initially but soon, guided by useful instructions and advice from my mother, I learnt to whip out a couple of decent home-cooked dishes. Before long, I even knew how to prepare a few well-known Thai delicacies such as 'Basil Leaves with Pork and Steamed Rice', 'Tom-yam Soup' and 'Pad Thai'.



Figure 12: Writer's homemade Thai dishes —From left: Basil leaves pork with steamed rice, Pad Thai and Tom Yum Soup

I woke up before sunrise every day, even on weekends, because there was a loud radio broadcast speaker along the road outside my apartment which blasted precisely at 5.40am each morning!

It did not help that I slept like a chicken at night, waking up at the slightest sound. I attributed my heightened awareness to my constant vigilance, being all alone in a foreign country. Looking back, I realised that my adrenaline had never stopped pumping ever since I left Singapore!

I was allocated to teach English, Mathematics and Science to Primary 5 students. Their standard of English Language was acutely low, most probably due to their lack of contact with English Language outside the classroom. The shop names, road directions and signboards in Tak City were all in Thai scripts, and everyone conversed in Thai. I also felt that many students, especially those in the academically-poorer classes, did not recognise the importance of English Language as a useful communication tool internationally.

I recalled the first day of school where the entrance leading into the school compound was muddy due to a heavy storm the night before. However, traffic was orderly and smooth. The vehicles seemed to face no problems manoeuvring through the waterlogged potholes. The drivers were patient, careful and courteous as they looked out for students who entered that same entrance by foot. Compared to the daily chaotic traffic mess outside a nearby school back home in Singapore, I witnessed a more cultured and considerate environment here.



Figure 13: Entrance leading into the school's compound; writer's apartment situated at the background of the picture



Figure 14: Anubantak School (Tak's Kindergarten and Primary School)

When I started teaching, I faced few problems in class-management because I possessed a myriad of entertaining skills (such as beatboxing, singing Thai songs, performing gymnastics, cracking jokes and playing educational games learnt from my teacher-training course) that assisted to break the ice easily, build crucial rapport and endear me to most of the students very quickly. It also helped that I had learnt conversational Thai and could thus carry out simple translations of my lessons' content to the students to the best of my abilities. The students were actually quite surprised that their English teacher could speak Thai because many foreign teachers came in with no grasp of the language.



Figure 15: Writer teaching in one of the Primary 5 Classes



Figure 16: Writer (spotted with a shaven head to cope with the hot summer) marking scripts in the English Department

However, as time passed, some students took advantage of my amicability, while others got bored of the games I played with them. As the students became restless, I lost my patience a couple of times and became more of a disciplinarian. Even so, after my chiding, I could only maintain discipline for less than thirty seconds before they started to get rowdy again. Very soon, I focused my attention only on the more well-behaved students. On hindsight, this was certainly not professional and what made me even more remorseful were the excellent compliments of me given by my Department Head during a teacher-review a few weeks later. However, I sought solace in the fact that discipline was a problem faced by the other foreign teachers as well. It was common for the students to be naturally more light-hearted towards the foreign teachers.

Besides discipline, there were times when I received feedbacks from the students' parents that my teaching content was way above the standards of their children. I was also requested to follow more closely to the textbooks, but the irony was that I found the content in the textbooks to be too complicated for the current English Language standards of the students! I also faced challenges alternating between the two different forms of written English as the students have always been taught in American English. These problems were hard to resolve but I took every pointer positively and tried my best to improve the suitability of my lesson content.

If there was one thing that motivated me to teach ardently, it was the Thai students' spontaneous amicability and show of kindness for the teacher outside the classroom. Many of those who did not listen during class and who were frequently reprimanded by me proved to be the friendliest bunch. They would often come to hug me after class and chat with me using Thai language, scattered with a handful of inaccurate phrases in English. Whenever I was outside school exercising or cycling to buy groceries, my students would also greet me loudly with wide smiles when they spotted me. I almost



lost my balance and crashed my bicycle a few times because of my students' sudden loud greetings at the most unexpected moments along the streets!

My lifestyle routine in Tak City was quite predictable. During weekdays after school, I would go for a jog, join in a game of soccer with the locals, or experiment with cooking different kinds of food. Before retiring early for the night, I would read a book (there were no English novels in Tak City, so I had to buy one from Bangkok) and watch television programmes (my understanding of Thai language improved a lot after watching their single-language programmes) or rented-DVD movies on my laptop. On Saturdays, I would teach extra classes in the morning, shop for groceries and read my emails at one of the few internet cafes in the afternoon before going for a drink at a pub nearby my apartment which televised live English Premier League matches.



Figure 17: Extra classes on Saturday mornings

I hardly mixed with my fellow foreign teacher colleagues but would join them for meals and drinks occasionally. I felt that I became more of an introvert and chose to be alone most of the time after school, partly because of my over-wary perspective towards others. The upside of this was greater independence and more opportunities to immerse into the local community. I found joy walking along the streets and conversing with many familiar faces whom I had interacted with frequently (e.g. shopkeepers, grocery-sellers).

I thought that I would spend my first birthday outside Singapore alone, but the day was spiced up by my students who sang birthday songs (in Thai and English) and presented me with small but thoughtful gifts. My life here could be regarded as monotonous to some, but I learnt to appreciate the virtues of solitude while working and living here. I was lonely at times, but not perpetually unhappy. I came to understand that if one can learn how to live with that loneliness, that we cannot always be among the loved and familiar ones all the time, then making the best out of the situation, we accept these periods to be part of our lives.



Figure 18: Simple but meaningful birthday gifts given by the writer's students

During my teaching stint, there was a compulsory 3-day Buddhist Camp for my Primary 5 students. I offered to participate so that I could help take care of the students' welfare, especially at night when they had to stay over in the temple. Being a free-thinker, I also wanted to understand the practices of the main religion in Thailand (i.e. Theravada Buddhism) better. While some students enjoyed the

camp, others suffered home-sickness, reminiscent of my primary school days. A final ceremony capped off Buddhist Camp where the students had to kneel down and show appreciation to their teachers, one by one. The students seemed to have been enlightened after the teachings and it was truly a touching moment when I received this humble act of gratitude by each and every student.



Figure 19: Student offering his religious appreciation to the writer as his teacher

Another special point during my teaching career arose when the English Department had to organise an English Camp for the students. Due to my love for music, one of the main tasks I took on was writing the camp's theme song and choreographing a couple of dance moves to go along with it. I borrowed a well-known and contemporary tune sang by a famous Thai artist named Bird Thongchai, and inserted English lyrics to accompany the catchy beats. My colleagues loved it the moment they heard it. As the tune originated from one of the most popular songs in Thailand last year, the students learnt quickly and enjoyed the theme song whenever it was played. There was this sense of achievement during the English Camp seeing everyone (students and even teachers) singing and dancing delightfully to the song I wrote!



Figure 20: Writer (in yellow camp and white pants) leading the students for the English Camp Theme Song

### **Nation-wide Events**

Two significant events marked year 2011 for Thailand. They were the General Elections and the disastrous flooding that took away hundreds of lives.

My only chance to vote for the first time in Singapore last year was substituted with a localised experience witnessing an election heating up, unfolding, and concluding with the appointment of the first female Prime Minister in Thailand. Set in the rural regions of the country, the province of Tak was devoid of rousing political rallies during the General Elections. However, I tuned in regularly to national-televised updates every day. Every new channel was broadcasted in Thai language, so I had to figure out what was really happening. It was also interesting to listen to the political views and predictions made by the Thai colleagues in my school.

Before the flood situation captured international media attention in Bangkok, the north of the country suffered as well. Tak City was not spared either, though the area around my apartment was not adversely affected because it was some distance away from the Ping River, the main river

flowing through the town. I vividly recalled a scene when I made my way to the riverside market to buy groceries during that period. I was shocked to see that one of the food stalls which I frequented was almost completely submerged by the high water level. In addition, the houses and huts along the river were inundated; only their roofs could be seen! This was indeed the first time in my life witnessing such widespread flooding. How could the flash floods at Orchard Road ever be compared to the severity of Thailand's natural disaster?



Figure 21: A hut located just next to the Ping River submerged, only its roof to be seen



Figure 22: People wading through the inundated streets, days after water has receded greatly

### **Post-trip Blues**

I made a decision during October 2011 to cut short my work-life stint in Thailand due to family commitments back home. It was a difficult one to make because I wanted to continue building on what I had achieved so far. When the students knew of my impending departure, the obedient students were sad, but the naughty ones were elated, probably because I would not be able to chide them during lessons anymore.

To bid my farewell to my beloved students, I bought several gifts for them. One of the favourite past-times of the people in Tak City was sitting beside the Ping River and painting fabric caricatures while relaxing in the cool riverside breeze. I bought many caricature designs for my students and requested them to add colours to the fabric pictures before writing my personalised message for each of them. I hope that they would remember that they once had a Singaporean teacher in their lives!



Figure 23: Farewell lunch with the Thai teacher colleagues, writer in white on left row



Figure 24: Departing times with students after giving out their fabric paintings with writer's well-wishes penned down

Before departing in mid-November 2011, I was fortunate to enjoy the opportunity of witnessing another major festival in Thailand— the Loi Kratong Festival (the 'Festival of Lights'). Tak City was known to be the place where the most beautiful and unique Loi Kratong celebrations took place. Chinese lanterns lit up the night sky while candles mounted on coconut shells floats drifted along the symbolic Ping River.



Figure 25: Festive celebrations during Loi Kratong Festival in Tak City; extreme left shows beautiful lightings which outlined the image of the present King of Thailand; extreme right shows writer releasing Chinese lantern with his Filipino teacher colleague

The 8.5 months spent overseas have been my longest time away from Singapore. Naturally, I experienced some challenges when I returned. After all the newness and stimulation of my time abroad, a return to family, friends and old routines (however nice and comforting) seemed dull to me. I also had trouble explaining all the sights I saw and feelings I had while abroad. It was difficult to convey my experience to people who do not have similar frames of reference or travel background.

Due to my lengthy absence, I also realised that my circle of friends has constricted greatly. However, I got to know the true ones worth forging who took pains to understand my situation while I was away and constantly provide words of encouragement.

I also experienced a degree of alienation when the reality of returning home was less natural and enjoyable, and more demanding than I thought. Singapore would always be Singapore. I developed what might be termed as 'critical eyes', a tendency to see faults in society which I had never noticed before. I would never forget what I experienced the night I landed at Singapore Changi Airport. This might sound atrocious, but I felt that everyone seemed to be moving around in a very robotic zombie-like manner, as if life had been sucked out of them. I sensed that the people were merely following the flow of things, steadily but aimlessly. Was I disillusioned or were they? My friends and relatives have been asking me whether I have readapted to the Singapore lifestyle. My answer was not to readapt totally but selectively, whilst adopting some good pointers learnt from my stint in Thailand. I am not sure if I would be quickly drawn back into 'mechanical' system of Singapore, but I promise to build on what I have achieved and continue to live life with a purpose in Singapore's society.

### **Afterthoughts**

To cover my entire journey in this article would not be possible, but I hope to have shared some of my uniquely-explicable moments. If there was one reason in penning this account, it would be to help others to understand how personally-special dreams can be. And the route to achieving them need not always be materialistically-driven, scaling the ladder and reaching for the sky. I went the other direction.

Riding against the wave of modernity, I took on a job which paid me one-fifth of what I used to earn but one that ensured a simple and comfortable livelihood. Having said this, dreams are very much dictated by the individual's current state of affairs. They come at a price, and more often than not, people who pursue dreams in Singapore can afford to do so only if their financial backgrounds are moderately stable or have yet to dedicate their time to child-bearing.

Increasingly, the younger generation seek greater fulfillment in their lives; how they live their lives matters a lot to them. As we become more critical about the way we live, we tend to engage in more radical decisions. Besides slogging in full-time professions, I have friends who share idealistic goals and are taking concrete steps to achieve them. They put aside work to better themselves through meditation camps, mission trips and working holiday schemes. Career takes a backseat and self-actualisation comes into focus at some points in their lives. Others drop stable careers to start from scratch in totally new industries like baking and non-profit social enterprises, driven by the aim to chase their interest, passion and what they believe in.

Dreams are a product of what the mind constructs, and the character of a person is crucial to the execution of the plan. I would not shy away from the fact that my resolute character, singlehood and moderately-stable financial situation back home were the main impetuses that led to the conceptualisation and implementation of what I succeeded in doing. But neither would I forget that the support of my family and friends, and the local help I received along the way in Thailand, were also the key factors that saw me through this fruitful period of my life.