

Web source: [thingsasian.com](http://thingsasian.com)

## 10 Essential Thai Words and Phrases

By: Kenneth Champeon



From top to bottom: *Sawasdee jao* (pronounced 'sawatdee'), *sawasdee, jai, aroy, aroy dee, mai pen rai, sabai sabai, sabai*.  
Image © 2001 Ken Champeon

### 1. *mai bpen rai, mai mee bpunhaa*

The first phrase roughly translates to "it doesn't matter", the second to "no problem." Together, they typify the Thai approach to life: don't get bogged down by small obstacles, don't worry, take it easy. Much to the dismay of Westerners, Thais employ these phrases even in situations that are dangerous, even life-threatening. (Westerner: "The house is on fire!" Thai: "No problem.") If a Westerner protests, he is swiftly reprimanded with *jai yen* (see below #4).

### 2. *sabai*

This word is usually translated as "happy", but its use is often closer to "comfortable", "relaxed", or "well." To Thais, happiness is not a state opposite that of sorrow. Rather, it is more akin to tranquillity. Sitting by the seaside with the wind blowing your hair is *sabai*. Winning the lottery is not.

This difference is underscored by the fact that *mai sabai*, or "not *sabai*", does not mean "sad". It means "sick", "ill", and can even be used as a euphemism for "hangover".

Suffix the word *dee*, or "good", to *sabai*, and you get the standard Thai greeting: *sabai dee mai?*, or "Are you well?"

Thai offers many ways to intensify an adjective. One way is simply to repeat it. Thus *sabai sabai* could be translated into English slang as "everything's chill" or "not a care in the world". It is wellness almost beyond words, the Thais' heaven on earth.

### 3. *ruk*

The Thai people are usually described as sentimental, encountering life emotionally rather than intellectually. This is not meant to disparage them, and in any case they often disparage Westerners for being too cerebral, too cold. The linguistic centerpiece of this worldview is *ruk*, or "love". Just about every Thai pop song will be propped up by *ruks*, often in the form of *pom ruk ter*, or "I love you" (*ter* is the informal "you", like "tu" in French).

*Ruk* is also the root of the common word *naruk*. The prefix *na* is the equivalent of the English suffix "able" - thus *naruk* means "lovable", "adorable", or "cute." Show a Thai girl a photo of a lion cub, a live puppy, or a stuffed animal, and she is liable to squeal *naruk!* shortly before embracing or scratching the *naruk* thing's nose. (My sincerest apologies to Thai girls who don't do this.)

*Ruk* also gives us *suttiruk*, a term of endearment roughly meaning "sweetheart". (N.B.: Not to be used indiscriminately, especially as part of the phrase *suttiruk ja*, which means something along the treacly lines of "sweetie pie".)

#### 4. *jai*

Exhibit B in the case for Thai sentimentalism - the close etymological connection between Thai words meaning "heart" and "mind". *Jai*, "mind", spawns the word *hua jai*, "heart".

The word *jai* forms a number of compounds that describe human emotions. In fact, my pocket dictionary lists *sixty-seven* such *jai*-words. Some of the most common are:

*jai rorn* -- hot-tempered (hot mind) *jai yen* -- calm (cold mind) *jai lai* -- cruel (bad mind) *jai dee* -- kind (good mind) *kao jai* -- to understand (enter mind) *corp jai* -- thank you (edge mind)

As far as the economy of the Thai language is concerned, the mind is a terrible thing to waste.

#### 5. *gin*

Thais take eating very seriously, no doubt in part because of the strong Chinese influence on their culture. I know a Thai woman of Chinese ancestry who, rather than asking me "How are you", asks me "Have you eaten yet".

*Gin* can mean "eat", but it is more akin to the word "ingest": one can *gin nahm* ("drink water"), *gin kao* ("eat rice"), or *gin ya* ("take medicine"). *Gin* is also used to describe the taking of a piece in chess.

Because rice accompanies just about every Thai meal, *gin kao* is usually used instead of *gin* to mean "eat." It is perfectly acceptable to use *gin kao* to describe the inhalation of a cheeseburger, for example.

#### 6. *aroy*

Deriving from this preoccupation with food is *aroy*, which means "tasty". Thus does *aroy* appear in the names of many a Thai restaurant. A common experience among newcomers to the kingdom is to be offered a food they have never seen before, together with the pronouncement *aroy*. Thais are very proud of their cuisine, so the follow-up question *aroy mai?* ("tasty?") is usually not far behind. (Suggested answer: *aroy dee* -- "yummy"? -- accompanied by a thumbs-up gesture.)

#### 7. *sanook*

*Sanook*, meaning "fun", is a guiding principle of Thai social life. If you have recently returned from a trip, whether from Malaysia or the mall, you are likely to be asked *sanook mai?*: "was it fun?" An experience that is merely educational, or, as the argot has it, "intense", would probably be given the swift Thai denunciation: *beua*, or "boring". If it's not *sanook*, it's not worthwhile. Thus *sanook* and *sabai* are a common element of the names of Thailand's many watering holes.

#### 8. *ba*

Westerners often receive - and deserve - the charge of *ba!*, meaning "crazy" or "mad". You are *ba* if you do anything stupid or unexpected, like driving poorly or dancing spontaneously. Tellingly, the Thai phrase for methamphetamine - the country's most destructive drug - is *ya ba*, or "mad medicine".

### 9. *pai*

We have already seen two forms of Thai greeting, "Are you well" and "Have you eaten". A third employs the word *pai*, or "go": *pai nai mah*, or "Where have you been". As with "have you eaten", many Westerners are taken aback by the seeming invasiveness of this question (their first thought being "it's none of your business"). But it is really little different in intent from "What's going on". (In other words, "I have been in the bathroom" is not what your interrogator is after.)

*Pai* is also the source of *pa*, which ostensibly means "let's go", or "get a move on", although a Thai will often say *pa* a hundred times over the course of an hour preceding actual departure.

### 10. *sawatdee, chohk dee*

No collection of essential Thai phrases would be complete without *sawatdee*, the all-purpose Thai salutation. No need to bother distinguishing between "good morning" and "good evening", "hello" and "goodbye": *sawatdee* covers them all. But there are alternatives for parting, like *chohk dee*, meaning "good luck". *Chohk dee* also serves as a fair substitute for "cheers", not in the evolved British sense of "thanks", but in the old-fashioned sense of "may the road rise to meet you, may the wind always be at your back."

\* \* \* \* \*

Published on 5/24/03