

THROWING STONES

By Riley Koren



"When you throw a stone into water, it hurries the quickest way down to the bottom of the water. So it is when Siddhartha has a goal, a purpose. Siddhartha does nothing, he waits, he thinks, he fasts, but he passes through the things of the world as the stone passes through the water, without doing anything, without touching anything; he is pulled, he lets himself fall. His goal pulls him toward it, for he admits nothing into his soul that would resist the goal."

-Siddhartha, Herman Hesse (translation by Rika Lesser)

My teacher Paul Fowler read this to me, sitting in his apartment in Chiang Mai one evening as we shared our latest theories on self-healing. I love it because it reconciles two apparently contradictory ways of living, both of which I believe:

1. "Let go and go with the flow."
2. "You create your own life."

The first seems passive, and the second, quite active. Both seem true, but how can I let things happen and make things happen at the same time? Siddhartha tells me these are not two choices, but one . . . or as Thai people are fond of saying in English: "Same, same." I make something happen by allowing it to happen, by stepping aside and not preventing its happening. I create something by allowing it to come into being, by admitting nothing into my soul that would resist.

The Thai healers I met in and around Chiang Mai understand this deeply. They taught me to heal my body by allowing it to heal, to relax a muscle by inviting it to relax and then giving it the space, love and support to do so. Even the woman who gave me a spectacularly uncomfortable abdominal organ massage works gradually, gently - always with my body, never against. At the first placement of her hands over my abdomen, she announces, "Ah. Energy block here," and proceeds to focus on unsticking the energy that has been stuck for years in my core. In the process, her hands happen to find themselves quite deeply embedded in my psoas, my kidney, my pancreas, my who-knows-what . . . but this is secondary, only a result. In her mind, she is following energy. Opening, never forcing, but encouraging each block until it opens, in which case she whispers, "Thank you," or until it doesn't, in which case she moves on.

Another bodyworker I met, who insists that her work is Thai massage even though it looks different from all other Thai massage I've seen, works by allowing my muscles to float up to the surface and meet her hands. "You push, they go away. They scared," she says. She impersonates my muscles, flinching and curling up into a ball. "You have to work gentle, like this. Not need more than this. You work too hard." She tells this to every Westerner I've seen her encounter: "You work too hard. Let it go." She moves her hands over my body, sensing heat and emotion. She pauses, lets her hands come into contact with my body and then waits, listens, allows. "It's okay," I imagine her saying to my muscles, "Let it go. You don't have to be afraid anymore." Lying in bed that night, I feel aches reaching up from deep inside my back and hips, connecting my conscious mind with muscles I have ignored for years.

It is this touch, more than anything else, that I bring home with me, that seeps into my way of being. It is this question with which I challenge myself as I work and live: "What can I sense if I just stay here, silent and still and present? How much can I learn by just pausing and listening? How can I relax more deeply into this moment? These questions are with me in the softly-lit massage room as I settle into my first physical contact with the person on the table or the mat, the person with whom I will spend the next hour of my life. But they do not leave me when the hour is up; they follow me down the sidewalk and slide with me through the train's closing doors, tug my sleeve as I reach into the cabinets to find dinner, climb into my lap to block my view of the computer screen and remind me to breathe.

Paul had warned me that each time he goes to Thailand, he comes back intending to keep living in that "cha, cha" ("slowly, slowly") way, and that each time, it eventually gets lost in our forward-thinking American culture. After my month-long stay, "cha, cha" keeps me faithful company for about a week before threatening to beat a hasty retreat back across the Pacific Ocean. It isn't the pace of my fellow CTA-riders' footsteps or the immediacy and precision with which we demand food, service and answers; it's my own thinking that is beginning to scare away the calm. The content of the thoughts is not the disturbing factor. The thoughts are pleasant and exciting, inspired by e-mails, phone calls and meetings and centered around new opportunities for healing, relationships and work. It's merely their presence that overwhelms me. They show up in droves, stealing from me the pure awareness of waking up, sucking the life out of my food and turning a deliciously hot shower into the thing I have to do before going to work.

It becomes an ongoing cycle, this process of forgetting and remembering, of allowing myself to be carried away by thoughts and then feeling the gentle voice of my grounding questions, pulling me back to here and now. And slowly, I become aware of a change in my view of this, the meditation of life. The task of remaining in the present moment is becoming the joy of existing in the present moment. I first practiced meditation grudgingly, because monks and teachers told me I should, because they did and because they looked peaceful. Now I am beginning to experience how much better my food is when I taste it, how much more joy I find in walking to the train when I feel my feet on the ground. Mindfulness is growing from a distant intellectual concept into my favorite state in which to live.

With this tool, I can allow opportunities to flow into and out of my life, to receive each one as it comes . . . hold it, but gently, not pinning it too tightly to lists or calendars. Bless it, delight in it . . . then let it go, give it space to become the fullest expression of whatever it is. As Paul told me recently, "I have an amazing life and that has nothing to do with a perfect life which doesn't exist. So I prefer to focus on the amazing part!" Instead of trying to fit each thing into its perfectly scheduled slot in my life, I choose to experience it where it is, when it is there, and to see the beauty in that.