



“WELCOME TO CITY OF NICE PEOPLE”

Cross-Cultural Dialogues on Authentic Movement in Thailand

by Susan M. Bauer

Preface:

In 2000–2001, I lived in Bali, Indonesia, on a Fulbright grant to continue my studies in Balinese dance and culture. I had many goals for that year, but leading a group in Authentic Movement had not been one of them. I did, however, have one hidden wish—to travel to Thailand.

During my first month in Bali, I visited the Ashram Candidasa (founded on the principles of Ghandi) and by chance met a Thai woman named Nuch. In one day spent talking by the beach, I learned she was a coordinator for a non-profit group in Bangkok called Spirit in

Education. Hearing this title, I surprised myself and began to cry. Attention to “spirit” was something I had always found lacking in the Western approach to education in which I had grown up. Hearing this so clearly identified—and learning that a whole organization existed for this purpose—filled me with hope.

The Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), Nuch explained, was founded in 1995 under the patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to promote an alternative form of “literacy” based on empowerment, mindfulness, and a respect for human

rights. SEM runs programs in and around Bangkok that serve various groups—business people, grassroots leaders, monks and nuns, students and teachers—emphasizing experiential learning through courses in socially engaged Buddhism, conflict resolution, deep ecology, and voluntary simple lifestyles in order to promote “more being” in our lives. (Description is from the SEM brochure.)

I then told Nuch about my work in dance—including Experiential Anatomy and Authentic Movement, the latter (which I also refer to as “mindfulness-in-motion”) having been compared to the practice of Vipassana meditation. She asked many questions and listened intently. Finally, with tears in her eyes as well, she asked, “Do you have articles I could read about all this and share with my colleagues? We have never heard of these forms. Would you come to Thailand to teach these things to us?”

THAILAND: October 2000

The Thai are a very friendly people; any guidebook will tell you that they are hospitable, warm, and generous. All this I found to be true. I didn’t, however, expect to uncover the “gold of darkness” beneath their smiling faces. I also did not expect that teaching in Thailand would give me a whole new perspective on my practice of Authentic Movement, highlighting cultural perceptions and differences, as well as assumptions inherent in the form itself.

On my arrival in Thailand, I made my way through the smog of downtown Bangkok to my hotel, where I was met the next day by Nuch—my guide and travel companion for most of my trip. For two days we visited temples and monasteries in Bangkok and surrounding villages, and on the third day boarded a bus to Kanchanaburi Province, an area several hours northwest of Bangkok near the famous River Kwai. We drove into the hills to the Children’s Village School

(Moo Baan Dek School)—the host of my three-day workshop in Authentic Movement and a two-day workshop for teens in Experiential Anatomy.

Moo Baan Dek is an alternative school for disadvantaged children based on holistic education. Part of its philosophy is the belief that all children—but particularly those with difficult childhoods—need to be near nature and actually in the water at least once a day. To this end, the school was built on the river and included the daily ritual of the children bathing in the river together in the late afternoon.

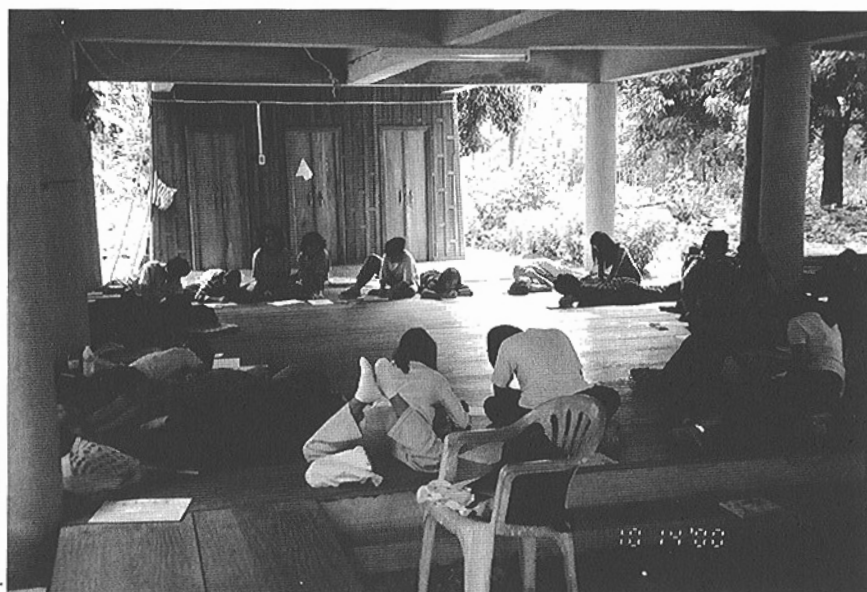
The school itself consisted of several buildings, as well as a workshop center tucked back in the woods by the river where we would be for the three days. The workshop center was a two-story structure with sleeping quarters above and an open workshop space below—a large wooden platform open on all sides, with two long tables used for meals and the other half left open for movement.

We had planned the Authentic Movement workshop with a full schedule from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. My translator would be a Thai woman named Kop, a dancer who had traveled to the U.S. and spoke fluent English. Days would begin with yoga at 7:00 a.m. (led by a Thai yoga teacher), followed by breakfast. There would be two daytime sessions—9:00 to 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., with an afternoon break—and an evening session from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. for movement or for discussions. The group was to be limited to twelve participants.

When I arrived, my host politely gave me the list of twenty-six students. “What happened?” I inquired. She apologized and explained that an American professor at one of the Bangkok universities had seen a flyer for the workshop and had applied for a grant to send his counseling psychology students—all twenty-two of them! They were all on a bus right now from Bangkok, she explained,



Drawing by workshop participant, done after an Authentic Movement session.



Workshop participants drawing as part of an Authentic Movement session in the studio, Children's Village School, Kanchanaburi, Thailand, October 2000.

each on a full scholarship. Additionally, she continued, there would be the yoga teacher, Nuch, and two teachers from the Village School, making the total twenty-six.

Day One, Morning: What if I step over someone?

After morning yoga and breakfast, the group gathered in the studio. Each person had been given a handout on Authentic Movement the night before. The handout, translated by Nuch, provided a list of guidelines for mover and witness and gave a brief introduction to the discipline of Authentic Movement, which included this quote from its founder, Janet Adler:

The form of this work is simple—one person witnesses another person moving in a studio space... The witness, especially in the beginning, carries a larger responsibility for consciousness, as she sits to the side of the movement space. She is not "looking at" the person moving, she is witnessing, listening—bringing a specific quality of attention or presence to the experience of the mover. The mover works with eyes closed in order to expand her experience of listening to the deeper levels of her kinesthetic reality. Her task is to respond to a sensation, to an inner impulse, to energy coming from the

personal unconscious, the collective unconscious, or the superconscious.
(Adler, 1987)*

That morning, we introduced ourselves, and I tried out a few Thai words: *Swadikah* ("hello" for a female) and *di chan chi Susan-kah* (giving my name), and *jang rai?* (How do you feel?). After going over the handout together, there were many questions—indicative of the cultural challenges we would face together.

For instance, someone asked: "What if I should meet up with someone else while I am moving? Like if I am walking through the space and I should accidentally approach someone else who is lying down?"

I explained that you can choose to move away or to engage in the interaction, but that ultimately each person was free to find his or her "authentic response" in the moment. My answer didn't seem to satisfy them. To clarify the question, another offered: "Yes, but for instance, what if my feet are near someone's head?" Another added urgently, "Or, what if I should actually step over someone?"

I was aware of the taboo of the feet in many Asian cultures, particularly in relation to the head, so I began to understand the dilemma to which they

were referring. Even so, I felt drawn to stick to the tenets of Authentic Movement as I understood them: "Then notice your feelings about this," I suggested, "and the associations that come up. Use them as a mirror to learn more about yourself. In the discipline of Authentic Movement, there is no movement that is considered inherently good or bad, right or wrong, better or worse. So, if you find you are experiencing these types of judgments, you are invited to notice them, become conscious of them, as part of the practice itself."

Kop looked over at me tensely, waiting for me to add something that she could use to console them. After she translated what I had said, a silence followed. I continued, "Of course, as we discussed, if you find that you want to move quickly or with large movements, you can always open your eyes slightly to be sure you will not endanger yourself or another mover in the space." Kop eagerly conveyed this message to the group, as she recognized I had given them a "safety valve" with which to negotiate this social problem.

Next we talked about the structure for our sessions. "Because the group is so large," I explained, "half the group will move and half will witness. In the next session, you will switch roles. The witnesses should sit around the edges of the space, and the movers should find a place in the space to begin. I will begin and end each session by ringing my

*From "Who Is The Witness?" by Janet Adler, CQ 12:1, Winter 87.

[right] Workshop participants drawing as part of an Authentic Movement session, Children's Village School, Thailand, October 2000.

[below] Drawing by workshop participant, done after an Authentic Movement session.

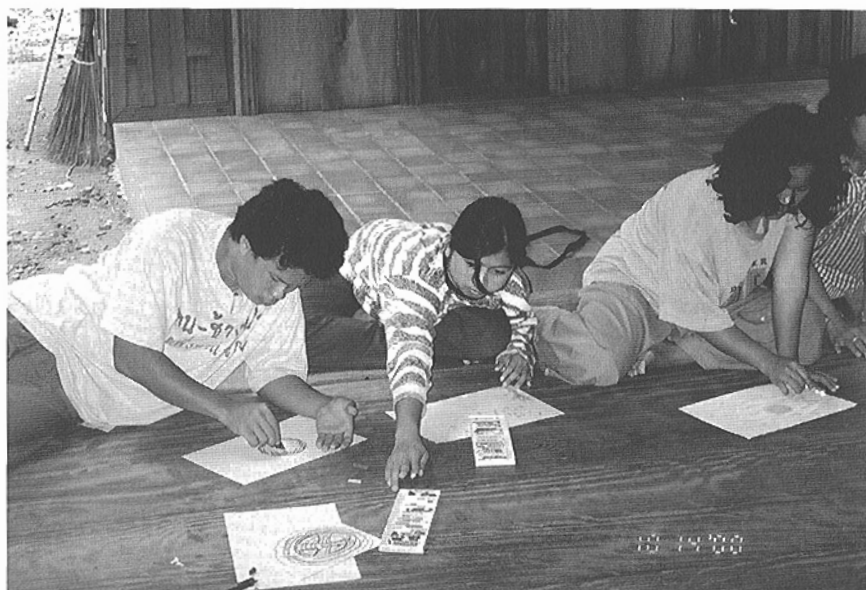
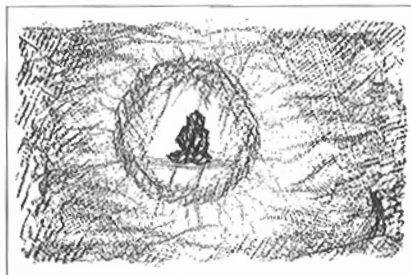


photo © Susan Bauer

Tibetan bells. After both sessions, we will come back together to talk about our experiences." I explained that we would sometimes draw before talking as a group.

The movement session that morning included quite a bit of stillness and a lot of "peeking." The verbal sharing was minimal, although there continued to be a steady stream of questions about the history and philosophy of the practice. As counseling psychology students, they were bright and eager to discuss these more intellectual aspects.

Day One, Afternoon: What if I fall off the edge?

That afternoon, we worked in dyads, in which each person was only responsible to witness one mover. Before we began, there were a few questions from the experience in the morning. One man spoke: "I notice that as I am moving with my eyes closed, after awhile I don't really have a sense of where I am in the space. And sometimes I am afraid I will walk over the edge or bump into one of the pillars." (There was a small drop-off from the edge of the floor to the ground.) I reminded them that it was OK to peek. "Yes," he continued, "but sometimes I might be so involved in the movement that I might not even realize I am near there. I mean, what if I should fall off the edge?"

"If you are in some danger like that," I explained, "the witness can protect the mover by simply raising an arm up to stop the mover should he or she walk that far. But that is generally not necessary."

The witnesses took their places sitting around the room, and the movers settled into the center. I rang the bells to begin the first session.

During the session, the man who had asked the question (now a mover) began to walk quickly and directly in a straight line with a slight smile on his face. Immediately his witness scurried around the room to the other side just in time to block him from walking over the edge by raising his arm as I had described. (Actually, any witness sitting nearby could have done the same.) The mover then turned around and walked in the opposite direction in the same brisk way, now grinning widely, and again his witness ran to the opposite side to protect him. A few of the other witnesses began to giggle. By now, much of the focus of the witnesses had shifted to him, to see if he would do this again, which he did from time to time.

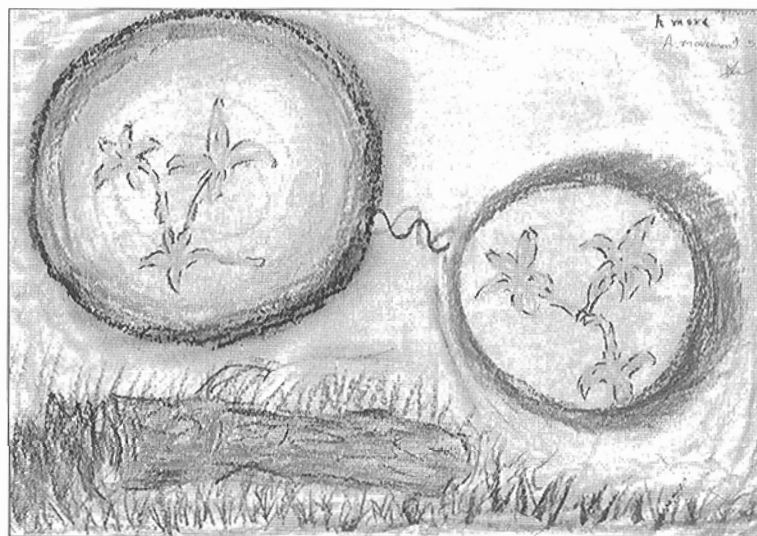
Then, in the next session, the movers and witnesses switched roles. As they began to move, I saw that many of the witnesses—now in the role of movers—had decided that they liked this newfound "game" and began their own versions of it, some walking backwards slowly, some sideways, some

turning and turning, getting nearer and nearer to the edge. And, of course, this sent the witnesses into their "role" of scuffling around the sides of the space to protect their mover from going over the edge. The witnesses, who (as movers) hadn't seen what was going on, now began to laugh as well.

As I watched this all unfold, I began to feel that they had created this game to avoid the deeper and perhaps unfamiliar process of sensing and feeling that is invited by Authentic Movement. And yet, at the same time, it seemed that this newly invented game did mirror exactly where many of them actually were with this process—on the edge of stepping in more deeply and wanting some protection and guidance about the boundaries. Were they asking, "Is the container safe enough for me to risk stepping in?" I wondered.

Later, when the group came together to talk, very little was said about the movement. Some mentioned they found the laughter distracting. Others said they had enjoyed discovering that they could be "other than serious" in their movement. It seemed a welcome revelation to them that they could break out of their sense of politeness and laugh and smile while moving.

That night we discussed Authentic Movement and its relationship to dance, therapy, and healing. We spoke about listening, being in the present,



Drawing by workshop participant, drawn after the "moving in nature" session.

and "not knowing." We also spoke a little bit about the metaphor of "walking to the edge," of protecting and being protected, of risk and involvement, leaving them to consider this in relation to their experiences earlier that afternoon.

After singing a song, we set off to our sleeping mats with a bit of the jovialness from the afternoon session still seeping into the nighttime conversation, animating the dark night sky.

Day Two, Morning: How does this apply to my daily life?

On the second day, another concern arose. Someone asked: "How does this practice of Authentic Movement apply to my daily life?" Others seemed to have the same question. I agreed that it was a good question and said that we'd address it in our afternoon session. Though I wasn't yet sure how, I knew I needed to find a way to let them discover the answer for themselves.

That morning, some of the stiffness of the day before seemed to have lifted, and they began exploring a wider range of movement, as well as talking more readily about their movement experiences.

In the afternoon, I explained that we would address the question of how

this practice can apply to our lives with a related exercise that was not Authentic Movement per se.

I asked them to each take some time in nature, alone, staying fairly close by (down a path or by the river). "There," I began, "notice what you become aware of, what draws your attention—for example, the softness of the earth and perhaps a desire to lie down. Then maybe you lie down and notice again. Perhaps, as you look up, you see a cloud in the sky. Just be there and follow what you experience."

The session would be twenty minutes long, done in silence, and end with the Tibetan bells. They were to bring back one element from nature as a symbol of their experience. It was a warm day, with a cool breeze coming off the river. They set off with eager curiosity.

BELL.....space.....BELL.

When they returned, they drew in silence and then we gathered to talk. Each had made a deep journey in their short time in the woods, noticing particular aspects of nature (sounds, trees, footprints, birds, leaves), as well as corresponding metaphors and messages. The drawings further expressed these powerful interconnections.

As each person spoke, we began to see a common thread: as we look, we

see; as we listen, we hear. Further, by becoming mindful of what we perceive, often a "layer" of meaning—particular to us and the present moment—arises to teach us, to guide us, perhaps to awaken us to something from the unconscious that was previously hidden from our view. Maintaining this type of heightened awareness, of movement, sensation, feelings, thoughts, images—such as is cultivated in Authentic Movement—can encourage a way of living that is equally open and receptive, aware and perceptive.

Now that they had discovered this through their own experiences, I could simply add: "This is one way that Authentic Movement can enter your daily lives."

Day Two, Evening: The Embrace

By that night, I sensed that the group was beginning to trust me and each other and that we were ready to begin working together at a deeper level. What emerged in the next session was nothing particularly unusual in my experience of Authentic Movement, yet proved to be most extraordinary to them.

After the group had moved for some time, I noticed one woman, a

Children from the Children's Village School bathing in the river, Kanchanaburi, Thailand, 2000.



photo © Susan Bauer

mover, sitting still for a long time. She then began to rock gently back and forth. Soon she began to cry, softly at first, and then with waves of gentle sobs. At the first sounds of her crying, many of the other movers seemed to freeze; the witnesses shifted their positions uncomfortably. Then another mover began to gently inch her way closer to the sound of the crying, feeling her way with her hands groping in the air. She slowly sat down next to the woman, again groping until she found the woman's seated body, and hugged her from the side. Resting in the embrace, the two rocked back and forth together, amidst tears, until the session ended.

Afterwards, movers and witnesses drew in silence. We gathered to talk, movers speaking first, followed by witnesses. The woman who had been crying kept silent, and no one spoke about her crying, yet the group seemed tense and disturbed. Finally, one man said that as a mover he had felt very uncomfortable to hear a person crying and wanted her to stop. He said he even felt ashamed to hear her. Other movers agreed, saying they had not known what to do. The woman who had cried looked down at the floor and remained silent. Then another woman had an idea, which she explained quite animatedly and cheerfully, clapping now and again as she spoke to the group.

Perplexed, I awaited my translation. I learned that the woman was proposing a game, one that involved a type of "call and response" rhythmic clapping by the group. Many seemed eager to play. Then one woman who had said very little so far spoke up, requesting instead that I continue to facilitate the group. She also wanted my opinion about whether or not they should play the game.

After an awkward silence, I responded: "Well, traditionally in Authentic Movement, we wouldn't play a game right now. Rather, we would stay with the experience—even if it is uncomfortable—and see what there is to be learned. In this practice, as I have said, there are no right or wrong, better or worse, movements—or emotions for that matter—and so, normally, I would not suggest that we shift the focus from what is happening."

"But," I continued, "in respect for your customs and your feelings, if you would like to play this game, it would be OK." Another discussion ensued until it was finally decided that they wouldn't play the game and instead wanted to transfer the discussion back to me. We continued discussing the session as usual—movers speaking first, then witnesses. No one mentioned anything about the crying or their responses, and the "crying woman" still sat silently.

As we went off to our sleeping quarters that night, I noticed a particular silence among the group. Rather than the cheerful conversation of the night before, everyone just went to sleep. I slept also, relieved to have made it through our day, but somehow unsettled about it all.

Day Three, Morning: The Sun Sets, The Sun Rises; A Celebration

At breakfast the next day, Kop approached me. It seemed the group was still quite upset about the session the night before. Apparently they didn't think I had handled things very well. "Why is that?" I inquired. She replied, "When they agreed not to play the game, they were curious to see what other method you would create to help them feel better. But instead you went back to the usual talking process about the movement." "But," I said, "I had already explained that I would follow the guidelines of the practice and not shift the focus from what was actually happening." "Yes," she said, "but because that is our custom, they still expected that of you as the leader."

Next, we discussed the woman who had been crying. She seemed to have mainly kept to herself and was quite isolated from the group. Kop suggested I

talk to her, and to my surprise, the woman agreed. Our brief conversation was a blessing that created an opening for the entire group.

With great enthusiasm, the woman told me about her experience. Apparently, at one point in her movement, when she was still for so long, she felt herself at the edge of a cliff watching an exquisite sunset. Soon she began to see all the things in her life that had come and gone, the transitions she had been through and the things she had lost. As she rocked herself back and forth, she began to cry. She had been through several painful experiences of loss recently, and sadness flooded through her in a welcome relief. She also said she felt very awkward at first when another woman came to hold her, but as she relaxed, she felt loved and cared for. That, she said, had been the greatest gift of all.

She showed me the drawing she had done after moving, of herself sitting on the edge of the cliff with a bright sun above her. Though not the sunset image

she had spoken of, this, she said, was how she had felt by the end. I asked her if she wanted to share her experience with the group. "Yes," she said eagerly, "I wanted to speak last night, but I was afraid if I looked at anyone or talked I would start to cry again."

After breakfast, we gathered for our morning circle. There was quite a bit of tension when Kop announced that we would be discussing yesterday's session, but as the "crying woman" spoke, the group began to relax, listening intently to her description of her movement. When she finished, the woman who had held her asked if she might speak too. She said she felt profoundly moved to comfort this crying woman, even though she was "not supposed to do it," and found that as she held her, she became deeply sad herself—for all the times she had cried alone in her room and never been comforted. She had begun to cry also, she admitted.

Then a man asked, "And can the witnesses speak now?" "Yes, please," I

said. He expressed that he had found himself feeling very emotional as well—not in response to the crying but in response to seeing someone in grief being held and comforted. Never in his life—in his family or with his friends—had he seen this, and the beauty and gentleness of it had moved him deeply. Other witnesses spoke: some had felt awkward and uncomfortable, some stunned, some sad, and still others had felt similarly appreciative to witness such a moment.

As the group realized that none of them had ever seen someone cry in public—and consequently had never witnessed this scene of comforting—they sat in the silence of this realization. A deep sadness spread throughout the room as each perhaps ran through moments of personal suffering when they needed comfort but no one was there.

And slowly, two by two, these friends began to lean together and hug each other—an embrace not out of joy and welcome, as is the custom, but out of sadness and compassion. Kop and I looked at each other, like two white-water rafters who had made it through to calm waters, and reached out and held each other's hand.

From this deep release, this sharing and honesty, a lightness appeared in the group. What they had hoped to achieve from the game now emanated from within each of them. As an expression of this, I believe, someone asked to move to music; there seemed a desire to celebrate. We decided to take a tea break and resume our session with some music and dance.

When we came back together, they asked for music that was joyous and wild. I chose music by my longtime friend and colleague John Sprague, which inspires community celebration



photographer unknown

Susan Bauer [center middle], Narumol "Kop" Thammapruksa [front, center, white shirt] with Authentic Movement workshop participants in a last group photo. Children's Village School, Thailand, October 2000.



Road sign seen from the car window on the way back to Bangkok, Thailand, October 2000.

like none other that I have found. After some tentative individual swaying, one person after another began to dance together, around, and between each other, finding a collective expression of joy, creativity, and optimism. A final circle of silence closed our movement journey together; it seemed there was nothing more to be said.

That evening, before our final session, I walked down to the river. Bending forward, I cupped my hands and cooled my face with a scoop of the sparkling river bath.

Day Four, Morning: The Departure

The next morning, after a festive breakfast, the orderly line that formed to say goodbye to me soon dispersed into a big group hug, some laughing and others crying, all of us grateful for our time together. We took some last group photos on the stairs before their bus took them back to the city.

I spent my last day there alone. The following morning, I drove away at 5 a.m. with the school's director, who was headed back to Bangkok for a meeting. We passed miles of jungle woods, elephant riding camps, hills, streams, and small roadside food stalls. After two hours, we entered the nearest city. Stopped at a traffic light, I looked up and saw a huge banner across the width of the street. Below a stream of Thai words, it read: "Welcome to City of Nice People."

Seeing this, I realized I now understood more about the collective burden that this aspect of Thai culture placed on my students. As I had also struggled with my own cultural conditioning and assumptions during our workshop, I could appreciate their discomfort and honesty, and could share, as well, in the transformation that had emerged.

As we drove the rest of the way into Bangkok, I reflected on all I had learned about myself and the teaching of Authentic Movement through our

cross-cultural dialogues. Our experience together was a powerful reminder of the influence that our conditioning can have on our perspectives, no matter what culture we come from. It also revealed the potential of Authentic Movement as a vehicle for transformation—increasing awareness and thus the possibility for more conscious choice. And "more being."

In this short workshop, I felt that my students had equally been my teachers. The compassion we had reached on together had truly proven to be a gift of gold to us all.



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Thank you to Kop, Nuch, and SEM. [S.B.]

2.....EDITOR NOTES

Melinda Buckwalter
Heidi Henderson
Nancy Stark Smith
Andrea Olsen (p. 102)

4.....CQ MESSAGES

5.....CONTACT TRUST

8.....LETTERS

10.....SHELF LIFE

publications received

56.....ESSENTIALS.

Basic CI Principles & Practices

Place and Pour
by Nita Little

57.....STILL MOVING

Contact Improv. shoptalk &
dialogue

Reflections at the 25th Anniversary
of the Breitenbush Jam:
Interview with A. Alessi, R. Chung,
K.J. Holmes, D. Lepkoff, K. Nelson,
S. Paxton, S. Smith, and N. Stark
Smith
by Kristin Horrigan

64.....CI NEWSLETTER—Contact
Improvisation news & notices

73.....CONTACTS

an international referral system
for Contact Improvisation

97.....CQ FINE PRINT—nuts & bolts

98.....DANCE MAP—classified ads of
programs, services, etc.

100.....BACK ISSUES—index

Place2.

11.....PERFORMING A SCHOOL: The Bocal Project

Boris Charmatz in dialogue with Jeroen Peeters

19.....ALL AT ONCE: Dancing *The Ridge* in New York City Parks

by Hana van der Kolk

26.....ON THE STREETS, IN THE FOREST:

Community-based site work with Tamar Rogoff

based on an interview with Tamar Rogoff by Sharyn Korey

33.....REPEATING DISTANCE

by Lin Snelling

34.....ARTIFACTS OF THE EPHEMERAL: a moving installation

by Colleen Bartley

38.....LOWER LEFT (not only) IN PLACE: The Satellite Project

by Margaret Paek

40.....THE EMERGENT IMPROVISATION PROJECT: Embodying Complexity

by Susan Sgorbati

47.....EXCHANGING STONE FOR COAL

by Tamara Ashley and Simone Kenyon

48....."WELCOME TO CITY OF NICE PEOPLE"

Cross-Cultural Dialogues on Authentic Movement in Thailand

by Susan Bauer

102.....DANCING IN A NEW PLACE

by Andrea Olsen, CQ guest coeditor for the Place issues

illustration © Lin Snelling



A view from the Japanese pavilion at Monty Theatre
Antwerp, Belgium.