

ปกิณกะ

Friendship isn't a big thing – it's a million little things.

John P. Loftus

Whoever coined that phrase knew how friendships are formed. So it was when I first met Professor Dr. Somchai Bovornkitti some 30 years ago. The occasion was a dinner organized by another friend, Dr. Boon Vanasin, at the Baan Khun Luang Restaurant on the Chao Phraya River in the busy Sriyan area of Bangkok.

"Acharn Somchai", as he is popularly known, and I sat across from each other, enjoying the many tasty Thai dishes and the views along the river. I found him to be friendly and outgoing, and we hit it off right away. After the dinner was over, we arranged to meet again, and frequently got together thereafter for lunch or dinner, or for no reason at all other than to enjoy each other's company.

One of Acharn (the Thai word for professor) Somchai's many admirable characteristics that stood out immediately was his curiosity about things – literally "every thing". He devours new knowledge and is always seeking to learn more about a wide range of subjects. As I got to know him better I observed that he was never bored or boring. Acharn Somchai is what every good teacher hopes each of their students will become – a life-long learner.

As a medical specialist, Acharn Somchai is a first-class expert on a number of medical conditions and diseases, which I always find very interesting. For example, he is sought out in Thailand and abroad for his knowledge of sarcoidosis and melioidosis, as well as a host of respiratory diseases and their precursors, such as radon and asbestos.

Of course, as a layman I could offer no in-depth knowledge to the conversation on such matters, but I had studied classical languages in university (Latin and ancient Greek), which gave me a fairly deep knowledge of English owing to the need to know the function of words before they could be accurately translated into these highly inflected languages. And of course Acharn Somchai always wanted to know more: more about the subtle differences in the meaning of words, more about how the English language differs in the United Kingdom and the United States, more about the etymology of words, and more about ways that he could improve his speech and writing.

Indeed writing is one of Acharn Somchai's passions. On visiting his library and study in his home, I discovered that he was a prolific writer and scholar. He had written hundreds of scientific papers in both English and Thai. He had also written or edited many books and texts on his realm of expertise. It was through this area that our association and friendship deepened. He had observed that there was a need for Thai doctors and medical practitioners to gain deeper knowledge of medicine. Would I like to help him in launching a new professional journal that would contain both Thai and English-language articles, and thus open his fellow Thai professionals to greater contact with their peers abroad, as well as show outsiders the nature of Thai research?

This time it was my turn to say "of course". I had years of experience in preparing publications. At the time I was working at the United Nations doing just

that. And so it began. Acharn Somchai launched the new journal, the *Asian Pacific Journal of Allergy and Immunology*, which later was the first publication in Thailand to document early cases of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the country and to warn that HIV infection could spread rapidly owing to some unique features of those infected in Thailand. I edited all the English-language articles and abstracts of the Thai-language ones, so I had advanced knowledge of the findings of new research. After discussing the matter with Acharn Somchai, I wrote a news article for the Bangkok Post, where I had once worked as an editor in my younger days, on the threat posed by HIV/AIDS. It was thus that, back in June 1985, Thailand learned about the ominous menace it was facing. At that time AIDS was a death sentence, and few wanted to accept the reality that this disease was present in the country. The new journal offered solid proof!

Acharn Somchai went on to launch many other medical journals and I worked on all of them as his English-language editor. I also edited the many papers he wrote for journals published abroad. As time went on I became deeply impressed by my friend's search for knowledge and the hard work he put in to make that knowledge known to a wider audience both in Thailand and abroad. Thailand has much to offer and he was often one of the main conduits for getting out the word to the rest of the world. Over the years, in addition to textbooks and formal presentations, he has written more than 1,000 academic papers!

Although it is the enormous contribution Acharn Somchai has made to medicine and science in Thailand

that I have described to this point, it is important to emphasize what a warm and generous friend he is. Our friendship also encompassed our families. We all frequently dined out together, and when my daughter got married, my wife and I asked Acharn Somchai to be the *poo yai* (respected elder) at the wedding.

Acharn Somchai is widely respected because of who he is and what he has accomplished, as I am sure will be amply described by many other friends only too happy to recount how he has touched them over the years. I should hasten to add that there were few times when we dined out that people did not come to the table and *wai* (Thai greeting with palms pressed together in prayer-like fashion) him with deep respect. Perhaps it was a fellow physician whom he had taught in medical school, or a grateful patient whom he had cured. The list could go on – he counts among his patients people from every sector of society, from rice farmers in the Northeast to His Majesty the King of Thailand. Being with him is always like being with a movie star or famous celebrity.

There are many more things I could write about Acharn Somchai, but that would defeat the purpose of such a message as this on an important occasion.

Simply put, this renaissance man is a fine fellow in every way. As a scientist, communicator, human being, and as a friend. If, as Eustache Deschamps put it, "Friends are relatives you make for yourself", Acharn Somchai is my older brother.

Congratulations on your seventh cycle birthday, Big Brother! I hope you ask me to write a note on the occasion of your eighth cycle birthday, too.