

The Cultural Divide: “To Do” vs. “To Be”

Let me begin this chapter by asking you a question: Is life a collection of events to be experienced, or is it a series of problems to be solved?

If you paid attention to the chapter about Time, you’ll remember that your culture views time as linear and sequential...everything that happens falls along that line. And the focus of that line is the future. Therefore you, as a Western guy, will probably answer that life consists of a series of problems and it is your job to solve them in the correct order. According to your Western culture (whether it’s American, Australian, British, or northern European), your job is to spend your life making something of yourself – to produce, to be useful, to contribute. You may have been raised with the idea that “idle hands are the devil’s playground,” and feel you must fill every day with “doing.” Your life is probably fast, hectic, and stressful as a result.

Your culture is a Doing culture.

We Thais, on the other hand, with our cultural focus on time as a shifting sphere that holds all things simultaneously, would answer that life is a collection of events to be experienced, and it is our task to “be” – no matter what life presents to us. And our focus is the present, colored by the past. Therefore our job in life, according to our culture, is to seek harmony, balance, and participation – and enjoy the rhythm of life as it occurs, instead of trying to “change” or “improve” it. We have been raised with the idea that all events are driven by Karma and are pretty much inevitable, so we fill our days with contemplation, reflection and deepening our inner understanding of the “status quo.” Our lives (Bangkok excepted!) are slower, more relaxed, and more playful as a result.

The Thai culture is a Being culture.

Here are a few more questions that will help you see the difference between your “Doing” culture and our “Being” culture more clearly:

1. Which is better: a fast-paced life or a slow-paced life?
2. Do you judge people according to how much they do, how much they accomplish, and how productive they are?
3. Does “not doing something productive” mean you are a lazy (and therefore bad) person?
4. Is it possible to change the circumstances of your life? Can anyone?
5. What’s more important: to work well or to play well?

As a typical Westerner, your answers would be pretty predictable. You’d prefer a fast-paced and productive life, and your culture would approve. After all, isn’t “sloth” (laziness) one of the 7 Deadly Sins? And if you are American, you were brought up to believe in your heart that anybody can change their own circumstances if they work hard enough and long enough at it. You might even feel guilty if you take time off to sit and stare at the landscape, sneak off for an afternoon nap, or even take a vacation.

A typical Thai would answer those questions very differently. Life is life, with its own rhythm and pace. We hold monks who devote their lives to silence and contemplation in the highest regard – knowing that they are experiencing the fullness of life's events by just letting them be and adjusting themselves to the circumstances. We grow up knowing and believing in our hearts that life is an unpredictable kaleidoscope of which we are only a part, and that no amount of will or effort will change our circumstances. We are able to see the joy in combining work with play, and don't view either one of them as more important than the other.

Let's look at some examples:

Roy and Tola are discussing one of Roy's friends. Roy says, "I really respect Frank. He's worked his way up from nothing, and owns three businesses – he's a self-taught genius, and everything he touches is a success. Sure, he can be a bit of a bastard sometimes, but it's all aimed at getting results as fast as he can – and he's brilliant at it." In Roy's description, you can see how much he admires what Frank does. The goals he pursues. The results he gets. The "doing" that is Frank.

Tola describes Frank differently: "Roy's friend Frank is unhappy, arrogant, and hurtful to people with his words." His "doing-ness" is not as important to her – it's how he is "being" that strikes her as his most important characteristic.

Here's another example. Let's say you're working in Thailand, running an office that employs many Thai workers. Your American company has brought a serious climate of "work is for work" into Bangkok, and you are finding yourself frustrated by how much time the Thai workers spend chatting, socializing, and making and receiving personal phone calls – in other words, they're not paying attention to the "task at hand" and clearly having too much fun. It's pretty easy to see that your Thai workers are "being" at work, rather than "doing" the work.

Let's look at the differences in a little more detail.

The Western Value: "To Do"

If you come from an "Anglo" culture like the USA, the UK, Australia, or Canada, "Doing" is a very powerful characteristic of your culture, and it is important for everybody to be constantly productive, planning, executing, and evaluating all the time. Conventional wisdom in your culture is that doing is what creates success – and if you don't do enough, you'll never succeed. Everybody in your culture knows that. It's the "truth" about the way life is.

For example, look at how important it is in your culture when you meet somebody for the first time, to find out what they "do" so you can figure out who they are and whether they are worthy of your respect. Even in your language not only is "how do you do?" a formal greeting, (with "how are you doing?" as the informal version), "what do you do for a living?" is one of the most common icebreakers in any conversation you have with strangers. To illustrate that point, imagine you are meeting three people for the first time. You find out that one is a senior executive at an oil company; the other is a

forklift operator at a manufacturing plant; the third is unemployed. Which one is most worthy of your respect?

As a matter of fact, just being “unemployed” can feel humiliating for somebody in your “doing” culture, because after all, the deep perception is that if you’re doing nothing, you are nothing.

In Monday morning conversations with your friends, don’t you always ask “what did you do over the weekend?” When you call your friends or family on the phone, isn’t one of the questions you ask “what are you/have you been doing?” Even in school, one of your early assignments was probably to write a 1000 word essay on what you did on your summer holiday.

Westerners tend to look at time as either a precious resource to be managed or an enemy to be conquered – and “doing,” being future-oriented, helps you measure your “progress” so you can move on to the next thing, and the next thing, and the next. This focus on doing is almost like an endless game of “Beat the Clock” – a marathon you’ll never win. But at least doing something proves you’re contributing to your society and not being a burden to anybody.

At work, you focus on work, investing your energy in organizing, planning, doing, and documenting what you’ve done so you can leave a trail of proof behind you to demonstrate your worth. Not only that, many organizations have taken it one step further and adopted formal policies for organizing, planning, and documenting – calling it “continuous quality improvement” or “standard operating procedures.” The **how** of doing is important to document, so that people will “save time” by not having to figure things out for themselves over and over again.

Since work time is for work and “getting things done,” socializing or taking time for personal phone calls or emails is not only frowned upon, in some companies it’s a reason for discipline. After all, in a Western culture, the employer is paying for his employee’s “time” and the whole purpose of work is to accomplish something.

The orientation to doing can be so strong within your culture that you aren’t able to even see the possibility of living any other way. But there are many cultures that do not share your point of view, and Thailand is one of them. If you expect there to be conflicts or misunderstandings about “Doing vs. Being,” you will never be disappointed!

The Thai Value: “To Be”

In Thailand, “Being” is a powerful characteristic of our culture, and we value inaction and acceptance of the way things are more than we value being busy for its own sake. After all, everything is subject to the law of Karma or fate and we are powerless to control, change, or stop the wheel. So we focus on controlling or changing ourselves from the inside, instead.

We don’t determine a person’s worth by what they “do” – we evaluate them based on how they are “being” and who they “are” (including who their family is, who their employer is, and what their status is in the hierarchy).

The Thai culture is less hectic and more relaxed, because we are driven less by the desire to get something done than we are to just participate in life the way it shows up and live each day as it comes. Another way of saying it is that sometimes the journey is more important to us than the destination – sometimes working to achieve a goal is more important than actually achieving it – because through the journey, through the work itself, we grow and expand internally as we adjust ourselves to the circumstances that present themselves.

We look at time as boundaryless and eternal, almost as if just “Being” expands time so we can be more fully present in each moment of now. There is no guilt or shame attached to “doing nothing” – after all, life always presents us something new to do in its own time and at its own pace. And our focus is on being at peace with that.

We have a hard time distinguishing “work time” from “play time” and will bring a sense of play into the workplace that some Westerners might find difficult to deal with. We’ll chat, laugh, joke, gossip, and generally enjoy the camaraderie of our co-workers while we’re at work because what’s most important to us is not “how” the work gets done but the end product. Our pride is not in the result, but in the process we go through to achieve it.

An example comes to mind, told to me by a Northern European manager of a machine shop that employed Thai workers in his international engineering company. The Thai machinists would sit barefoot in a circle on the machine shop floor, laughing, gossiping and joking as they passed around the tools and collaborated about how to make a particular part. A new supervisor (also European) saw the barefoot Thai men sitting on the floor, and sternly pointed at the workbench, indicating THAT was the proper way and the proper place to work with the tools – and pointed out that not wearing safety shoes was a violation of the standard operating procedures. When he returned a few hours later, it was to find the Thai workers wearing their safety shoes, yet sitting in a circle on the workbench itself, laughing, joking and collaborating as before – and producing beautifully machined parts.