
HELP ME, ASIA

About the Author

Shawn D. Phelps has a BA in Journalism from Ryerson University. Even though she started at age 22 and finished at 27—thanks to a one-year backpacking trip to Australia in the middle—she still won the top writing award for a graduating student. Feeling restless, she then bought a two-month bus pass and travelled across Canada, writing on spec for a travel magazine. Still restless, she did an internship for an NGO in South Africa, where she researched and wrote articles about education in townships.

Back in Canada, Shawn worked her way up to senior editor at *National Post Business* magazine (now *Financial Post Business* magazine), which she fatefully left after her life imploded at 30 with a break up and an autoimmune disorder. This led to her seven-month solo journey from Thailand to Nepal and her first published book, *Help Me, Asia*.

After the journey, she became editor of a human resources magazine. But she'd always dreamed of teaching, so she became a magazine writing and editing instructor at Centennial College. For the past three years, she has run workshops at companies across Canada with Bruner Business Communication. In 2006, she co-founded a grassroots charity called Jai Dee (Good Heart) Children's Fund with a focus on health and education. She lives between Toronto and Meaford (where she's experimenting with square-foot gardening and permaculture).

HELP ME, ASIA

FIVE
COUNTRIES,
ONE MISSION.
LEARN HOW
TO BE HAPPY



Shawn D. Phelps


Outsiders Press

*In this book, some names have been changed to maintain the safety of individuals, and some conversations are actually a collection of conversations collapsed into one, for the reader's sake. No writer can escape his or her own memory filters or point of view, but I did my best to tell every story in this book as it happened.

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This book is dedicated to...



Those of you
Who have ever felt alone, weird,
Lost, depressed, confused,
Rejected, used,
To let you know you're not alone.
We—me and the other people you see
Walking by you on the street—
Are all in this together,
And as long as we never
Forget this,
We'll all be okay.



It's Time



It's time.

It's time to rock 'n' roll,

It's time to roll the dice.

It's time.

It's time to stand naked in the sun

Or let the rain pour down.

It doesn't really matter

As long as I get to feel alive

Instead of feeling numb.

It doesn't really matter

As long as just one person's glad

I went out on that ledge

And gave them all I had

Instead of keeping me all to myself.

And someone somewhere

Will be glad I broke the silence.

Someone somewhere

Will be freed by my courage.

That's what happens when you aren't afraid

To give the world what you've got

Instead of worrying 'bout what you're not.

To stand and be what you are

With the intensity of a shooting star.

Like all those who live on the edge,

Giving everything.

Well...here I go.



Let me know if it meant anything to you...

(contact@helpmeasia.com)

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This book has been a journey in itself...and a form of therapy. I put my career on hold and mostly worked-to-live as I wrote 11 drafts over nine years. The hardest thing was figuring out what to get rid of. Many kind people helped along the way. First, Joy Gugeler provided honest feedback on one of my earliest drafts—which was raw and self-indulgent. A few years later, Val Gee edited my first chapter. Her suggestions helped me begin a complete and necessary rewrite of the book, but it was her encouragement that made it possible for me to continue against what looked like insane odds. I'm also grateful to all the agents and publishers who rejected my book (especially the one who told me to cut over 100 pages) because they forced me to keep polishing the core of the story. Evelyn Ennor, Don Phelps and Rachel Dupuis all offered valuable suggestions on the final draft. Alisa Yampolsky made time to copyedit the book, even though she was swamped with other stuff. Book designer David Moratto, with help from photographer Henry Feather, went above and beyond to make this book look better than I imagined it could. Thanks to my

parents, for their support and courage to keep trying to learn and grow; to my kindhearted brother, who's always there when I need him; to my beautiful niece, Sarah, who inspires me with her determination to make her dreams happen; to my friend, Rona, who always makes me laugh and my friend Laura, who challenged me to just "get the book done." But, above all, thanks to Thanou Thirakul, who never let me give up on my dream and supported it in every way, including dragging me outside for uplifting walks whenever I felt frustrated or hopeless (which was often). Thanou, without your love and friendship this book simply would not be, and I would never have found the courage to embrace the darkness in myself. Thank you.

There would be no story without all the people I met on my travels. I believe that each experience you have and each person you connect with transforms you into who you will become, and so I'm grateful to every person I met on that journey and, further, every person I've met in my life. Thanks for helping to turn me into who I became, and also who I am still becoming...



THAILAND



SURVIVING SILENCE



INSIDE THE TEMPLE, the wood floor felt cool and solid on my bare feet as I walked across its planks, setting down my mat halfway to the stage. In the background, Rosemary's voice rose and fell.

"Reach gently to the left, to the right. Feel the touch of your feet on the floor."

But Rosemary wasn't there; it was a tape recording. In her place, Josie, her assistant, went through yoga postures on stage while we, 20-odd meditators, tried our best to follow along.

Yoga sucks, I thought. *And that Rosemary's probably curled up in bed.*

Rosemary and her husband, Steve, had held these 10-day meditation retreats at Wat Kow Tahm (Mountain Cave Monastery) on the island of Koh Phangan for 15 years. Both in their 50s, with much of their lives dedicated to teaching meditation, they had likely earned an extra hour or so in bed. But I was feeling good and sorry for myself, so I didn't care.

"Feel the touch of your feet on the ground. Experience the touch," Rosemary's voice instructed.

I bent my body forwards, backwards, sideways, each motion almost painful with rigidity. Bending wasn't one of my strong points, and I'm not just talking about my body. But this was why I had come—to learn to be more flexible, to go with the flow. Emotions like self-pity and anger are caused by thoughts, and I could learn to not react to thoughts. I could just watch them come and go, like clouds. At least that's what Steve and Rosemary said. In theory, it was an awesome idea. But while exercising in 80% humidity so early that the roosters were sound asleep, it felt ridiculous.

Besides, there were just too many thoughts, weren't there? David picking me up and swinging me around: "Who loves you, baby?" David looking me in the face one year later saying "I don't know if I ever loved you. I don't know if I even believe in love. Maybe it's just a survival mechanism for the species."

Okay, so maybe I was a little bitter. And pissed off. Why not? He wasn't the first to walk out on me. And what had love given me but a bunch of memories that I could obsess over while listening to Sarah McLachlan songs? What was I supposed to do with that?

"Keep observing your breath," Josie instructed. But my chest felt crushed, small; there was no room for air.

Why am I here? And how the hell is watching my breath gonna fix this mess?

I don't know, I answered myself. But you're out of options, so you might as well see it through. You've got to face this shit and move on.

◇*◇

The meditation hall, a high-ceilinged structure we could only enter in our stocking feet, was supposed to be silent. Bodies, however, betrayed this rule. They coughed, sneezed, grumbled and gurgled. Once in a while you would even hear a muffled burp. Each body function came with a sound, and the less you wanted others to hear it, the more it was amplified. My stomach, for example, sounded like a revving dump truck. But that was better than the guy next to me. His stomach screeched like a 13-year-old girl at a boy-band concert. And then there was the constant shifting of legs. New meditators can't sit still for long—they move.

It didn't help that it was almost dinner time, when we would eat heaping plates of bananas, papayas and pineapples with nuts and shredded coconut. It sounds boring, I know, but since hunger was the only desire that could be satiated, food was like heroin. My evidence? During our walking meditation before dinner, rather than exploring the beautiful paths through forested courtyards, everyone always stayed close to the dining hall, scheming and planning how they could be first in line.

Or is that just me?

Fortunately I had a (contraband) stash of butter cookies in my room. The day before the retreat I'd had some second thoughts and decided the cookies would help me through the rough patches. And though I was trying to avoid sugar—my health had been in freefall for over a year and sugar does naughty things to the immune system—it had always been my most dependable and satisfying addiction.

But since I couldn't go to my room for a couple hours, the cookies were providing no comfort. After checking my watch for the third time in 15 minutes, I went back to sitting, just sitting, as I had been instructed, trying to be aware of the sensations in my legs, which were asleep. I had been standing, walking and sitting for hours. Just when I found my breath and cleared my mind, the cicadas made themselves known. The insects' screeching rose like an orchestra around the open meditation hall—first on the left, then the back, then the right, until they were so loud they drowned out all body functions, thoughts, and any semblance of concentration.

Mind you, that didn't stop me from obsessing about food.

Mmmm. Chicken in spicy coconut milk!

But these thoughts could only lead to suffering. All the food at the retreat was vegetarian.

Maybe everyone at home is right, I thought. Meditation retreats are stupid.

◆*◆

They felt even more stupid when I woke at 2 AM, my bones rattling with the “boom boom boom” of Thai techno base. Ko Phangan is home to Thailand's famous full-moon parties and, apparently, that night the moon was full. Yes, at that very moment, on the other side of the island, hundreds of people were losing themselves and their troubles in primal beats, their bodies pulsating under the otherworldly light of the moon, next to an endless view of ocean and sky. But why be jealous? Just another 20 or so years of this meditation stuff and I could be enlightened, right? Nirvana. The ultimate high. What could be better than that?

Butter cookies?

At least my random thoughts had a sense of humour. I tried to get back to sleep, tossing and turning, the floorboards creaking, but my mat felt like a stone slab.

Why am I here again?

Oh yeah, inner peace.

No, really, why am I here?

Top Three Reasons Why Shawn Is Here

- 1. Her relationships always end in heartbreak.*
- 2. Life in general didn't turn out the way she expected.*
- 3. She recently came down with a bizarre immune disorder that makes her have to live and dress like a vampire.*

All of it was true, but thinking about it didn't help me feel better. It was like having a full-moon party going on in my head. Useless, repetitive thoughts were always coming: boom boom boom. Back home in Toronto, I'd felt convinced that I'd find the answers to all my problems in Asia—the so-called land of wisdom and sages. According to the travel books I'd read, everyone and their mother had found their answers here. Why not me?

Okay, so right now it didn't look promising. But at least all this obsessing distracted me from thoughts of the rafters above my head, where, I'd been told, pythons often spent the night. To be safe, I turned on my flashlight and checked the mosquito net—at least no scorpions, centipedes or giant cockroaches would be crawling into bed with me, thank you very much. Having done all I could, I watched a glowing trilobite beetle inch up the wall.

Donngg. Donngg. Donngg.

Dammit. Have two hours really passed?

The bells were our morning wake-up call, but my misery upon hearing them at 4:30 AM was tempered with compassion. Lydia, my cabin roommate, was the poor soul who had to get up extra early every morning to ring them.



Lydia and I had become fast friends before the retreat. She'd stood out, a tall German girl proudly wearing Thai fishermen's pants and an "I don't give a damn" smile. She pointed to her rented motorcycle and asked if I wanted to go for a last chicken curry dinner, seeing as the retreat was vegetarian. We found an open hut on stilts with a roof of palm fronds, overlooking sand, surf, ocean and sky, sat cross-legged on cushions and watched a young Thai man paddle his fishing boat out into a halo of light. The air smelled of peanut, coconut, garlic and cigarettes.

"I cannot stay at the temple tonight," Lydia had said, apologetically. "I need this one last night of vice." She toyed with her cigarette, shifted position, the floor cushion too small to accommodate her long legs. "I'm staying in a guesthouse on the other side of the island, where I can smoke until the last minute."

I laughed. It was less than a year since I'd quit—the third time in a decade—and there was nothing I wanted more than one puff of Lydia's cigarette. But one puff would surely lead to a pack, and my pathetic state of health wouldn't bear it.

"If I didn't have asthma, I'd smoke right along with you," I said. "But I was using two inhalers just to breathe when I quit."

I shared the five-minute summary of my personal life—how my relationship had crashed, and then my health, so I quit my editing job at a business magazine and sold everything to come to Asia.

“That’s funny. I’m a journalist too,” Lydia said, flicking her ashes over the rail. “Television. Soul-sucking work. It’s killing me. I need to find something more meaningful, you know? I’m tired of asking people questions they don’t want to answer, and really do we need to know the answers to all these fucking personal questions?”

“Exactly,” I said.

Lydia shifted her blue-eyed gaze from her cigarette to the ocean, where waves tumbled onto the white sand.

“I want to quit my job and start my own karaoke bar in Berlin,” she said. “Create a place where people can come together for a few laughs.

“That’s a noble idea,” I replied, and I meant it, even though my last memory of karaoke was more embarrassing than noble. My friend Laura and I sang Prince’s “Darling Nikki” onstage together at a bar after one too many White Russians. Considering I had challenges with social anxiety, it had felt like quite an achievement at the time. And if laughter could be used as a measure of nobility, we had aced it.



But now we were in the thick of a silent retreat so there were no conversations—and certainly no karaoke—just the sounds of morning at a Thai mountain temple and the promise of another challenging day. I dragged myself and my sleeping mat, which doubled as my meditation cushion, out of the mosquito net and promptly tripped

Sometimes, at the end of a day, I would feel the space open up around me and know this freedom of not being lost in thought and a constant desire for something more than I already had. In these moments, I knew that coming had been the right decision. I was fully alive. I was here with the overhead lamps throwing shadows, tuned in to the sounds of frogs, geckos, cicadas and my pants swishing. I was no longer caught up in the past or the future—a taste of the monks' happiness I had envied from afar.

But on other days I was as agitated, stressed and obsessed as ever and, since I had nothing to distract me, it was like going head-to-head with fire-breathing dragons. My addictions all came up to say hello—entertainment, cigarettes, food and men.



That last one made itself known on the afternoon of day five. I was feeling the breeze as it swept over the mountain, blowing my hair and rustling the leaves, listening to the lizards call: geck-o, geck-o. Other meditators stopped, like me, to feel the wind rise to meet them. We looked bizarre, walking so slowly in the moonlight, as though we were truly on the moon. I was observing each step, stopping, then doing it all again, as I'd been told, while paying attention to any desires and aversions—aversions being things you don't want.

Thinking. Thinking. Would you let go and feel the damn joy of awareness, already?!

But it wasn't happening. I couldn't focus. I had begun desiring Robert. No amount of butter cookies was helping. Each time he passed I could feel him there.

EPILOGUE



IF YOU MADE it this far, I hope you enjoyed the journey. If you're curious about what happened next for me—my health, for example—and some of the people you met in this book, I'm creating a website about it all. It'll include whatever updates I can get, as well as some of the stories that were cut from the book due to space or flow. It'll be a work in progress, so if it's not finished when you first visit, please come back a few weeks later. (Hey, I'm human. I procrastinate and get overwhelmed by day-to-day life too!)

In case you're wondering, I've started writing another book. The subject is a secret (read: I'm still in the process of figuring that out). This time it shouldn't take me a decade to finish it!

Yeah, right Shawn. Tell this nice reader the truth...

Okay, it may take a couple years. I don't know. It'll all depend on the waves of life experience that roll in...

In the meantime, I hope all of the waves rolling into your life are good ones—but, remember, it's the rough ones that offer to teach us the most.

Come say "hello": www.helpmeasia.com