

Congestion and Enlightenment

Or, If you meet the Buddha on the road, ask him how long he's been stuck in traffic.

Stephen Tyler

The author returned from a recent visit to Bangkok convinced that western planners could learn much from the Thai approach to traffic management.

The scourge of America's metropolitan centers, an emerging suburban crisis, and every commuter's worst Monday morning nightmare, traffic congestion is approached with calm and equanimity by Bangkok's drivers. This is an astounding feat, considering the characteristics of Bangkok traffic.

In central Bangkok, the narrow streets are filled with cars, buses, and trucks, usually immobile. In between them weave the kamikaze motorbike riders, squeezing along between idling vehicles until their path is blocked by buses trying to change lanes or apprehensive motorists trying to avoid them. Young men flaunt their powerful toys, careening through the traffic with their fashionably-dressed girlfriends imperturbably balanced sidesaddle behind them.

The cars are new, marking the recent prosperity of this booming Asian near-NIC.¹ The roads are not, marking the reluctance of authorities to expropriate private land for public thoroughfares as urban development has exploded in the past decade.

While a typical North American city might have 25-30 percent of its surface area devoted to the automobile (more in Los Angeles), Bangkok's primitive road network covers a mere 12 percent of the city's area. Major residential and commercial developments are built on narrow alleyways with only circuitous access to the nearest clogged arterial.

In central Bangkok the streets are eternally crammed with cars. Many of these actually seem to be going places. People remain optimistic that somehow they alone will be spared the trials of traffic jams. Every day, over 500 new cars are added to the city's vehicle-swollen streets.

Traffic lights can last up to eight minutes before changing from red to green. Off-peak hours were reported to be sometime between 9:30 and 11:00 a.m., but because the author could never actually reach a major arterial during this period the phenomenon remains unconfirmed.

In central Bangkok, cars should not be thought of as a mode of *transportation*. They should be considered a mode of *air conditioning*. If you really wanted to get someplace it would be faster to walk. It would, however, be much less comfortable.

A rail mass transit system to address the city's transportation crisis was first approved more than 20 years ago, but since then the dozens of studies, engineering proposals, and detailed designs have so far resulted in not a penny spent on actually building anything.

Californians confronted with Bangkok's traffic frustrations would be reaching for their assault rifles in a matter of minutes. But the locals placidly sit inside their cars and buses for hours every day in this mess, and somehow manage to get where they want to go, eventually.

In Bangkok, traffic congestion is tolerable not because of advanced engineering solutions, immense public investments or efficient transit. It is tolerable because of Buddhism.

A Buddhist regards public displays of emotions such as anger, frustration, or impatience as socially unacceptable behavior. Prolonged periods of vehicular immobility which would drive a fast-track yuppie into a litigious rage are regarded in Bangkok as opportunities for meditation. Interminable signal lights are not due to sloppy computer programming, but to the driver's karma.

There is something in the mindset of the American motorist which leads to a conviction that unless the rubber is rolling, no progress is being made. But in Thailand the path to enlightenment is not an eight-lane freeway.

There seems to be a clear argument here for the power of mantras over matter. Rather than embarking on an investment program for upgrading our urban transportation system which would be so expensive as to sink the already leaky economy, we should be focusing our attention on America's drivers instead.

American drivers are convinced that nirvana is a 10-minute morning commute. This wrong-headedness is responsible for all the pressure for wider freeways. If commuters could be shown that the route to enlightenment and mental discipline was through gridlock, demands for faster roads and freeway de-bottlenecking would evaporate faster than a graduate student's financial aid in the fall semester.

There is some evidence of movement in this direction already. Casual freeway users are struck by the number of morning commuters who zealously protect their time alone for performing daily personal rituals in their car: shaving, applying make-up, breaking their daily fast, ingesting mood-altering drugs.

Clearly, Northern California is well placed to take the lead in this sort of initiative. Home to some of the nation's worst traffic, the region also hosts several leading international Buddhist training and education centers. A major transportation research program is getting underway at a regional think-tank, and gas tax revenues earmarked for transportation improvements are now rolling into state coffers. This happy conjunction of circumstances seems almost predestined. Where karma leads, we can but follow.

The car-maker with the most popular models in the state has already identified this potential within the region and initiated a major television campaign specifically promoting the spiritual and transcendent characteristics of its product for Northern California drivers. (It is not an accident that this manufacturer is from the Orient.)

Instead of widening those freeways, why not invest in an army of Buddhist monks? Buy time for them to lead mantras on those mindless morning talk shows, to replace anxiety-building traffic reports. Give out incense at the toll booths. Have them hold nature appreciation sessions alongside the jammed freeways. At each exit, they could lead group meditations on one of the Master's lessons. Commuters could look forward to their favorites.

Observers from Thailand might suspect that our transportation problems have less to do with the speed at which we are traveling, than with our confusion about the destination. Sophisticated engineering and the latest technology may be no match for this challenge.

On the other hand, even the Thais are willing to hedge their bets on technological solutions. In spite of big spending on new circuit capacity, the telephone system in Bangkok cannot keep up with the number of applicants requesting numbers for their new cellular car-phones. In case they get stuck in traffic....

NOTES

¹NIC = Newly Industrialized Country. This label is highly prized by status-conscious Asians who use it to distinguish their nation from its poor neighbors.