

On Pilgrimage with Skip Schiel

A Story of Asian Toilets

(For Kathryn Schiel)

Please allow me to escort you on a tour of toilets, Thailand to Japan, by way of Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. I made this journey as part of a Buddhist-led pilgrimage for peace and life to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War Two. This toilet tour is one of the untold stories of travel, the story may reveal a portion of the secret life of the traveler. My apologies to any readers offended by my candor. Detail and specificity are required for telling the complete story.

Please keep in mind the special conditions of my travel. I was an interfaith pilgrim, with limited cash, and a relatively unbending habit of defecation. I also have an anomalous anus, being afflicted with hemorrhoids, so that wiping requires unusual care and a prodigious amount of paper.

Throughout Asia (and Arabic lands and some eastern European regions), the squat toilet prevails—no seat, no chair, no water closet, a simple, practical appliance, yet so strange to the western sojourner. A hole in the floor or ground, round or square or triangular or ovaloid, sometimes with places marked for the feet beside the hole. You squat, not sit, and this is not so hard if you can squat, or hunker, otherwise, you teeter, you strain your lower leg and heel tendons, you cramp your breathing. Best if you grow into this posture, but not impossible if you stretch to it. Squatting is also very good for your back.

If you are to remain truly in the Asian mode, you wipe with water and the fingers of your left hand (eating with your right). How exactly to do this escapes me. I've experimented, always failed, and now, like most westerners, carry my own supply of paper. Flushing depends on the availability of water. Read on for details.

First, Thailand. I shat in wats, or temple complexes, usually in a toilet detached from the main buildings. Water was usually present, never paper, always the squat type of toilet. Most likely, the toilet was clean, not spotless, but not smelly. Adequate. Might be dark at night however, since lights are not everywhere. Bring a flashlight.

Next, Cambodia. I should point out now that in Cambodia I was pilgrimaging with about 600 others, mostly all Cambodians. We stayed each night in a wat, and these wats were clearly not designed for such large numbers. We often exhausted the water supply in the first few minutes. Bring your own water. The toilets ranged from adequate to filthy, filthy as much because of us as that that was the norm. The toilet might be a flush type or an outdoor type. Both stank. Since paper is generally not used, the plumbing couldn't handle our influx of paper. And stuck,

Quaker Arts OnLine

ONLINE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF THE
FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS
Issue #1, SUMMER 1998

overflowed, made a mess. Personally, I wasn't sure what to do. Carry my paper outside the toilet, finding some other way to dispose of it, or risk flushing? I usually flushed, with sometimes horrifying results. Paper can be bought in markets. Be prepared for the seller's laughing.

The line was often long, so we'd have to time our excretions wisely. I found anticipating the need superior to waiting for the call. Likewise, we couldn't squat and read, or meditate, or do any of our other preferred activities while letting our bowels slowly move. A sharp rap on the door hastened our action. And, theoretically, monks have priority for the facilities, being monks, although this was strongly challenged by some of the women with us. No division by gender otherwise, thank goodness.

You might consider what you are wearing when defecating, since dropping your pants and underwear, or shifting your skirt, can soil your clothing. The floor might be wet, might be coated with mud, or might have mushy feces on it. In Cambodia, many of us were afflicted with diarrhea, some with constipation. The second were the lucky ones. A diarrheal outpouring might not wait until the toilet is available, so that one place of privacy became for many a place of revelation. Had we once again shat in our underwear while intending only to fart? What would the morning reveal after a long night of sleeping, our sphincter out of our total control?

Occasionally we'd find abandoned dry-type toilets and were able to see how they were constructed. Often these were merely two poured concrete boxes, one above for the squatter, one below for the products of the squat. These were now simple shells, only the concrete remained. Long gone were the feces, mud, stink, washed away by the monsoon. Like a burial vault with the corpse vaporized. On to Vietnam. Here I can report only on the toilets in hotels and guest houses, since these were our accommodations. Uniformly excellent, usually sit-down-style toilets, plenty of water and paper, clean, comfortable, appealing to the growing number of western American and European travelers. But the picture would have probably been more like Cambodia had we traveled wat to wat or church to church. I was happy to be sitting, to not have to carry in my own water and paper, and to not need to risk the cleanliness of my clothing with each dump. Regrettably, the diarrhea afflicting many of us after our rough three weeks in Cambodia was all the more apparent with what was floating in water in a bowl.

The toilets of the Philippines seemed a curious crossbreed between east and west—approximately half were squat, half sit-down, paper was often provided, but we heard mixed messages about flushing. Some told us not to flush the paper, to carry it out. Others said, no problem flushing. We experimented. Most times the flush worked, about 20% of the time the toilet jammed and overflowed. People informed us that the plumbing was not adequate for paper, and I surmised that like much of Philippine culture, the toiletry is an awkward mixture of Asian and western: providing paper for wiping, but not plumbing with sufficiently large pipes to carry the paper.

The mixed messages and results led to a dichotomy between pilgrims. Some advocated and presumably followed safe paper practice, and toted out to deposit in a trash barrel. Some spoke in

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favor of flushing and no doubt did. Some like myself, equivocated, not sure what to do, vacillating, saying, "Ok, let's carry out," but often succumbed to the temptation to flush.

In Japan, I finally realized that a country's affluence can be measured by its toilets. Japan has lush toilets. In public places like parks and city halls, toilets are mostly the squat variety, clean, well-watered, stocked with paper, sometimes even with handles on the wall to prevent the defecator from falling over backwards. In some hotels and some homes, toilets might include the sit-down style. On the Super Express trains, the Bullet trains or Shinkansen, you get to choose, "western style toilet" or "Japanese toilet." Or, if you're a guy, you can go through the door marked "Gentlemen" and use the urinal. Urinals, in fact, are ubiquitous in Japan, and in public facilities are often in with the women's stalls.

Japan features a novel high technology of toilets. Some sit-downs have special seat lids, connected to a vast array of electronic controls. What these do is a mystery if you don't read Japanese, as I didn't when I first encountered such a toilet in a hotel. I pushed the wrong button, saw a little pipe rise slowly from the middle rear of the toilet and then squirt water up at what would have been my ass had I been sitting. I quickly closed the cover. To no avail. The water seeped out the side and ran onto the floor. Even Brother Sasamori, a native Japanese, couldn't figure out how to shut the water off.

We learned the toilet seat was heated, with a variable temperature controllable by the user, and had variable water rates and temperatures. Other controls remained puzzling to us. The toilet "throne" has arrived in Japan.

I write this little message while taking periodic breaks to use my old favorite toilet type. I can sit for hours in a large room dedicated to expelling wastes of the body here, while there, maybe a fifth the area is so dedicated. The materials for the toilet here are about twice what they require there. I can freely use all the paper I need, squander water with flush after flush, flushing even after each pee. Four gallons per flush here, compared with maybe two liters or less there, less than half a gallon. A strand of paper maybe fifteen feet long here, while there, I might use a third that.

Before my travels I'd always believed I had frugal toilet habits. I advocated, "If yellow, let mellow; if brown, flush down." Friends thought me excessive, criticized me for my disgusting flushing regimen. Now I try to be mindful of the style, simplicity and economy-the harmony with the earth-represented by the toilets of Asia, but find the Spartan practice difficult to maintain.

Habits die hard.

(October 1995)

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