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Esquire SINGAPORE

MPAS INDUSTRY AWARDS 2015 COVER OF THE YEAR MEN'S MEDIA OF THE YEAR LIFESTYLE/ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA OF THE YEAR

HEY. SO THIS MONTH, WE HUNG OUT WITH
DEV PATEL BECAUSE WE THOUGHT HE KNEW
SOMETHING ABOUT INFINITY. HE DOES
NOT. INSTEAD, WE FOLLOWED MONSTER CAT
TOWARDS THEIR FINITE RUN. MAD BREAK UP,
MAN. BUT THE GREAT ONES CAN DEAL WITH A
LITTLE STORM, NO? YES. WE PAY HOMAGE TO
ASIAN VISIONARIES: AI WEIWEI, P RAMLEE,
HAYAO MIYAZAKI AND MORE THAT HAVE
REDEFINED THEIR CRAFT IN THE TEACUP OF
MEDIOCRITY. MELODY CHEN AND JACINTHA
ABISHEGANADEN ALSO HAVE THEIR SAY.
ALL GOOD ENOUGH REASON TO READ THIS
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ESQ&A WITH DEV PATEL

We asked him about *Infinity*. Instead, we got a lesson on being present to life. *Life, guys.*

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STABS IN THE BACK

We took time off from our busy schedule to get a blessed tattoo in a swanky hotel.



Stabs in the back

Spiritual tattooing in a swanky hotel.

The last time I was in Bangkok, I was in a cult. Accidentally fell into it. My step-aunt and her partner were aspiring nuns at a multi-million-dollar Buddhist offshoot, complete with a spaceship-shaped temple and tens of

thousands of devotees regularly funnelling money. They thought it'd help me be more peaceful.

But this time around, I'm about to be tattooed. Just two hours after landing, including travel time, a former



monk will stab me repeatedly in the back with a sharp stick and some ink. The tattoo will help me be more powerful.

The driver asks if I'm ready for the tattoo, as the roads morph into the



more familiar Bangkok jam of cars in the 40-minute drive to the Dusit district. I'd barely slept a wink the night before, rushing a last bit of work before being too excited to sleep. The prospect of getting a new tattoo is both exhilarating and terrifying—I've never been able to get over that heart-pounding pre-tattoo fear. Soon, fatigue takes over and I rouse just in time for the driver to point out the greatly revered Thai King's residence.

We roll in through a street just by a hospital, thronging with students and nurses in their uniforms. Pushcarts of street food flank it on either side, as lunch hour is just starting. My stomach begins to grumble as the car nears what appears to be, at first glance, a plain, white building.

Seconds later, I realise that we've reached The Siam. The hospitality team is out in full force to meet my arrival, including Ajarn Boo. The master tattooist greets me with a *wai*, his face unsmiling but neutral, as I lamely acknowledge him in English. I feel like a hyperactive kid again, unable to calm my mind under the disapproving look of a monk.

The general manager and my butler sweep me in, both dressed in smart neo-colonial uniforms, with the butler in a black sarong hybrid. Complementary to the surroundings, art deco designs are charmingly set against a black-and-white colour scheme with lush greens bringing pops of colour.

Have you ever had a moment where you've had to stop all that you're doing, just to take in all you can of the beauty that you see? The Siam compels you to do that. There's so much to discover and dawdle over; the whole place is practically a museum of curios beautifully laid out and never in a manner that's overwhelming. Something about the place reminds me of the old point-and-click adventure games that used to be popular in the '90s before first-person-shooters with better graphics and more violent storylines took over. I feel like I'm roaming about in a game like that, the butler an NPC rattling off the features of the place, where to get food, and so on. In my sleep-deprived state, I half-expect to be presented

with a quest soon, where I have to examine the rooms for clues to solve a mystery.

If the first-floor courtyards and lobby are magnificent, wait till you get to the rooms. Tempting public areas and corners dot the corridors, while old pictures and paper artefacts line the walls. Entry into my suite is by way of key-card access that requires a bit of finagling with the door and a quick tutorial by the butler. Once in, a cool entryway of floor-to-ceiling panelled mirrors greet me in a visual echo chamber. The colour scheme continues here, with the exception of purple for the small daybed by the living room window. Overlooking the Chao Praya River, it provides magnificent views and a sunbathing spot as I mentally prepare myself for the tattoo. I consider a quick soak in the standalone tub, knowing that I will soon have a fresh wound that won't allow such luxuries, but between being stupid agog about the beauty of the place and sorting out the Wi-Fi access for my phone, I run out of time.

Get stabby

Hang around long-time backpackers and spiritual junkies enough, and you'll soon find out about *sak yant* tattoos. Bit of a redundant term really, since *sak* means to tattoo and *yant* refers to sacred geometry, as in the Sanskrit word *yantra*. When I was 18 and travelling in Cambodia, a guide outside Angkor Wat noticed the tattoo at the back of my neck and asked if it was done by hand or machine. He demonstrated stabbing while holding something long between two hands. That was my first introduction to what they were, and then, of course, I was told about Angelina Jolie's tattoo that she got done while filming *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia.

Through my Thai step-family and speaking to Cambodians whose Khmer script is also used in the Thai tattoos, I learned that it's not exactly common practice for the average man on the street. Sure, some definitely sport the tattoos, and even more so now than eight years ago, but outward displays

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are uncommon because of the way tattoos are viewed by traditional Thai and Cambodian society. They're more likely to be proudly sported by the many Western tourists seeking a special souvenir than locals who tend to cover them up.

The staff at The Siam confirm as much, a few of whom sport these tattoos themselves under their pristine uniforms. I don't have lavish tattoos, but for the few visible ones that I have, I do get stares whenever I travel solo in Southeast Asia, being female and passing for a local virtually anywhere I go. I'm quite aware of what it looks like too—here is another foreigner wanting a piece of the culture.

And with the experience transferred from a crowded temple to a luxury hotel setting, how much more removed as a traveller can one get? I think of this as I'm led down to the exquisite Sodashi Spa. With dark wood, the sound of fountains and the fresh scent of essential oils, it looks like a cross between a Zen temple and a luxe Turkish *hammam*.

The tattoo studio is nestled in the spa compound, beautifully set up with statuary and offerings. This space feels like a gorgeous gallery display too, with fresh flowers and incense burning. Ajarn Boo is in a loose, white cotton uniform, sitting cross-legged in the middle of it all. I sit on a cushioned platform in front of him, with him being the teacher seated at an elevated height.

On an alcohol- and herb-fuelled night two years ago in Kuala Lumpur, a friend of mine who's an aspiring tattoo artist worked on a "stick and poke" tattoo on my right hip. It's essentially a prison tattoo, with better professional-grade needles and quality ink. It took almost three hours to do a small three-inch piece. I consider myself a veteran of being poked repeatedly with needles by hand and show the handiwork to Ajarn Boo.

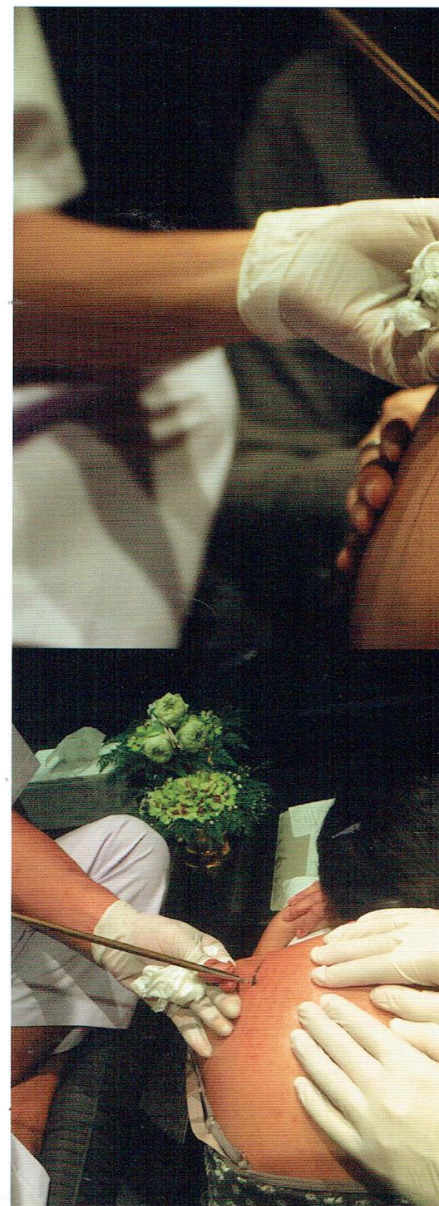
I ask how long the *sak yant* will take and he grins, saying it depends on the design. Traditionally, your first *sak yant* would either be a *hah taew* or *gao yord* tattoo. At The Siam, these are priced accordingly, with the former re-

It is a steady rhythm; I try to reach the sweet spot using the pricks as a guide. Breathe in, breathe out. Relax every part of my body and let everything melt away.

ferred to as "five lines" and the latter, "nine lines". But as a luxury hotel with quite a few high-profile guests who want their own way, there's always the option of asking Ajarn Boo to tattoo whatever you like. Although this isn't exactly a free-rein condition, he has to agree to your idea, and if it's not suitable, will suggest another. In a traditional temple, you take what the monk gives you, dammit.

A book of designs, kind of like the ubiquitous sets of flash tattoos on display at conventional studios, is there for the flipping. I see some familiar ones like tigers, and then there's a curious set of what looks to be cartoon porn. "That's for passion!" Ajarn Boo exclaims with a laugh. Tattoos really could be charged with any sort of power, and being human, sexual attraction *would* be on the list. But it's also supposed to help with people liking you and finding you pleasant company in general, so they won't attack you.

These tattoos, as the legend goes, started out as protective charms for soldiers. Since Buddhist monks aren't allowed to commit violence, they helped in the only way they could—by supplying *yantras* of protection and strength. Initially, these were printed on soldiers' uniforms during times of war, but the clothing got stained and torn. So the far better alternative was to infuse oil and ink with prayers, and then tattoo those symbolic prayers



onto the soldiers' bodies.

I see several tattoos representing strength, protection, speed and success. I opt to stick to the script and defer to Ajarn Boo's recommendation. He asks for my birthdate and day of birth, but when I enquire if that's the deciding factor, he grins again and says no. Since I already have an extensive tattoo on my neck that extends down to the top of my back, a *hah taew* is



chosen. If I had wanted to do the nine spires—the *gao yord* said to be the most powerful—it would have been done with sacred oil only, no ink, effectively an invisible tattoo that wouldn't have served the purpose of this article.

We start with prayers at the altar to Buddha, and then the symbolic gifting to Ajarn Boo as the master and teacher imparting knowledge to me, the student. And away we go.

It feels like what it looks like. Each bamboo stick is long, about the length of hand to elbow, and with a fresh, new needle inserted each time, at least for the process done at The Siam. I'm bent over a cushion, and after disinfecting the spot on the back of my left shoulder, I feel the first few punctures.

It is a steady rhythm; I try to reach the sweet spot using the pricks as a

guide. Breathe in, breathe out. Relax every part of my body and let everything melt away. The mind starts to wander once the nerves register the pain with greater urgency, seeking to dissociate. Something else is needed for a distraction, the way an animal caged and in pain will eventually chew its own paws off. Why am I thinking of this? Focus. I can feel the master tattooist going down in a line along my

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back. There are five lines. I don't want to think of the lines. Focus. The bear in the cage is being milked for bile from a gaping wound in its stomach. I am not in a cage. Focus on the sensation. I don't want a distraction, the best part about being tattooed is the sensation and the adrenaline it gives. You will get "high", but you must first focus on, and then transcend the pain. It's nothing like the stick and the poke that I received on a fleshy part of my body. The back is muscled and has less fat; closer to the bone and you'll feel it too. Focus. I think of the instruction that I received at the cult-like temple years ago. I didn't buy into any of it, but the meditation practice at least was bog standard, if not for the fact that we were supposed to concentrate on a weird crystal ball. I concentrate instead on the needle on my back. Breathe in, breathe out, clear the mind. Focus.

I finally hit the point. I am now really relaxed, the piercing pain is exactly like what you'd expect being stabbed in the back repeatedly to feel like, but gently. The sensation becomes pleasant instead, like a weird massage administered by a sewing machine. My mind drifts to the number of lines again. I've lost count. I can hear the butler snapping pictures of the process. I briefly think of a pimple on my back, wondering if the process will burst it. My mind returns to the needle.

"Finish!"

And so it is. A wipe down and a smear of Vaseline is applied before a small piece of gold leaf is placed in the centre of the tattoo to activate the power. Ajarn Boo blows on the tattoo, the chanting begins, and he uses a small leaf brush to splatter charged water on me. Head bowed, hands in a *wai* and kneeling on the cushion, I'm still in the mindscape from the tattoo, a kind of meditative stupor listening to the soothing, familiar tones of the chant. And then it is done.

Temple blessings

1. *Maeta Ma Hah Niyom*: With this blessing you will be treated by others with great loving kindness and compassion which will improve your popularity and help you to gain prefer-





ential treatment.

2. *Chok Lap*: Luck and good fortune.

3. *Kwam Plohtpai*: Protection against danger including evil spirits.

4. *Noon Chataa*: This benefit will improve your destiny, fate.

5. *Ma Hah Saneh*: This will give you charm and increase your popularity and attractiveness with the opposite sex.

We move on to the temple for further blessings from the abbot. It's quite a ride away, just over an hour's drive, and I haven't eaten anything all day save for a few bananas. The restaurant manager, A (that's his name, A), who's also one of the people instrumental in bringing Ajarn Boo to practise at The Siam, packs me croissants and iced coffee. I don't normally drink coffee, but this seems to perk me up considerably, instead of giving me the usual case of stomach cramps. Magic.

The crowded streets give way to green fields of paddy and orchid nurseries. I badger A for more information on the tattoos. It turns out he has a full back of them, given by Ajarn Boo when he was still practising at the temple. After being ordained as a monk at Wat Bang Phra, he picked up the tattooing skills from a master, developing it by careful disciplined practice daily. When he left the monkhood, he was given the blessing to practise as a layperson, and has done more than a thousand over a period of seven years.

I finally hit the point. I am now really relaxed, the piercing pain is exactly like what you'd expect being stabbed in the back repeatedly to feel like, but gently.

Fifty have been done at The Siam thus far, and I'm strangely pleased by the fact that when Katy Perry stayed at the hotel, she didn't get a chance to have a tattoo done. Score one against Perry!

A statue of the founding monk takes centre stage at the main temple. We bow three times, paying our respects. A group of Mandarin-speaking tourists crowds the side full of amulets and other Buddhist magical paraphernalia. I'm ushered to the abbot after being passed an offering of flowers, incense and a bunch of symbolic artefacts in exchange for THB500. His assistant banters with me, asking where I'm from in limited English.

"Ang Mo Kio! Sentosa! Esplanade! Orchard!"

The abbot has heard that I'm from Singapore and chants this strange litany. And then it's on to the actual blessing, a sprinkling of water, a touch of gold foil on my tongue and forehead, a smack on the head and off I go. Blessed.

Wat Bang Phra started off as a small temple and has now grown considerably. All temple buildings are funded by the donations that come from tattooing. Its name has spread far and wide, and it's probably the most known temple to get a *Sak Yant* in Bangkok. I meet three backpackers led by an Argentinian who orchestrated the whole adventure. The other two, a Canadian and a Frenchman, look less confident and ask me repeatedly if mine hurt. They hold offering bowls as payment, including a pack of cigarettes, because it's said that the originator loved to smoke and this is a symbolic offering to him. He's the dude in a kind of colonial bowl-shaped hat, in framed portraits all over the various tattooing rooms.

The contrast between my tattoo experience and theirs is massive. The muggy heat is valiantly opposed by creaky, beating fans. Well-fed stray dogs and cats scamper in and out of the rooms filled with quiet men and women waiting in line or helping to hold down the ones being tattooed. Some monks tattoo with cigarettes hanging from their lips. Most use the bamboo needles, shared repeatedly, and only cleaned between use by dunking them in a bucket of alcohol. I see one using a tattoo machine. Why? Because it's

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faster. No shit. But the same needle is reused.

Many of the men and women are covered in these tattoos, but only on their torsos. To put them on the lower body would be a huge act of disgrace, for these are sacred. I see many wincing in pain, though none cry out. The Frenchman looks nervously at me again, asking if I was able to choose my tattoo. I say yes, but for THB150, they are at the mercy of the monk.

The rules

A tattoo aftercare sheet, including a list of rules to follow, is given at the end of each session at The Siam. I'd just about forgotten about those. There were tales of not being able to walk under laundry lines with female undergarments. Bit of a difficult thing to do, since virtually every walk under the block of an HDB flat would subject you to that. But thankfully, the rules from Wat Bang Phra, the temple Ajarn Boo received his training from, are pretty standard stuff.

Don't eat starfruit... okay, I don't care for them anyway. Don't eat green gourds... I don't know what they are, but they don't look all that appealing either. Don't commit adultery or cheat... easy-peasy. Don't insult or disrespect someone's mother.

Ah crap. No more yo momma jokes.

I attend a cooking class organised by the hotel, including a wet market tour with the chef. Probably the best I've attended thus far, the friendly chef also has a back full of tattoos and gamely removes his smock to show them off. I look at the recipes and am assured that there are no starfruit or green gourds.

Do the tattoos really grant the tattooed powers? Ajarn Boo says it's a matter of belief. But if the rules are as such, and they really mirror or expand upon the standard five precepts of Buddhism, then perhaps it's a matter of maintaining good conduct so that the "powers" granted will benefit you naturally anyway. Perhaps it's like a placebo effect; I think I will be granted special powers to attract the opposite sex, therefore I do. And as long as I

What it certainly does is make me more mindful of my behaviour. Even to the extent of seriously reminding me of the five precepts that I've not been observing strictly.

keep to the rules and don't piss anyone's mums or spouses off, I suppose I'll be covered for a few of the other powers too.

What it certainly does is make me more mindful of my behaviour. Even to the extent of seriously reminding me of the five precepts that I've not been observing strictly. I think about the precept of no killing, while doing Muay Thai training at The Siam's extremely well-equipped gym. The boxing ring has a floor so plush that I'm thinking of curling up and going to sleep on it once training is over, when I feel a bite on my calf. I'm close to killing the mosquito until I remember that first precept. The vintage boxing posters look down at me, amused.

Protected

On my last night, I decide to hit Khao San Road. Armed with my butler's suggestions of fun places to go, directions in Thai for the taxi drivers, and a whole lot of spirit, I join the fray.

Is the placebo effect working on me? I breeze through the crowded streets—past the men grabbing my arm to go see a ping pong show, or to take their tuk-tuk, or to simply dance with me—feeling confident and untouchable. Gone are the standard feelings of being on constant high alert as a solo female traveller. I reach Madame Musur, a hip resto-bar in Rambuttri Road, and find myself seated next to a girl from China.

Soon enough, we become fast friends and I traverse Khao San again,

this time, dancing in the streets with her and laughing at the crazy foreign men yelling, "WO AI NI" ("I love you") at us or trying to buy us drinks in dodgy bars.

A little later, she receives an invitation to party, all the way in Sukhumvit, a good half an hour or so away, from an old Bangkok friend. Buoyed by a sense of adventure, we agree to go together. She keeps exclaiming through the night how much I trusted her and how crazy it is that so many tuk-tuk and cab drivers have been trying to swindle us. How we jumped into a cab and went to a location that we're both foreign to, while praying that the cabbie wasn't going to take us to a weird place, or that the party wasn't going to be full of creeps. How we went to an even madder club where we were the only two Asian girls who weren't working girls attached at the hip to white men.

I make it back to The Siam the next afternoon pretty damn sure that I broke the last precept at least. Nothing unsavoury happened, that sense of being invincible and alive remains. Is the *sak yant* working? Maybe, maybe not. It's a beautiful design nonetheless, a careful piece of art permanently etched that's got me more mindful of my own spiritual path. Corny as that sounds. And done in one of the most beautiful locations in Bangkok, full of history.

At least I'm not in any strange cult this time round. 