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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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# Chalintorn Burian Interview Narrative

8-26-2007 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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## **Chalintorn Burian**

8-26-2007 interview in Honolulu, Hawaii

### **Personal Background**

My name is Chalintorn Neovakul Burian. I was born in 1947 on April 26. I am the second child in the family, with one elder sister, two younger sisters and one younger brother. I come from a middle-class family.

My father valued education greatly. Even though he had five children and we were not wealthy, he sent all of us to private school where we could study in English language, which he found very important.

My father worked with the Shell Oil Company so he's pretty international in that sense. I was a good student. When I graduated from high school, I was one of the top 10 of the country, so I was able to enter any university that requires a high score and could choose any faculty that I would like to be with. I chose to go to the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Thammasat University, which was a brand new faculty.

Usually, at Thai universities we have general arts faculties, but this faculty focused on the liberal arts. When I graduated with honors, I was invited to teach at Thammasat University. I taught at the university from the time that I graduated in 1970 to 1972 when I got a scholarship to come to the East-West Center.

### **Life at EWC**

I came to the East-West Center as a grantee in the Culture Learning Institute to do the master's degree in applied linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). I completed my master's degree in 1974.

I came in '72 so I completed my study in '74. But by that time, I got married here in Hawai'i to a staff member of the East-West Center, his name is Fredrich John Burian. He was working with TDI – this was in old times -- (laughter) Technology and Development Institute.

I stayed on to do the second master's degree at the University of Hawai'i. In 1979, I received another master's degree in Educational Communication and Technology, and at that time, I was also teaching at Indo-Pacific Languages Department at UH as well.

I taught until 1980. My husband went back to Thailand and we all went back to Thailand. He started working with the United Nations, ESCAP-Economic and Social Development Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

### *Arrival at EWC*

I arrived at the East-West Center on August 19, 1972 and I remember that because I did not know that you could arrive a few days earlier.

I had only known that the program will start on August 20 and so I arrived on the 19th. But On August 20, East-West Center took everybody by a charter flight to the Big Island. That is the first year. My year was the first year that they no longer bring people in on the President Cleveland Cruise Ship -- from Asia, that they would do the orientation on the ship. But that's OK.

I went to the orientation which was held at Hawai'i Preparatory Academy (HPA) on the Big Island. Fred was working as a Program Officer. So he went with his institute. I was with CLI, the Culture Learning Institute, and he was with TDI. I met him on that very first day. I was very interested because usually you'd spend a lot of time with the Culture

Learning Institute, and then there's a break and you'd get out and you know other people (from other institutes). So, I met Fred on that day.

But there was something else that happened on that day. I had a friend who is an East-West Center grantee, an American who speaks Thai. He has been to Thailand. The first day, I was very impressed with his Thai. Thai girls usually flocked together. So when the Americans -- I would say they're more outgoing than we Asians -- so when the Americans initiated that we should go in town -- Kamuela town -- which is a small dingy little town -- to listen to the music at night, we all went with them.

We were a big group. Everybody was just outgoing. We listened to music and we sang along, to songs like "500 Miles Away From Home" and we cried and all that. But then Michael, an American grantee, was saying, "Oh! look at that woman, isn't she beautiful"? I was young. I was in my early twenties. We all looked for the woman he was talking about that is so beautiful, and I didn't see anybody (beautiful). And then, he started to describe that all the cracks in her faces showing that she has weathered the sadness and the happiness of her life; the hands that seemed to be wrinkled and rough, has brought up her children and this and that. He was describing this Hawaiian woman sitting across the room who was actually big and huge in my perception at that time, and I would not call, I would not have thought about her being beautiful. But what he was describing is something fairly new (to me). That is, you're looking through the people and you see all these values, and I thought, "Wow! This is East-West Center." This is the kind of people that they bring together, and it's so deep. Little bits of that kind of thing had changed my perception.

### *EWC, a Unique Experience*

My mind was brought to other events. I was a dancer. In my family, my father wanted us to be more cultured. So while we were growing up, we were asked to select whether we're going to go into singing, musical instruments or whether we were going to do dancing. I did the (Thai) traditional dance when I was young. So, when I came here (to the EWC), I had a certain perception about dances. But you were exposed to Hawaiian male dance performance, very masculine, very powerful. Thai dancers, even though they are male, they had to be effeminate.

I would see Kabuki (traditional Japanese theatre). All these little pieces of experience are like fabrics that started being woven together, being put together. I started to appreciate other people's cooking and all that kind of stuff. It's, I would say, ingrained and you become suddenly more accepting, more open-minded and that helped a lot in the future. So I remember that.

Fred and I met in 1972 and started dating and the East-West Center in those days was very good in providing opportunities for us to visit other islands. You might have heard about island tours, which again were very exciting.

And then during the summer, I was in Linguistics and English as a Second Language, I went to the U.S. to visit many English language institutes. With another group of about 10 people from different countries and that got me to see America, you know, we went from California all the way up to the East Coast and I hooked up with some of my friends who got scholarships to study in Texas, Austin, Rice University and people who were at various universities and so on. We compared notes and everybody told me. "How lucky you are that you are with the East-West Center and you have this cultural experience."

Then I realized that yeah, I was very lucky. And besides, people don't talk about it but the East-West Center is one of a very few scholarships that we don't have to pay back. For many other scholarships, especially government scholarships, you have to go back and you have to work twice the time that you are away; or you pay back the money three times or four times or whatever is arranged. So I have people who were on other scholarships and they went back and they have to pay back by working in the same position. They cannot make progress. Even if the other faculty or the other university is better, they cannot transfer unless they pay the money up.

(However) I didn't know that when I came to the East-West Center. I didn't know that I would have such an enriched experience, right?

### ***An EWC Marriage***

Then Fred and I got married in September of 1973, right at the Thai Pavilion, and then I stayed on and I did more study. In 1980, we went back to Thailand, and I'm glad that I went back to Thailand. I would recommend anybody, that it is OK to stay back and work. But at a (certain) time, you have responsibility to go back and to help your country, to spread the good word about East-West Center. If you just stay outside your country, you might not have that opportunity. I went back and I did that.

### ***Host Family Program***

The only regret that I have relating to my early romance is that I had a host family that I'm still trying to locate.

You are given a host family and I did not spend a lot of time with them because I spent a lot of time with Fred. When you're young and you're in love, you did not make much sense of your responsibility with your host family. You thought you didn't want to bother

them, and you have somebody who wanted to take care of you. I spent some time with the host family who has a daughter and I cannot remember their name.

When I came here for this reunion, the first thing I asked Gordon [*Ring*] is this: Please ask Friends [*of East-West Center*] what happened to my host family? Who was my host family? I want to meet them; I want to invite them to come to Thailand. But Friends of the East-West Center did not keep their records.

Even Larry Smith told me that. He said, “We laughed when we got your request, because Friends never kept the record. So we don't know who your host family was.” Well, that's a big early regret. And about exciting thing that happened to me that never happened to anybody else? Well, many people got married at East-West Center. So my experience is not that unique.

### ***Fire in the Dorm***

But in 1973, by that time I already had a single room. When you first came, you shared a room with other grantees.

So (it was) my second year. It was a big room that I had. But you are asked to share a room with short-term East-West Center grantees. I shared the room with this older lady who I had a very good relationship with.

She's a principal of a high school, and she was here being trained by the East-West Center. But somehow or another, during that period of time, I was out for dinner, and then received the word that I should come back to the dormitory because my room was burned down. That's the only experience that nobody else had, right? Yeah, I came back and it was dark because they had to cut off the electricity. But my room was burned down.

The fire trucks were there. And the next day, the police officer came over to interview people and so on. I lost actually everything. But you know, the Friends of the East-West Center came through and gave me some money, actually gave me an account at J.C. Penney to buy my stuff. The funniest thing is that then I was dressed just like everybody else.

I came from Thailand with certain kind of clothing that was very formal. But here, I got a chance to buy T-shirts and other things like that. And friends gave me a lot of things that they had bought for themselves. They realized that this poor woman didn't have anything to wear to classes. So I got a lot of aloha out of everybody. What happened there was that my roommate has beautiful fineries, especially this fabric – the barong *[hand embroidered garment of the Philippines]* made from pineapple fiber.

It's flammable! And in our room, maybe people didn't pay attention, the light bulb in the closet did not have a guard on. So what she did was that she put it (her clothing) on the rail and it touched (the light bulb). It became very heated and it burned. She was down in the TV room. She was a Catholic. So when she heard that there was a fire, she was doing rosaries. She didn't even know that it was in her room.

My friend who was next door to us, in the next room to us, smelled it (the smoke) so she came out and she went in the opposite direction. She didn't even know that it was my room because the front doors were all closed, and so the fumes and the smoke went out the window and then would come back in. It's hard for you to know which direction it came from. But that was my excitement at that time.

So many things happened to me and I think that I have always been born with good attitude.

Very positive attitude. That (it's) OK. It's time to move on. Don't cry over spilled milk. And I moved on. I told people about fire a lot because it's the only incident that happened at East-West Center -- that they didn't have other fires from what I understand. But people who came later, we were talking about people who came in '74, and after. When I was telling them this story, they said, "So you are the person!" And I said, "Oh, now you know whose room it was!"

## **Life After EWC**

### ***Work with NGOs***

When I went back to Thailand in 1980 I worked with an NGO called Population and Community Development Association, or PDA, a very well-known NGO, the largest in Thailand. When Fred and I went back to Thailand my attitudes had changed. With East-West Center training I found that I had become very broad-minded. When I went back, I decided that I should look at developmental issues. My first employer in Thailand (PDA) was involved in issues of family planning and rural development, integrated development and so on. So I worked with them for three years and I was very happy.

I worked with PDA for three years and then I moved over and started working with Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), again in adult education, as a senior program officer for continuing education. I worked there (at AIT) until Fred and I, let's see, left (Thailand) for a year. Fred was on a sabbatical leave and he did that at the United Nations Office in New York. So while I was in New York I finished my Ph.D. dissertation research.

When I returned (to Thailand), I worked with the Petroleum Institute of Thailand, a new organization in a new field for me. It's an NGO, which has all the oil and gas and petrochemical companies as its members. And my boss, who I mentioned earlier, was

very supportive of me. She was a trained chemical engineer. She was looking for someone to help with human resources development for the petroleum and petrochemical industries that Thailand was just starting to launch. At that time, Thailand did not have any curriculum in universities in petroleum engineering. We did not even have enough people who knew about oil and gas because we did not have a real industry yet. So they were looking for someone who has a good understanding of training assessment, being able to develop a curriculum with experts in the field, and then being able to organize the training and evaluations and all that.

I was their first human resource development director. I really, really liked working there and that's when I started to be very much involved with the East-West Center. And you know, it's always been like that because of my background in human resource development, I was able to go into many fields. I mentioned earlier that I started out with PDA, in the field of population and family planning. They also were very big in rural development. So I was into that (as well). And then the petroleum, which is a new field altogether. I was happy learning new things. So when I came back from New York, I completed my education, my doctorate degree.

I finally received my doctorate degree in 1993 from the Fielding Institute in California in Santa Barbara in human and organizational systems, which kept me working with adults, like training for adults. I look at myself like a vehicle. I'm going where my passengers want me to go.

I would say that I have a short attention span with jobs. My husband has a very good job at East-West Center for 18 years, with U.N. for 17 years, so he was more like bread and butter (winner). And I was allowed to take the job that I would like to get. So I'd get the

cream of the job. I always had contracts to do consulting, or to do some kind of project that is short-term. I had always been selecting the one that I want to do. So all these jobs, even though each lasted only three or four years, were very, very rewarding.

### ***Work with HIV/AIDS***

After I returned (to Thailand from New York), the biggest issue at that time in 1993 that Thailand was facing was HIV/AIDS.

Very early at that time, and so again, the office that was funded by the USAID - the Family Health International - was looking for someone to help with their communication and training programs for the whole Asian region. (The program was called) AIDSCAP - AIDS Control and Prevention program. It's covering all the Asian countries. I applied for the job. I would say that I had learned a lot from PDA about family planning, about how to desensitize issues like condoms and things like that. So I was able to apply that to the application of the new job. Besides, I knew that whenever I interview, people would know that I was educated and funded by East-West Center, and that I had East-West Center experience.

They almost didn't have to ask many questions about my open-mindedness or my experience with the research, because it's pretty much known to everybody that when you are East-West Center grantees and do graduate programs, you not only receive a master's degree from University of Hawai'i, but you receive a lot of hands-on training to do research at East-West Center. And EWC has a big network.

In fact, at my AIDSCAP job, AIDS was a very sensitive issue. I would be working in countries that would not even admit that they have any (HIV/AIDS) problems. So (it's)

very difficult to get in and do this kind of work in countries like India and Indonesia.

Thailand was very open. There was no problem there.

A lot of health workers, health professionals, social workers who have to go out are women already in the field. A lot of times in many countries, they bring people who used to work in the fields in malaria prevention (to be trained as HIV/AIDS workers). So, these are mostly women. I would not say that it's difficult.

My job was to develop training programs to train health workers, or retrain them because they might not even know about how to work in the HIV/AIDS (field), and a lot of desensitization curriculum. I developed a lot of, what you would call behavioral change communication modules so that people can use them in the field. And I would go to the field and do the training.

At the first phase, I did not have direct contact with HIV/AIDS patients. In many countries, they are not openly available. In Thailand, of course, I would receive some AIDS patients. I would go back after the training, and after they were taking the knowledge to go (implement) in the field. I would follow them to wherever they work, to observe and evaluate their work. So, it got me to many corners of Asia that nobody would see.

I usually would go to the poorest of a country, because that's where people are not very educated and that's why they don't have enough information how to protect themselves. It's fun if you could go beyond the fact that I'm a woman and I have to dress in a certain way when I go into the slum area and some sensitive Muslim area. I worked with HIV/AIDS for four years from 1993 until 1997.

## **Ties That Last**

### ***Work in International Education***

*[In 1997]* The Institute of International Education *[IIE]* approached me to be their regional director for Southeast Asia. By that time, I would say that there had been certain things that I was able to do without health professional training.

But in 1997, even in Thailand, HIV/AIDS has moved to another phase. There's a lot more of care-giving, and care management. There were more patients and then it (HIV/AIDS) has gone to the babies. So I, at that time, was burned out. People who work with HIV/AIDS are easily burned out. I was happy to be approached by IIE, and so I took the job that I thought it was a short term -- you know I have a short-term attention span. But it turns out that in that position, with that kind of responsibility, I have been able to develop jobs within the job. Every two or three years, there's always a new project coming in, that I have to start all over again.

I have been with IIE for 10 years already without me even knowing it!! My responsibility again covers Asia. I'm able to go to the countries where I have a lot of East-West Center friends, and they are the ones who help introduce me to the right people, who would alert me to the sensitive areas so that I would not fall on my face. Especially when I was working on HIV/AIDS program, I would ask my East-West Center friends about the HIV/AIDS situation: What is the real situation? Who I can trust, and who I should be very careful with? And that's very valuable information.

When I worked with IIE, however, the job is quite different. It's a lot easier than HIV/AIDS prevention. I'm responsible for Southeast Asian countries, and coordinating

with offices that IIE has in Indonesia, Hong Kong and Vietnam, by supporting the training for these offices in Southeast Asia.

*[Supporting]* management training, financial training for the offices of IIE itself. IIE has always been known for managing the Fulbright Programs for the government and (there are) a lot of government programs. My responsibility with IIE is with testing - providing testing opportunity for the students, like TOEFL, GRE and so on. And then scholarships. So again, I'm back to manage, to administer, East-West Center Scholarship programs in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. I would go into those countries to promote East-West scholarship and fellowship: East-West Center, Asian Development Bank and then also APLP [*EWC Asia Pacific Leadership Program*]. So I was doing that in all these countries.

Every year, I would go and I would take the application (package) with me including the East-West Center program descriptions. I would tell people why they should choose East-West Center rather than other scholarships. You're talking about good students who have an opportunity to apply to other scholarships. I'm a very good spokesperson for the East-West Center.

Salesperson. I look at myself as a good salesperson actually, because I speak from my heart, from my own experience and people can tell. They say, "Look at her. She came back in one piece, right? And she was able to use her experience in her work." So I'm very happy with that job. IIE also has other scholarship programs. We have been funded by the Packard Foundation to do work in Myanmar. The David and Lucille Packard Foundation.

The project really ended five years ago. But we had three years to work in Myanmar.

Because we could not set up the office in Myanmar, everything was (operated) from my office (in Bangkok). That was to provide funding for people to study in reproductive health and population.

I was able to get into the areas where I needed to find the right kind of participants that I know would go back (to Myanmar). It's important if you fund any project that you bring people out for training (for them to return to Myanmar). If they don't go back, that's very bad for the project image itself. But I found 33 people to come out of Myanmar to go to the U.S., or go to training in the region like Thailand, Singapore and places like that. Every single one of them went back. I'm very, very happy with that.

Then we have other part (of IIE work scope). We advise students who wanted to study in the U.S. Through that network - EducationUSA advising network - that IIE received the grant later for me to manage a network of 100 EducationUSA advising centers in East Asia and the Pacific. So I expanded my scope of work into East Asia/Pacific which means China, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, all the Southeast Asian countries down to Australia, New Zealand, and all the Pacific Islands - 25 countries and territories. That position is called REAC. It's Regional Educational Advising Coordinator for East Asia/Pacific. That's my other hat that I am wearing but still under IIE umbrella. I became the REAC for East Asia/Pacific for the (U.S.) State Department.

Then recently, just in May of this year, 2007, again IIE received a contract to administer a program called KAUST - King Abdullah University of Science and Technology - Scholarship program around the world. So I am responsible for Asia, and that is why I'm going to Cairo for the meeting of KAUST managers.

So you know, all of this, and people would ask me: How could I recruit scholarship students for KAUST in Asia? I said do not worry about it. I just work with my East-West Center alums that are in all kinds of professions, including science and technology. And yeah, that's how it has been.

Yes, every single bit of it. And that's why I feel grateful (to the EWC). Not only that I help with the work of the East-West Center in Thailand, but my responsibility is also in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

I also make sure that whenever I go to other countries, I will meet with the East-West Center alumni, and have a chance to listen to them. I was in Laos before I came here. I normally would just go there, to do East-West Center presentations, and I would talk with the alumni, invite them for dinner and talk about how important it is that they are now in a position where they can help their country. They could support or recommend somebody else to apply to the East-West Center.

Now the situation is quite competitive. There are many scholarships. For example, in Laos, you have Australia, Canada, Japan, who offer scholarships, and so students have more choices. Not like in the old days. So, in a way, I feel that I've always been in human resource development, which expands to development in a concerted way, and East-West Center was a tool, was a vehicle for me to reach the needed population.

### ***EWCA Involvement***

My involvement with the East-West Center Association started in 1985, when I attended the International Conference, which was a Silver Jubilee of the East-West Center, which was held here at the Center in Honolulu.

At that time, I was ready to be involved with the East-West Center again because the children were growing up – we have two children and Fred had two children from a previous marriage. I was living in Thailand, I had nannies, I had housekeepers, I had my parents to take care of the children in case I had to travel outside of the country to attend some functions. I was pretty comfortable in my earning capacity. I had good financial situation, and then also, I have always had the attitude, a very good attitude about being East-West Center alumni.

When I started working, I realized that the experience at East-West Center was so important for me to get a good job, to be able to maintain good relationship with other people, to maintain a network. So when I was ready and I saw this Jubilee Celebration coming up, I decided to come to the East-West Center. It's very much like the reunion here at this time [*EWC '70s Reunion in Honolulu, 2007*].

So that was a good thing. Then, I learned about the other events that were going to happen every two or three years, and I went to the second gathering of the East-West Center Alumni which was in 1988 in Bali [*Indonesia*]. That is an international conference, and at that time, people approached me and told me that they would like to have the next conference in Thailand. Would I be able to help?

I thought that Fred and I would be in Thailand for a while and I had a good job, had a very understanding boss who herself at a time was the chair of the New Zealand Universities Alumni Association. She was active in her own alumni network and she was supporting me to be involved in my alumni network. This was very fortunate for me because people who work with other organizations in Thailand, especially with Thai government offices, might not get that kind of support from their employers to broaden

their scope. So I received that kind of support from my boss. And so, when people at the Bali conference asked me about Thailand I said I would like to do it but I would need to go back to the Thai chapter [*of EWC alumni*] and ask whether they would be willing to take on this big task to hold an international conference.

We did it in 1991. We held the most memorable conference in Thailand and I was chair of the program, very busy at that time coordinating all the programs and our counterpart was Ministry of University Affairs, which right now is part of Ministry of Education.

They were supporting a lot of local logistics arrangements including inviting Her Royal Highness, Princess Sirindhorn, who later became the Crown Princess, to preside over the East-West Center Conference. Those events kept me involved with the East-West Center and East-West Center conferences. In 1991, I became a member of East-West Center Association Executive Board. And then in 1992 to 1994, I became the chairperson of the East-West Center Association Executive Board.

I have been busy and very much committed and very much involved. And like what I said, it's important to have supporting environment in your work place and supporting environment in your family.

My husband was sort of an alum of the East-West Center, because he had worked with the East-West Center for 18 years before he went to Thailand and then worked with the United Nations. He is not the kind of person I am. I would like to be involved. I like to just get in and do things. He's more laid back but he would support financially in whatever it is -- which is good because I could travel. In fact, I have been attending almost all, I would say 99 percent of all the East-West Center international conferences.

### *Aging and EWC Network*

Let me just say one more thing. We heard this presentation on retirement yesterday. My Ph.D. dissertation was on productive aging. I took another spin of human resource development by looking at how would I benefit (people) best. The largest group that is going to be coming up are the elders. So I try to make life easier for me and for people around me by understanding the issues.

I studied productive aging, meaning that I try to prepare people, even when they are young, to realize that there are so many things that they have to prepare when they are young that they cannot prepare when they turn 60. Training them to have good attitudes so that they will support the elderly and so on. I learned from my study outcome that to prepare yourself to be aging productively, you first of all must have good health. So I am into yoga. I've been doing yoga for about 15 years. Yoga, swimming and gardening. You have to have good health. You have to have good savings and that is important. Because if you don't have savings, you can age and you don't have money. What are you going to do? You have to have good lifelong learning experience. This is what people did not think (about). They think that they go to school and then get to work and that's it. But no.

Because technology is changing and new things come in, you should not resist. You just have to be able (to keep up with) not only the technology, but issues. You have to be involved. So, lifelong learning experience is important. The last thing is the informal network. Because if you just hang your life (only) on the professional life, when you retire, people usually die within two years, because they cannot go to work. They feel frustrated. What is for me in terms of informal network is the East-West Center, you see?

That's what I told everybody. If you don't know what your (informal) network is, just look at the East-West Center and your friends, and then you'll see how you can make contributions so that it will last longer than your life. When my husband, who is nine years older than I am, retired nine years ago, I'm 60 this year so he is 69, we have been involved in developing a five-acre piece of land that we have on the Big Island.

Yes, I have a house (on the Big Island). I always have. When we were moving back to Thailand in 1980, we were selling our property here (on Oahu). When we would come back, we didn't know where we were going to live. We already saw crime rising (on Oahu) and we decided that we're going to come back to Hawai'i but let's find where we're going to be.

We met in Kamuela on the Big Island at HPA, so we went there to look for a property. We bought it and set it up for rent. And then we packed up and we went to Thailand. But now (20 years later) we took back the house from the tenants and we refurbished it. We keep a small unit (*ohana*) for our use whenever we come back, (and rent the rest). We also have a five-acre piece of land that we are developing as a meditation garden. I meditate. My husband also meditates. That is what I will continue to do, keeping on with my informal network with the East-West Center, paying back to the East-West Center in that way - trying to bring people with the right kind of materials - for the East-West Center, so that they can again make some changes in their lives.

### **EWC's Impact**

The last thing I would say is that I often told people that I was born twice. I was born as a person and a human being in 1947. And then in 1972, to the East-West Center experience, I was born again as another human being, a better human being, a human

being who knows how to give back to the society and how to make contributions to other people's lives, how to recognize the potentiality in other people, and try to make that (potentiality) happen. So, that's the East-West Center for me.

Well, thank you for giving me this opportunity. You can see that I always have wit in talking about my East-West Center experience because I deeply feel that the opportunity is there and I was not selected to come here by accident. It was meant to be. So I should really maximize my outputs to other people.