

# ZEN

62

ZEN  
2 interview  
By Ellen Boonstra



# The Art of ZEN

Meeting President Allan Namchaisiri of Zen at CentralWorld for the first time was a memorable experience for both of us, for not all was what it seemed....

We were all scheduled to meet at 10 a.m. sharp at the DJ Booth on the ground floor of Zen department store: myself, our new freelance photographer (whom I hadn't met before), our fashion editor and the interviewee – the head honcho of Zen at CentralWorld. After a few minutes a hip-looking young man - spiky hair, triangular crystal stud in his ear, clad in jeans with chains hanging from the belt loops, and two large bags slung over his shoulder – walks up to me and says, "Hi, Allan. - You're from 2magazine?"

Upon the assumption that he's pronouncing my first name 'Ellen' Thai-style, I immediately start directing this guy, upon my presumption that he's the new freelance photographer, to take shots of the interior of the store, hoping to get him out of the way before

'The Big President' himself arrives. The man gives me a couple of confused looks: "I'm Allan. From Zen?"

Oops! So this is NOT our new freelancer. I've made a complete idiot out of myself, admittedly not for the first time but we've certainly reached a new low here. Quickly trying to regain my composure I mumble something along the lines of "uh... you're not quite what I was expecting..."

Okay, we've confirmed that it's a confusing world we live in, as well as established that Allan Namchaisiri, Senior Vice President/Head of Marketing – Central Retail Corporation & President of Zen at CentralWorld, as the full title on his business card says, doesn't fit the stereotypical mold of a senior level executive of

63





65





Thailand's biggest retail conglomerate, the Central Group.

I confess to Allan (calling him Mr. or Khun seems too formal) that I assumed he would be a clean-cut, middle-aged, recently relocated expat in a business suit and tie, and – being Singaporean – perhaps a tad on the conservative side. Plus he would be mostly talking sales figures, customer demographics and economic outlooks.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only is Allan Namchaisiri a hands-on creative type who was instrumental in reinventing Zen at CentralWorld's sparkling new image and concept, he's a long-term resident of the kingdom who's fluent in Thai. (The Thai-sounding 'chaisiri' is a direct translation of his Chinese name and was added later.)

He moved to Thailand 18 years ago – he came here “by mistake” and was immediately hooked by the energy and buzz of Bangkok. Although he studied economics in Singapore, he has always been fascinated by shopping and style, and quickly found his way into the world of fashion and retail. After a brief, half-year stint at a fashion magazine, he joined the Central Group. There he gradually climbed through the ranks – from the marketing of imported

goods and the marketing development of shopping malls, rising to Head of Marketing for Central Retail and ultimately to President of Zen at CentralWorld.

The Central Group is the nation's largest operators of shopping centers. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone in Thailand who hasn't made a purchase at one of the many businesses owned or operated by the group, whether it's a DVD player at PowerBuy, a book at B2S, laundry detergent at TOPS, or a snazzy new outfit at Central Chidlom. The other two biggies – Emporium and Siam Paragon – are owned by Central's fiercest competitor, The Mall Group.

The world of retail is a highly competitive one and constant innovation is necessary to stay ahead of the game. As part of the recent massive renovation and construction of the CentralWorld complex, Zen also underwent a complete overhaul.

“With the marketplace getting increasingly more competitive, we had to come up with a new identity for Zen,” Allan says. “Our vision was to create a store that is unique to Thailand and the region... catering to what we call the new, trendy and hip lifestyle.”

Rather than following the well-trodden path of



housing a bunch of designer brands under one roof, Zen decided to take an entirely different approach. When completed, Zen shoppers will not only be able to find their favorite brands of clothing, but also a complete range of services conducive to a metropolitan lifestyle.

"If you look at how we mix the merchandise and the services together, Zen is the store where in the future you'll be able to get a tattoo or a body art painting. There'll be a dog spa, a solarium, a big fitness center, educational services....A one-stop lifestyle shopping destination where everything will be integrated. Basically everything the modern urbanite could wish for and more," enthuses Allan.

Reopening its doors last December, Zen at CentralWorld is five times its former size, expanding from 16,000 square meters to a gigantic 50,000 square meters of store space, topped by Zen World, a tower with another 30,000 square meters of lifestyle services, making it Asia's largest lifestyle specialty department store.

A month before its official opening the department store unveiled its new image at Elle Fashion Week. In what was probably the highlight of the event, a colorful parade of professional models, famous and not-so-famous Bangkokians of all ages, professions and denominations, hop-scotched their way down the catwalk under loud and enthusiastic cheers from the audience. Each model represented a different brand or individual lifestyle Zen has to offer.

Allan, who was instrumental in conceptualizing the show, explains there's something for everyone at the department store, whether they're in their teens or in their 70s. "Zen is about living life to the fullest, being able to express and celebrate one's own individuality... It's for the young and the young at heart."

I remark to the boyish-looking CEO that I can't imagine anyone who more personifies the Zen philosophy. He confides that he's a hyperactive person who enjoys doing a variety of different things and who thrives on new challenges. "Life to me is unpredictable. It's better to lead an exciting and stimulating short life, than a regretful and boring one. Not that I plan to die young!"



**Zen at CentralWorld**  
[www.centralretail.com](http://www.centralretail.com)



