

The Exponential

I was on a two week solo trip around Thailand. I arrived on the island Koh Yao Noi. It is a small, quiet island you can cross in thirty minutes by motorbike. My bungalow sat on a secluded road, shared with only one other house. Other places were a few minutes away. By the time I arrived that afternoon, I was exhausted and was relaxing on a chair outside. The air was thick, there were no cars, just insects and the occasional motorbike somewhere far off.

In the house right beside mine, there was this guy in his late twenties. He just seemed to do everything really slowly, like he had absolutely nowhere to be. Since we were the only two people around for miles, I eventually went over to say hi. I asked him how long he had been there, expecting something like a few days, maybe weeks at most. He told me he had already been living there for two years. I wanted to know more, and we fell into a long conversation.

He told me that he used to work in IT, but had been unemployed since he moved here. It all started when someone in his company needed a custom Python tool for their business. He told them it would take about a week. Then his boss tried an AI instead. It was done in a few minutes and worked perfectly. He went quiet after seeing it. His point was that he didn't lose a job, he lost the entire category of work.

While there were other things he could work on, his logic was that he could spend the next few years keeping up with all the AI tools, but at some point these tools will no longer need any human help. So his work and eventually everyone else's will be meaningless. The IT sector is just experiencing this first shock, other sectors will follow, and in his mind all have the same endpoint. And it is not that long in the future.

Around that time, two years ago, he decided he didn't want to play that game. He quit his job, bought a one way ticket to Asia and eventually ended up here.

He is living mostly off of savings now, which would last at most four years and that is while living very simply. I asked him what if his prediction is wrong and he ends up broke with no job here. He was quiet for a second. Then he laughed like he had just heard something ridiculous. For him this is a done deal.

His confidence irritated me. I pushed back on everything I could think of. He kept returning to the same point: exponential growth, and how badly humans judge its speed. He said the only work that mattered now was building AI. Everything else was just keeping the lights on until it no longer needed us. But that wasn't enough for him.

He filled his time reading, cooking, exercising and meeting people passing through. He wasn't saying he had figured out what comes next. He just didn't see the point in pretending the old answer still worked.

“If I had lived just 100 years ago I would be happy to work some physical job, there would have been no other way to get it done. But working a job now feels like ordering a taxi to a point and running there first. Why not just wait for it here?”

On the flight home, I looked at the man in the seat next to me. He was hunched over his laptop, typing furiously into some massive spreadsheet, looking completely exhausted.

I leaned back in my seat, closed my eyes and kept thinking about the taxi thing.