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## **Wai Khru: An In-Depth Examination**

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This is a long and detailed article about the Thai healing arts Wai Khru ceremony.

“It is considered of utmost importance in the Thai tradition to have a teacher and to be initiated into the tradition,” says my teacher. “And to always honor and bring to mind our teachers, and those who have come before us, when studying or using our knowledge practically.”

“The reason for this ” continues my teacher, “is that there is a line, like a blood line within a family; that links us to the teachers of the past and allows us to invoke their knowledge and wisdom. It also gives us a form of protection being initiated into the tradition. By invoking the spirit of our teachers we are protected from negative influences and other unknown sources of harm such as ghosts, demons, black magic etc. It also gives us the power to heal those afflicted by these same things. For these, and other reasons, we always begin by performing the Wai Khru”.

This was my first formal lesson from my Traditional Thai Medicine (TTM) teacher, Reusi Tevijjo. It is the first lesson, because the Wai Khru is, in his view, (as it is with all of the really good teachers I have had) the keystone to studying this art.

So what is the Wai Khru ceremony? We will go into great detail about this later. In short, it is a ritual ceremony of gratitude offered to one’s teachers: this includes one’s parents, present day teachers, teachers’ teachers (and so forth up the lineage history), various possible deities, any deity or ancestor who is seen as the founder of your practice, and of course, (this being Thailand) the Buddha. The Wai Khru ceremony is not unique to practitioners of TTM; there are in fact Wai Khru ceremonies for nearly every aspect of life in Thailand that includes direct instruction. “Wai” means “respect”, and is also the word for the posture of hands held together in prayer position that is used in showing deference. Many non-Thais relate to this position by the Sanskrit word “namaste”, and have seen it as a form of greeting throughout Asia. The word “khru” comes from the Pali/Sanskrit word “guru”, and means “teacher”. So a “Wai Khru” ceremony literally means to pay respect to one’s teachers. More than just a time of giving thanks, it is a time to connect to one’s teachers, and the teachers who went before them, as well as to the energies, wisdom and protection that comes from them.

Throughout Thailand people in all walks of life perform daily, periodic, and yearly Wai Khru ceremonies; each tailored to its individual purpose that is dependent upon who is doing the ceremony and what walk of life they are treading. The way that the Wai Khru ceremony is performed differs depending on the setting, but all pay homage to the Buddha, all give offerings of flowers, incense and candles, all ask that the performer of the ceremony tap into something older and wiser. School children gather in the schoolyard for a Wai Khru ceremony that honors (in addition to the Buddha, and their parents) their current day school teachers. They prostrate themselves before the teachers and give offerings of flowers representing: respect, patience,

perseverance, discipline and intelligence. Similarly, Muay Thai kick boxers honor their teachers in an elaborate dance that leads the fighter to contemplate and thank his teachers, including the ancestral teacher seen as the founder of Muay Thai. Ceremonies such as this are endemic throughout the land. Musicians thank the founding teacher of music with sacred melodies, soldiers do a Wai Khru ceremony similar to the muay Thai fighters, doctors, be they allopathic or traditional, practice Wai Khru ceremonies like the ones encountered by students of Thai massage. It is this last one that I will elaborate on here. Due to the increasing popularity of Thai massage, this, the healer's Wai Khru, is the Wai Khru ceremony most commonly known to non-Thais.

Most non-Thai practitioners of Thai medicine practice only the bodywork component of TTM, known to the West as Thai massage; in Thailand as nuad boran, or traditional massage. While Thai massage is an incredibly complex and multi-faceted modality, in truth it is just one part of a much larger system of healing that includes pharmacology, herbology, astrology, Buddhism, magic (working with spirits etc.), midwifery and more. Regardless of what aspect of Traditional Thai medicine one practices, it is believed that in order to be a true transmitter of healing one must begin each day with the healer's Wai Khru ceremony. Most non-Thai, Thai massage practitioners have been taught at some point to do the Wai Khru whether they know it by name or not. A Wai Khru practice is a bouquet of gratitude, blessings, protection and connection. According to the Thai people, without it you can learn all of the Thai medicine techniques there are, but you will not have learned the true healing. You will have only empty techniques with nothing inside of them; nothing to give the techniques spirit, magic, mojo if you will. Looking through the Thai lens, it is the Wai Khru that gives the practitioner depth, divine inspiration, and ancestral guidance and protection. It is the substance behind the mechanics, for it is in the daily practice of giving offerings and chanting that one connects to the lineage of healing arts

“Ideally,” says Reusi Tevijjo, “a Thai massage therapist should perform the Wai Khru daily, even on days when you will not be doing any massages. It's not about doing it just for those days (when you massage). Quite frankly, that's not enough. We don't stop being a student, healer, teacher...so, in order to invoke the spirits and teachers adequately it needs to be done every day. If you can't some days, it's no problem, but try to make the effort”. Until he said this to me, I did the Wai Khru only on days that I gave massages or taught classes. It was for me, a wonderful perceptual shift to think in terms of being a healer and a teacher, and of course, a student, even when I am not actively using those skills.

Through Reusi Tevijjo I have had so many of these shifts in understanding that my tutelage with him has been an ongoing process of unraveling the tapestry I have woven from the teachings of others, and reweaving it into a more vibrant tapestry out of the same threads. The depth of information has been staggering and invigorating and has connected me to my practice and teaching on ever expanding new levels. I could say this about nearly every aspect of Thai medicine that I have discussed with him, and most certainly it holds true for my relationship with the Wai Khru ceremony.

My introduction to the Wai Khru came at the first place I ever studied Thai massage. It was a well marketed (even back then) school in northern Thailand that had a printed curriculum, air conditioning and a large staff (yes, these things were remarkable then). Each morning would

begin with the students chanting along to a tape recording of the director's voice saying the Wai Khru. Because it was a recording, there was never the slightest variance in how the words were said. Morning after morning, for weeks on end, we said the Wai Khru chant exactly the same and the sound and cadence of that teacher's voice were forever burned into my brain. We didn't know the meaning of the words, nor the purpose of the chant and there was something hollow in the taped rendition. I don't think we were even told that the ceremony had a name. We were told we should do this, but given no reason as to why. As is so often the case with non-Thais learning the Wai Khru, we were left to decide for ourselves what the meaning might be. Over the years I have heard some amazingly inventive perceptions that grew from the lack of actual information.

Without a depth of understanding of the Wai Khru, I quickly dropped it from my practice. Years later I would come to study almost simultaneously with two amazing teachers who put a great deal of importance on the Wai Khru. One of them was able to explain it very intellectually due to his Buddhist training as well as his academic work as an anthropologist/historian. The other explained it in the more esoteric form of morning dharma talks following the most extensive Wai Khru ceremony I had yet encountered. (There were students who would leave his classes simply because they could not stand the fact that the morning ritual could take anywhere from fifteen to forty-five minutes, often followed by talks about it). These two teachers expanded my understanding and appreciation of the Wai Khru enough to sincerely apply it in my practice. More recently my study with Reusi Tevijjo has brought me a level of comprehension that has inspired me to want to write about and share this knowledge with the larger community.

Each of my teachers has done the Wai Khru ceremony somewhat differently from the others. Each teaches slightly, or dramatically, different words to the chant and a different way of approaching the ceremony. Some have required offerings, some have not. Some have had very short simple ceremonies, some longer more elaborate. There is no right and wrong in these differences, and in truth the similarities have been greater than the dissimilarities. Here is a story that Reusi Tevijjo once told me: he had asked his teacher about an incantation that he read in a book which was similar to one he learned with his teacher. His teacher said, "keep both, use both, and see which works better." Then his teacher asked him "do you know why I write so many texts and keep all of the good information I find, even if it's not in accordance with what I was taught? Because it's all right and it's all wrong." Reusi Tevijjo says, "there was once the original incantations, then it was taught to some people. Then they taught it to some people. Already, it went through changes because people remember things differently. It's still the same incantation but it's a little bit altered. If it gets so altered that it loses its power then we can throw that away but we don't know until we try them. And in the end the most important thing is our own minds and intention. Of course there is right and wrong and somewhere in the middle. We're talking about in the middle towards right here. We should be skilled enough to recognize wrong by the time we've studied some".

Each Wai Khru chant I have been taught has included an homage to the Buddha and homage to Jivaka (more on him shortly). Each has been chanted in a mixture of Sanskrit/Pali and Thai languages. And each has had at its core, a sentiment of gratitude. Here I am going to discuss one very common form of the healer's Wai Khru ceremony as well as the form that I currently use. Of the very common form of the Wai Khru, there have been a number of translations over

the years and you can find many of them in books and instructional manuals put out by different schools and teachers. I have read and appreciated many of these translations and offer here the explanation of this Wai Khru as given to me by Reusi Tevijjo; this being the one that I feel is most accurate based on my experience with other translations and my personal understanding of Reusi Tevijjo's vast knowledge.

It should be noted that the Thai languages have never been consistently transliterated. This means that there is no standardized system for putting Thai words into a Roman alphabet. Practically, this means that everyone is just sounding it out, and therefore you will find the same Thai words written in English many different ways, and none of these ways are right or wrong. They are simply the preference of the writer. Similarly Sanskrit and Pali are ancient languages that have no written form, hence they are transliterated into each new language as best fits that language. About this combination of languages here, Pali and Sanskrit are very similar, closely related languages and while there is a little of each in this Wai Khru, it is mostly in Pali; the holy language of Thailand. Pali to Thai Buddhists is much like Latin to Catholics. While almost no one speaks Latin colloquially, it is used predominantly in Catholic religious ceremonies. In Thailand no one speaks Pali colloquially, yet it is found in all of the sacred chants.

Translating the Wai Khru is not easy. There are concepts that don't exist in the Western world as well as cultural biases against certain forms of paying homage. In addition to this, there are parts to the Wai Khru that are untranslatable, or should not be translated. The reason for this, Reusi Tevijjo says, that "it is the tradition not to translate such an incantation because for one, it only makes sense to the creator of it, and two, it will lose its power". Caution must be used when reading translations of the Wai Khru that seem to be complete – it is likely that the translator is making bits up and even more likely that they are doing so with an aim to please a Western audience. At times this aim to please leads to not only creating translations for untranslatable parts, but to changing the meaning of more easily understood parts as well. At the very least, the translator is not aware of or perhaps not respecting the tradition to leave certain parts to the mystery.

## **Common Thai Healer's Wai Khru Chant**

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma SamBuddhasa (3x)

Om namo Jivaka Sirasa Ahang

Karuniko Sabba Sattanang, Osatha Dibbamantang

Pabhaso Suriya Chandang Komarabhacco

Pakasesi Vandami Pandito Sumedhaso Aroga Sumana Homi

Piyo Tewa Manusanang Piyo Poma Namutamo

Piyo Nakha Supananang Pinisiang Namamihang

Nama Putaya Navon Navien Nasatit Nasatien

Ehi Mama Navien Nawe Napai TangVien Navien Mahaku

Ehi Mama Piyong Mama Namu Putaya

Na A Na Wa Roga Bayadhi Vinassanti (3X)

### **Translation**

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma SamBuddhasa

“homage to the Blessed one, the Arahata, the Perfectly and Completely Enlightened One”.

This is a common Buddhist chant that pays homage to the Buddha. It is used throughout the Buddhist world extensively. It is traditional to pay homage to the Buddha first, because he is seen as the first and greatest teacher. Even in a specific field such as medicine, the Buddha is seen as the ultimate healer and the first teacher to be acknowledged.

Om namo Jivaka Sirasa Ahang

Karuniko Sabba Sattanang, Osatha Dibbamantang

Pabhaso Suriya Chandang Komarabhacco

Pakasesi Vandami Pandito Sumedhaso Aroga Sumana Homi

“Om I pay homage with my head to Jivaka”

“Who out of compassion for all sentient beings has brought us to divine medicine”

“He who shines as bright as the Sun and Moon, Komarabhacco”

“I hereby declare my respect to the great pandit, the intelligent and wise one. May I be happy and free of illness.”

This section is paying homage to Doctor Jivaka Komarabhacco; also known as Shivago or Chewoke. Doctor Jivaka is recorded in the Buddhist text The Pali Vinaya, as being the physician to the Buddha himself and as such is revered in Thailand as being the “Father Doctor”. Because there is a lot of confusion about Doctor Jivaka among non-Thai, Thai massage therapists, I will go into a bit of depth about him here. Firstly, to clarify some common misperceptions about him: Doctor Jivaka never went to Thailand, was not a monk, and did not invent Thai massage.

His life was lived in India during the time of the Buddha some 2,500 years ago and it is only through Buddhist legends and texts, not through physical travel, that he arrived in Thailand. His influence as a figurehead of medicine, while very strong in Thailand, is not unique to Thailand and in fact his story is told with local variations in Tibet and China as well (he also did not travel to these countries as far as we know).

Assumptions that Doctor Jivaka was a monk are likely based on his caring for the Buddha and his close association with the monastery; however, in those days monks were never doctors and he was more accurately a white-robed lay Buddhist who supported the monastic order through his donation of medical services: a donation that led to a long standing tradition of medicine in the monasteries and very likely increased the numbers of people joining the monastery. As a white robed layperson, he would have taken higher precepts and practices than a regular lay person without actually becoming a monk.

As for the belief held by some that Doctor Jivaka was the founder of Thai massage, it should be stated that while there are many detailed descriptions of medical services performed by Doctor Jivaka recorded in the Pali Vinaya, there is not a single description of him doing any form of massage. Add to this the fact that there is currently no form of bodywork readily found in India that resembles Thai massage; whereas there is a strong oral history in Thailand that sustains an understanding that Thai massage is indeed from South East Asia, and it becomes ever more clear that while the origins of Traditional Thai Medicine are debatable, it is likely that the massage component did not come directly from Doctor Jivaka or even India. For those who argue the clear Indian influences upon Thai massage, it is important to remember that influence is not the same as origin and can come along and add to or shift things at any time. It is also notable that the honoring of Doctor Jivaka is not unique to Thai massage practitioners. Healers of all sorts throughout Thailand be they village herbalists, midwives, or even practitioners of Western allopathic medicine, honor Jivaka. To assume based on his reverence in the Thai massage world that he founded Thai massage, would lead one to believe that he also founded midwifery, allopathic (western) medicine, herbalism and just about every healing modality found in Thailand.

So why pay homage to him at all? Well, just because he did not invent massage does not mean that there is no connection to him in the healing arts. In a Buddhist culture, just the fact that he worked directly with and healed the Buddha would be enough to warrant him thousands of years of homage. Ultimately, he was a great healer; and there is a level at which healing rises above the specifics of one medical modality or another. It is also likely that he had influence on traditional Thai medicine's theoretical system through knowledge that would have traveled to Thailand with the spread of Buddhism due to Jivaka's creation of a relationship between medicine and monks. In paying homage to Dr. Jivaka we are giving thanks to his great healing, and asking that the energies of this esteemed healer be with us in our work, helping to guide us and protect us. It is important to realize that this is a fairly generic healer's Wai Khru chant that does not include all of the possible teachers and deities that an individual or lineage may have a connection with and wish to pay homage to. Jivaka here is a figurehead of medicine, not the specific endpoint for a Thai massage lineage. More important than the name is that we recognize that healing knowledge does not come from us alone, that regardless of who invented what, there

are ancestors to be thanked. In this we do not work alone, but rather with the support of generations upon generations of healers

Piyo Tewa Manusanang Piyo Poma Namutamo

Piyo Nakha Supananang Pinisiang Namamihang

“Adored by deities and humans, He who is adored by Brahma I pay homage”

“Adored by Naga and heavenly beings, Who is of pure faculties I pay homage”

It is not clear who this section is paying homage to. It is composed of Pali words and Reusi Tevijjo says that it could be in reference to either the Buddha or Jivaka, or even the Reusi (more on them soon). The word “naga” refers to benevolent serpentine earth beings that are something of a cross between snakes and dragons. Naga statues lead visitors into all of the temples in Thailand with their heads down toward the bottom of staircases leading to the doorway, their bodies running up like banisters; they guide us into the sacred. What is important to know about this section of the Wai Khru is that it is mostly used as an incantation of attraction to ask for protection and luck of the deities, and to be liked by others.

Nama Putaya Navon Navien Nasatit Nasatien

Ehi Mama Navien Nawe Napai TangVien Navien Mahaku

Ehi Mama Piyong Mama Namu Putaya

This is the section that is not meant to be translated. While some books do offer translations of this piece, Reusi Tevijjo tells me that it has far more meaning outside of what is found in them; the purpose of this part of the chant being for attracting things, people, money or business. Since it is not the tradition to directly translate this part, I am choosing to honor this by not including whatever translations I have come across. Instead, I think of this as a time to allow the mystery and magic of the chant to just be.

Na A Na Wa Roga Bayadhi Vinassanti

May disease and illness be utterly destroyed

This last part is simple enough and straightforward in translation.

And so we complete our dissection of the form of the Thai healer's Wai Khru most commonly known to the non-Thai world. As I have mentioned, it is not the only version of the healer's Wai Khru. How this one came to be so widely used when teaching Westerners I am not sure, but I suspect that it began with the Shivagokomarpaj Hospital (Old Medicine Hospital) in Chiang Mai. Shivagokomarpaj was one of the first places to teach Thai massage to non-Thais, and many schools and instructors have come from their halls. From there I believe it spread until it became known to Thai schools and teachers in northern Thailand as the one to use for foreigners. It is not a traditional northern style Wai Khru, but is common among schools in the city of Chiang Mai that have a connection to Old Medicine Hospital. In the south, the most common school teaching Thai massage to non-Thais is Wat Po, which uses a different Wai Khru. The Wai Khru as I teach it, as my teacher has instructed me, includes parts of this first one incorporated into a slightly longer chant. It is as follows:

## **Second Wai Khru Chant**

Araham Sammaa Sambuddho Bhagavaa Buddham Bhagavantam Abhivaademi

Svaakhatto Bhagavataa Dhammo Dhamman Namassami

Supatipanno Bhagavato Saavakasangho Sangham Namaami

Maataa Pitu Gunam Aham Vantaami

Gurupaacariyam Gunam Aham Vantaami

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammaa Sambuddhassa (3x)

Om namo Jivaka Sirasa Ahang

Karuniko Sabba Sattanang, Osatha Dibbamantang

Pabhaso Suriya Chandang Komarabhacco

Pakasesi Vandami Pandito Sumedhaso Aroga Sumana Homi

Om Namom Jivako Kumarabhajo

Namassittavaa Isii Siddhi Lokanaatham Anuttaram Isii Ca Bandhanam

Saatraa Aham Vantaami Tam Isii Siddhi Vessa

Om Sarvebhyo Rishibhyo Namah



Na A Na Wa Roga Bayadhi Vinassanti

Metta gunam Araham Mettaa

### **Translation**

Araham Sammaa Sambuddho Bhagavaa Buddham Bhagavantam Abhivaademi

Svaakhatto Bhagavataa Dhammo Dhamman Namassami

Supatipanno Bhagavato Saavakasango Sangham Namaami

These first three lines are a traditional Buddhist chant used throughout the Buddhist world and are known as the Triple Gem. The first line pays homage to the Buddha, the second to his teachings, and the third to those who have carried on his teachings for all. After each line, the chanter should prostrate one time.

Maataa Pitu Gunam Aham Vantaami

This line pays homage to one's mother and father. In Thailand great respect is paid to one's parents as being the original teachers. My most respected Thai massage instructors have all made clear that this is not about what one's relationship with one's parents is; it does not matter if they were good or terrible parents; one must still pay homage to them as being the people who gave one life and were the first teachers. After this line, prostrate one time.

Gurupaacariyam Gunam Aham Vantaami

This line pays homage to the rest of one's teachers including current day human teachers as well as celestial guides. Prostrate one time after this line.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammaa Sambuddhassa (3x)

This is the same line as is found in the more common Wai Khru outlined above. It pays homage to the Buddha and is used extensively throughout Buddhist culture. It is not unique to healers and can be found in many incantations.

Om namo Jivaka Sirasa Ahang

Karuniko Sabba Sattanang, Osatha Dibbamantang

Pabhaso Suriya Chandang Komarabhacco

Pakasesi Vandami Pandito Sumedhaso Aroga Sumana Homi

Om Namo Jivako Kumarabhajo

This is the same as the section paying homage to Jivaka as is found in the more common Wai Khru outlined above. The only change is the addition of the last line, stating Jivaka's name.

Namassittavaa Isii Siddhi Lokanaatham Anuttaram Isii Ca Bandhanam

Saatraa Aham Vantaami Tam Isii Siddhi Vessa

Om Sarvebhyo Rishibhyo Namah

This section pays homage to the Reusi. Reusi are Buddhist spiritual ascetics, a bit like a mixture between a monk and a shaman, but with a different set of rules and purpose than monks. Monks generally live in a monastery and it is their task to work toward personal enlightenment. In order to facilitate this they separate themselves from the layman's world; they do not marry, have children, or have jobs. Reusi on the other hand, are more like Buddhist shamans. Traditionally they work to be in tune with the natural world; receiving wisdom from nature. As conduits of knowledge of the sciences such as the healing arts, the Reusi must work directly with lay-people. They do not have the same rules of separation that the monks have. While most Reusi are hermits, technically they can marry and have children and work as teachers and medicine practitioners. It is the ancient Reusi who are credited with the transmission of much of traditional Thai medical knowledge including Thai massage and other sciences. In truth, legend would attribute to the Reusi of old, not to Dr. Jivaka, the discovery of both self massage techniques and assisted massage techniques as found in Thai medicine. Old medicine paintings often will show the image of the Buddha in the center, a Reusi to his right, and Dr. Jivaka to his left. This positioning of the Reusi to The Buddha's right clearly indicates the Reusi's high placement in medical history.

The question that arises from this is: if the Reusi are more closely connected to the creation of Thai medicine, why is it Dr. Jivaka that gets all the fanfare? I think there are two main considerations here. One, Dr. Jivaka worked directly with The Buddha and in a Buddhist culture this automatically brings him to the forefront. And two, Reusi are traditionally very hermit-like, preferring to live quiet lives in the forest; interacting with others primarily for the purpose of providing service. They keep to the shadows so to speak. Even in Thailand, where there is still a living tradition and lineage of Reusi, many Thais are unaware of their continued existence and believe the lineage to be dead. The overlooking of the Reusi is so complete that even at the famous Wat Pra Kaaow, the Emerald Buddha Temple in Bangkok, a statue that to the trained eye is clearly a Reusi, is labeled as being Dr. Jivaka. Because this is a rather well known statue, the error has been duplicated in many books on Thai massage that contain photographs of this statue. Even more notably, a recent publication in the West about self care exercises that come

from the ancient Reusi. has within it multiple photographs of Reusi; each and every one of them with captions labeling them as photographs of Dr. Jivaka. It also contains Thai drawings of Reusi performing the poses taught that are labeled: “archival drawing(s) of Jivaka”. We can see that even in the world of those purporting to make a study of the teachings of the Reusi, knowledge of them is limited and riddled with error. I think that this is accepted, and possibly even preferred by the Reusi as preserving the anonymity of the tradition yet I also think that as a practitioner of Thai massage it is important to pay respects to this very important part of the lineage of Thai healing.

Om Na A Na Wa Roga Bayadhi Vinassanti

Sadhu No Bhante (3x)

This again, is the mantra to combat disease, with the addition of a second line that is a bit like saying amen.

Metta gunam Araham Mettaa

This is a chant of metta. Metta is a Buddhist concept that translates as good will; some translate it as universal compassion, or loving kindness. There are many Buddhist meditations aimed at generating metta, or good will. In the Thai healing arts, generating metta, and working from a place of metta, is of utmost importance.

The Practice – Instructions

As stated above, the Wai Khru is ideally done on a daily basis by any practitioner of Thai medicine. While a person can do the Wai Khru practice at any time, the best times are one hour before sunrise, or one hour before sunset as these transition times of day carry a special quality to them that is conducive to this sort of practice. If a Wai Khru practice is done in the morning, it is best to do it after bathing and using the toilet, but before eating, and it is important to brush one’s teeth to have a clean mouth. The Wai Khru is performed before an altar with an image of the Buddha as well as images of any other teachers and/or deities being honored. For details on how to properly set up a Thai altar I recommend Pierce Salguero’s wonderful book, *The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand*. Traditional offerings given to the altar include; incense, candles, water, food and flowers. Some also give tobacco, old money, alcohol and fruit. Incense is representative of the element wind, and the number of sticks of incense varies depending upon the intention. Five works well for most massage practitioners as it is representative of the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha, ancient teachers, mother and father, and current day teachers. The candle represents the element of fire, water represents the element of water, food represents the element of earth, and flowers represent the element of space.

The Wai Khru is performed kneeling, feet pointed back behind the body (toes curled under foot for men). In Thailand it is considered impolite, especially for women, to sit in tailor position (lotus position, “Indian” style). Once positioned, the practitioner bows three times. The way that Thais bow in this setting is to begin with the hands in the prayer position close to the chest, elbows close in at the sides. The head is brought to the ground, with the hands above the head in

prayer position, also touching the ground. The idea of prostrating oneself before an altar with statues and other images on it is sometimes difficult for a Westerner to embrace. I would like to note here that the way it was explained to me is that one is not so much bowing to the statue of the Buddha, but rather to the qualities of the Buddha that one aspires to hold within oneself. The Buddha stated quite clearly in his teachings that he was not a god, and so it is not to a deity that one bows, but to an image created to remind one of the teachings of a wise human. The same can be said of any images of Doctor Jivaka, Reusi, or other teachers that one may have upon one's altar. If you pay homage to any of the deities, as is often done in a Wai Khru practice, this is a different matter; but I will assume that this notion of prostrating to a teacher or God/ess is not of issue to you if you include deities, and let it go at that.

Following offerings and bows, one chants the Wai Khru chant of choice and finishes with three more prostrations. When done, candles and incense may be left to burn, but if they must be extinguished they may not be blown out. One can use a candle snuffer or fingers, but blowing out a candle is thought to disperse the offerings. If a person is someplace where they do not have an altar they can still practice the Wai Khru. Face east, and proceed as usual. Having an altar with images of the Buddha and teachers is helpful in focusing our minds, but it is not the heart of the practice; it is merely a tool.

For those who practice Thai massage yet are faithful to a religion that does not have space within it for a Buddhist Wai Khru practice; they can adjust their practice to more comfortably match their belief system. For example, prayers can be directed to Jesus, Allah, G-d, angels, saints, Mother Earth... These prayers would be prayers of gratitude, and prayers for guidance and protection in your healing work. You should still be sure to give thanks for the lineage of training, your current day teachers, and your parents. While this is fine for the average practitioner of Thai massage, ultimately, the Buddhist spiritual component of traditional Thai medicine is integral to this healing system; to work on a deeper level with Thai medicine it would need to be embraced. Traditional Thai medicine without Buddhism simply isn't traditional Thai medicine. Also along these lines, there is a strength to having a practice that utilizes chants or mantras that are used by others in the world. As Reusi Tevijjo says, "This is the reason why certain incantations which are used all over the world, like Om Mani Padme Hum, have so much power. It's easier to use incantations which are used by many or used in groups in the beginning to effect a change. Sometimes it's hard to develop the concentration needed to use an incantation on our own".

My hope in writing this essay is to help Thai massage practitioners have a deeper understanding of the Thai healer's Wai Khru, and to appreciate the importance of this practice. Reusi Tevijjo has spoken with me at length about the traditional way of studying, which would be a one-to-one lifelong relationship between a master and an apprentice student. These days most of us learn Thai massage as one of many students in an occasional class. Even those who return year after year to Thailand to work with a particular teacher are generally one of hundreds of students that that teacher sees in a year; and so the traditional way is lost to us. Through a strong Wai Khru practice we can bring an element of this ancient connection to teachers and lineage into our lives that might be otherwise absent, and through the commitment to a daily practice, experience a tiny slice of the true student commitment.