

The Historical Roots, Theoretical Foundation and Spirit of Traditional Thai Massage

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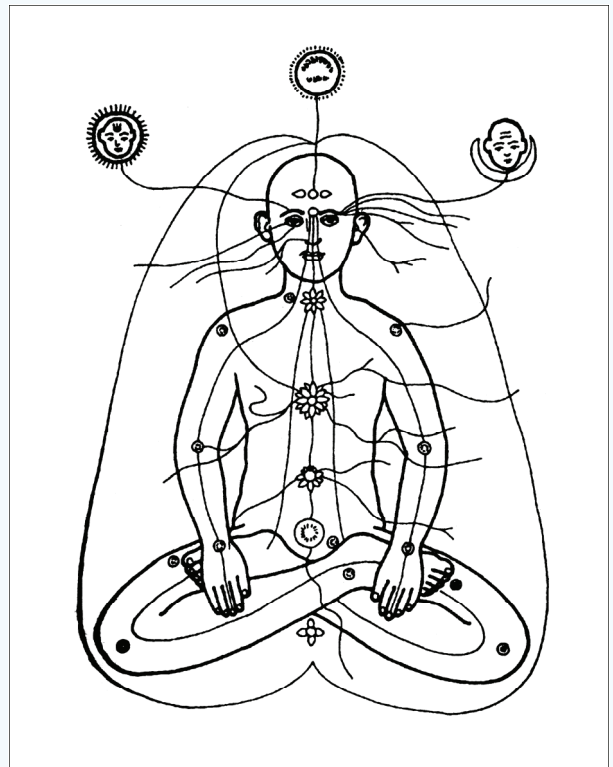
THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TRADITIONAL THAI MASSAGE

Traditional Thai massage, or “Ancient Massage” (*nuad phaen boran*, as it is called in Thai), looks back at a long history of therapeutic healing. If one traces the evolution of the techniques of healing-massage practiced in Thailand, one discovers the astonishing fact that the earliest roots of Thai massage lie not in Thailand but in India. The legendary founder of the art is believed to have been a doctor from northern India. Known as Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha, he was a contemporary of the Buddha and personal physician to the Magadha King Bimbisara over 2,500 years ago.

Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha was a close friend of the Buddha and also the physician of the *Sangha*, the order of Buddhist monks and nuns. He is mentioned in the Pali Canon, the scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced today mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha is regarded not only as the inspiration for the massage techniques used in Thailand today, but also as the source of knowledge about the healing powers of herbs and minerals. Aspects of Indian Ayurvedic medicine can still be found in Thailand and—along with herbal treatment, steam baths and massage—comprise the services offered at the Massage Hospital run by the Foundation of Shivago Komarpaj in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. And even today Kumar Bhaccha is respected and honoured by many Thais as the ‘Father of Medicine’. Religious ceremonies (called Pujas in Pali and *bucha* in Thai) are conducted to remember him. A prayer in Pali language is chanted on these occasions: “*Om namo Jivaka*”—Jivaka, symbol of Cosmic Unity. “I venerate the compassionate Jivaka with good conduct...” These ceremonies, called *wai khru* in Thai, are still a daily ritual at the Massage Hospital in Chiang Mai and are performed twice a day.

Despite what is known about Kumar Bhaccha, much of the origins of Thai massage and traditional Thai medicine still remain obscure. It is believed that the teachings of Kumar Bhaccha reached what is now Thailand at the same time as Buddhism—as early as the 3rd or 2nd century B.C. It is unknown whether there was any indigenous form of massage in the region before that time. Equally unknown is to what extent Chinese concepts of acupuncture and acupressure (as well as other aspects of traditional medicine) had any theoretical and practical influence on the practice of massage in Thailand. Nowadays it is impossible to definitively answer such questions, since for centuries medical knowledge was transmitted almost entirely orally from teacher to student, following a teaching tradition also common in India. There is mention of massage in 17th century medical scriptures written on palm leaves in Pali language using Khmer (*khom*) script. These old texts seem to have been very important and were accorded respect similar to that bestowed on Buddhist scriptures. With the destruction of the old royal capital, Ayutthia, by Burmese invaders in 1767, most old texts were



destroyed and are, sadly, gone forever. Only fragments survived and these were utilized in 1832 by King Rama III as the basis for the famous epigraphs at Phra Chetuphon Temple (popularly called Wat Pho) in Bangkok. The fragments were collected and compared and then carved in stone and placed into the walls of the temple. The diagrams (the cover of this book illustrates the sort of drawings that were used) and the corresponding explanations have their shortcomings. A publication of the 'Association of the Traditional Medical School in Thailand' published in 1977 in Thai language, presents "The Medical Texts which his Majesty King Rama III had engraved at Phra Chetuphon Temple (Wat Pho) in 2375 B.E. (1832 A.D.)." There are some contradictions between the diagrams and the explanatory notes; the diagrams lack ribs and vertebrae, and there are other inadequacies. But these graven texts are still a rich source—and the only source—for anyone interested in exploring the theoretical background of Thai massage. Altogether there are sixty figures, thirty depicting the front of the body and thirty depicting the back. On the figures therapy-points are shown along the various energy lines called *Sen* in Thai; these lines form the primary theoretical basis of Thai massage. If one looks at these diagrams with a Western concept of anatomy in mind, they appear to be quite strange at best, the reason being that anatomy did not play a role in ancient Thai massage. Surgery was unknown in Thailand until quite recently, and dissection of corpses seems to have been banned in earlier Thai societies. Anatomical knowledge was therefore practically non-existent, and the massage-diagrams do not pretend to be physiologically accurate. They are only a schematic device to show the pattern of invisible energy lines and acupressure points—and their influence on the body and its functioning.



"When any person is sick at Siam he begins with causing his whole body to be molded by one who is skilful herein, who gets upon the body of the sick person and tramples him under his feet."

-- Simon de la Loubère, French liaison to the Thai Royal Court in Ayutthia, 1690

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF TRADITIONAL THAI MASSAGE

The theoretical foundation of Thai massage is based on the concept of invisible energy lines running through the body. Ten of these lines are especially important in Thai massage: 'The 10 *Sen*' or *sib sen*. The Indian origin and influence becomes obvious here since the background of this theory clearly lies in Yoga philosophy. Yoga philosophy states that life energy (called *prana*) is absorbed with the air we breathe and with the food we eat. Along a network of energy lines, the *Prana Nadis*, the human being is then supplied with this vital energy. These energy lines are invisible and cannot be verified anatomically. They form a sort of 'second skin', a second body in addition to the physical body. Called *Pranamaya Kosha* or 'energy body', this second body is comprised of a multitude of energy lines, said to be 72,000. However that may be, there are many lines and out of this multitude Thai massage has selected 10 mainlines on which there are especially important acupressure points. Massaging these points makes it possible to treat certain diseases or to relieve pain.

The 10 *Sen* are sufficient to conduct practical treatment for the whole body and its internal organs. Western scientists are still puzzled by the fact that these lines and points do seem to have validity. Their existence can be validated practically by the curing of various diseases or, at the very least, by providing relief. These points can be thought of as ‘windows’ into the body. These ‘windows’ enable an exchange of cosmic energy through which the human body is maintained in an energy balance with the energy of the universe. Disturbances in the flow of energy result in an insufficient supply of *prana* which will in turn lead to sickness. Working on the energy lines with massage can break the blockades, stimulate the free flow of Prana, and help to restore general well-being.

More or less the same theory is found in the Chinese systems of acupuncture and acupressure and also in the Japanese system of Shiatsu, which has evolved from Chinese models. (The energy lines in these systems are called meridians.) The origin of these systems is clouded in mystery. Some practitioners hold the opinion that their roots also lie in Indian Yoga philosophy, brought to China by Bodhidharma, the Indian saint who established Zen Buddhism in China—but such an origin is very much disputed by the Chinese. But whatever the origin of the Chinese teachings, there is little doubt but that the theory of the 10 *Sen* in Thai massage is based on the Indian transmission and not on the Chinese traditions. This relationship is manifested even in the terminology the Thais use, with many words quite obviously derived from Sanskrit, the ancient spiritual language of India. For example, the first three of the *Sen*—*Sen Sumana*, *Sen Ittha* and *Sen Pingkhala*—are not only linguistically cognate with Sushumna Nadi, Ida Nadi and Pingala Nadi, but these three Thai *Sen* follow paths very similar to the corresponding Prana Nadis. (A detailed description of the 10 *Sen* will be given in Section 3.1 of this book.)

THE SPIRIT OF THAI MASSAGE

Looking back at the tradition of Thai massage it is very clear that it was never seen as a mere job. Massage was always considered to be a spiritual practice closely connected with the teachings of the Buddha. Until fairly recently it was the *wat*, the temple, where massage was taught and practiced. Even today one of the most important massage schools in Thailand is at Wat Pho in Bangkok. The establishment of legitimate massage facilities outside of the temples is a recent development. The giving of massage was understood to be a physical application of Metta, the Pali (and Thai) word used in Theravada Buddhism to denote ‘loving kindness’—and devoted masseurs still work in such a spirit today. A truly good masseur performs his art in a meditative mood. He starts with a Puja, a meditative prayer, to fully centre himself on the work, on the healing he is about to perform. And he works with full awareness, mindfulness and concentration. This is a difficult mental state to achieve and even in Thailand there are only a few masters skilled in that art. Most of these masters—and I was blessed with having two of them as my teachers—are deeply religious people who practice Buddhist meditation as well. For beginners it is important to keep this ideal in mind and to learn in that spirit. There is a world of a difference between a massage performed in a meditative mood and a massage done just as a job. Only the masseur working in a meditative mood will develop an intuition for the energy flow in the body and for the Prana lines. Only a spiritually aware masseur is able to treat different people according to their different needs. Without such higher consciousness, Thai massage becomes mechanical and loses much of its power.