

A Member's Thoughts on the THAI Retreat & Conference

I participated in the first THAI Retreat & Conference and I wish to speak from my experience there. As a person not generally comfortable with 'organization', I went with a skeptical eye, wary of power, hypocrisy and bad intention. I also went because I love this practice of Thai massage. I am always looking to learn more and I am very interested in connecting to a larger community of practitioners; a group of people who all speak this beautiful language - a language of many accents, dialects and regional eccentricities. What I experienced was a profound immersion into the loving spirit of Thai massage.

I first want to speak to the reverence that I felt there. Reverence for the teachers in Thailand who have passed down this work - Asokananda, Pichet, Mama Lek, and Chongkol, among many others, were all referenced and honored. Through ceremony and stories as well as through the teachers there that represented many of these approaches, there was the constant recognition that we owe our connection to this work to these and many others through the ages.

Next, by working with teachers who have trained under many of the current Thai practitioners in Thailand, we all got to experience a taste of what various teachers have brought to the table. In this way, many are more clear about what is possible in Thai massage and many have made decisions to study one lineage or another, based upon what spoke to them. This was a wonderful opportunity for people to get insight into various practices and see the connections between them. ITM teaches one style, Pichet another, Asokananda another, and so on. To see where they intersect gave us all a clearer and deeper understanding of Thai massage. To have strong, committed and open teachers of all these styles in one place was a wonderful opportunity for those of us who have only studied under one or two teachers - what a blessing that was!

What I found in speaking to the teachers themselves - Rose Griscom, Bob Haddad, Hans Lütz, Janice Vitavec and David Weitzer - was that they also were profoundly moved by the opportunity to meet with teachers that they had known about but had never met before, all of them practicing and teaching for many years. I believe that when we operate in our normal bubble, we tend to not trust those who are doing similar things, especially when they are doing it differently. Differences tend to get magnified while what we all have in common tends to be less apparent. But when we meet and have a chance for face to face dialogue, those walls of ego and fear tend to melt....and that is exactly what happened at the THAI retreat. The spirit of Thai massage shone through so strongly. These teachers were all strong personalities, yet they approached each other with the utmost honor and respect, through their differences and similarities. All were deeply moved by their experiences and their connections to Thailand. By the way, none of the teachers were paid and they all paid their own travel expenses. I believe that they had no ulterior motives other than to share and be present at this seminal meeting.

Finally, I am not one to comment on the details of certification and all that. It is a difficult line to walk - to try to be an inclusive organization that respects all traditions, while at the same time creating standards that try to protect the integrity of the work as well as the public at large. As individual US states become more interested in licensure and regulation, it might be in our best interest to have a collective voice in that process. This is the society we live in, like it or not. I think that these are big issues that require input from everyone. But as we discuss this, we must remember to respect each other and constantly remind ourselves of the love that drives us all. If we can't do it, then who can?

We are all works in progress, we all have so much to learn, and at the end of the day, we are all walking together in the same direction. From what I can see, THAI is helping to create a Thai massage *sangha*. I recently read an interview in Tricycle magazine with Robert Sharf, Berkeley professor and Buddhist scholar. He was talking about how as Buddhism gets expressed in the west, the emphasis on individual experience has become primary. I will quote from the article. The question is asked, "What gets lost when primacy is given to individual spiritual experience? His answer - "the *sangha* gets lost! The community gets lost. If you view Buddhism as a matter of inner experience, you downplay its corporate dimension, those traditional resources that serve to deepen and extend the bonds of community and tradition." He continues, "the organized rule-bound and tradition-bound institution of the *sangha* provides a framework that, at least ideally, helps to efface egocentrism. The *sangha* literally embodies the Buddhist tradition; it transcends the self-concerns of any individual." He closes with this: "So we must ask whether Buddhism, when practiced without the ties of community and tradition, instead of mitigating our tendency towards narcissism, actually feeds it." Perhaps there is an aspect to this that deserves investigation, I don't know. But I do know that I feel much richer for the experience I had at the THAI Retreat & Conference and I, my clients and all who are and will be connected to me, will be better for it.

With respect and many blessings,

Paul Fowler - paul@thaimassagechicago.us