

An Interview with Asokananda

by Bob Haddad

The following are excerpts from an interview with Asokananda by Bob Haddad, Director of THAI. The interview was carried out on Feb 12, 2004 at Asokananda's home in Chiang Mai. Tragically, Asokananda passed away on June 27, 2005. We have lost a great teacher and a true friend.

What was your first experience with Thai Yoga Massage?

My first experience with Thai Yoga Massage was watching my two teachers practice at the Old Medicine Hospital (Chiang Mai, Thailand). I had no previous experience with Thai Massage before that, but I'd been studying a type of massage as part of my yoga training. The yoga tradition I follow contains a type of yoga massage that is not as evolved, but retains some remnants of what finally developed into Thai Massage. I knew a bit about yogic massage, but I had no clue that it was brought from India into Thailand where it then developed over more than 2,000 years. My introduction to that was quite interesting. I was teaching yoga to a friend on the beach at Ko Samet and two Dutch people came over and asked if they could join our morning yoga session. They were the ones who first told me about Thai Massage., back in 1986.

Were you already living in Thailand at that time?

No, I was primarily doing meditation in Burma and had spent quite a bit of time in Sri Lanka and India, and I would occasionally visit Thailand. I had met an old meditation student of mine in Burma at my teacher's monastery and I was doing this yoga session with him at the beach. I had absolutely no idea that serious Yoga Massage was practiced in Thailand. It was virtually unknown back in the mid 80s. Even in Thailand few people knew about it and there were practically no schools where you could learn it. The Dutch people told me that there were still two places where one could learn Thai Massage, and that one was at Wat Pho in Bangkok and the other was at the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai. I didn't really want to spend much time in Bangkok so on my next trip to Chiang Mai, I went to have a look at what they were doing at the Old Medicine Hospital. Back then there were no regularly structured classes; it was simply ongoing study. I think for the first half year there were only 2 or 3 students in the school. Anyway, I saw these two teachers working there, and what they were doing was amazing. I knew immediately that I wanted to learn it, so I asked them and they said I could start right away. And that was my introduction to Thai Massage.

How was Thai Massage thought of at that time in Thailand?

Thai Massage was virtually unknown at that time. Very few people were interested in learning the art, but shortly afterward, about three years later, Thai Massage began to establish a name for itself and more and more people arrived in Thailand hoping to study it. Attendance at the massage hospital grew from the handful of people I began with to a group of between 40 and 50 students by 1989 when I left. Interest in Thai Massage had exploded.



Asokananda at his home in February, 2004.

Photo by Bob Haddad

Do you owe that to any particular phenomenon?

Well I think it was a combination of things. On one hand this was a time when alternative medical practices began to gain popularity and acceptance all over the world, and consequently people began to be interested in traditional Thai Massage. Also within Thailand, this was a period when a group of Thai intellectuals began to question their country's complete dependence on Western medicine. Thai Ayurveda and Thai Massage had been pretty much pushed aside since the 1930s when Western medicine began to gain prominence. Also, in the mid 80s, the Thai Massage Revival project was started by the government, and more emphasis was placed on reviving what was still left of traditional Thai Massage. It was a time of change and within 4 or 5 years the whole situation with Thai Massage was completely transformed. When I first started no one was interested in Thai Massage, neither Thai nationals nor foreigners, yet four or five years later, there was considerable interest within Thai society as well as from the outside world.

What do you know about the Thai Massage Revival Project? Was it an effort to bring about standardization in the teaching and practice of Thai Massage?

Initially it was a project to simply revive Thai Massage. People had begun to realize that Thailand had a serious tradition of profound, therapeutic massage and of Ayurvedic medicine, whose revival was running parallel to that of Thai massage. So it was an attempt to bring back the knowledge and spread it more, and at the same time to make sure that it was somehow up to a certain standard of practice.

Do you think it was successful in achieving its goals?

It certainly did raise the awareness of Thai Massage within Thai society, and by now, Thai Massage has regained a certain level of status within Thai society that was lacking at that time. A few years back there was a government attempt to get every teacher registered in Bangkok, and teachers were supposed to have done some training there in order to get officially registered. One of my teachers had sent some materials at one point, but never received any answer. I remember when I asked my other teacher about it - he just looked at me smiling and said "do you really think I need that?" So (he laughs) the people I was working with were not very concerned about any sort of government affiliation.

Tell me about your teachers and about your initial length of study.

My teachers were Pichest Boonthumme and Chaiyuth Priyasith and...

Were they both teaching simultaneously at Old Medicine Hospital?

Well nobody was really teaching there actually, they were both working there, practicing there as therapists. The teaching consisted of being around them, observing them, working with them and getting feedback from them.

So the Old Medicine Hospital was functioning as a therapeutic center where people in the area would be attended to, as it was in the Buddhist Wat tradition?

Yes, it was a place where people with health issues would go and receive serious treatments and the main therapists were Chaiyuth and Pichest at that time. They both started there in the mid eighties and worked together for a period of two or three years. Chaiyuth left sometime in '87 as far as I remember and Pichest stayed on until the early 90s.

Tell me something about the presence of Ayurveda in the practice of Thai Yoga Massage.

Thai Yoga Massage IS Ayurveda, it's part of Thai Ayurveda and anyone here in Thailand who is engaged in serious Thai Massage sees it that way because that's the history of its development. Medical knowledge from India began to arrive in the Mon kingdoms of what is now northern Thailand between 200 and 300 BC. As the Mon rulers established contact with India, Theravada Buddhist monks and Ayurvedic practitioners began traveling to this region to teach a healing practice that contained both Ayurvedic principles and massage. So Ayurveda and traditional massage was originally taught as one concept. Ayurvedic practice in Thailand developed into what is now known as Thai Ayurveda, which is quite different in theory and practice from Indian Ayurveda, and the massage element developed into what is now known as Thai Yoga Massage. It was always one based on one tradition, but with different branches of the same medical practice.

To what extent have the original elements of Indian Ayurveda been lost or changed in current day Thai practice?

Well for example, in the actual practice of Thai Ayurveda the *doshas* do not play a significant role. The major source of diagnosis and of treatment protocol in Thai Ayurveda is based on tastes, which is not the case in Indian Ayurveda where *dosha* analysis plays a much more significant role. In Indian Ayurvedic medicine there are eight tastes, but in Thai Ayurveda there are ten. So it's quite difficult for an outside observer to understand Thai Ayurveda because it's based on a theoretical background containing many Indian principles which are rarely used in actual practice. Thais are not particularly concerned with those elements. They pay respect to the source, but they work within their own tradition. That's the way it has developed over the past two thousand years.

Does Thai massage reflect any indigenous Southeast Asian healing practices?

Nobody has any idea about this. There must have been some native healing tradition in Thailand, but there are no known sources of information about this.

To what extent does Thai Massage reflect ancient Chinese healing practices?

I think the Chinese influence in Thai Yoga Massage is completely overrated in much of the current literature on Thai medicine and in Thai Massage. I often smile when I read articles on Thai Massage where the Thai energy system is compared with the Chinese meridian system, arguing that it is more or less the same thing. There are even books that claim that the Thai Massage *sen* system is the same as the Chinese meridian system, and they then conclude that practitioners should utilize the Chinese meridians when engaging in Thai Massage. I believe this is not a good way to look at the Thai healing tradition because upon serious investigation one will see that the Thai tradition is clearly derived from the Indian *prana nadi* system and from Ayurvedic medicine. Chinese medicine and the Chinese meridian system had little influence on the actual practice of Thai Ayurveda and traditional Thai Massage until much later on. It's also historically easy to understand this because the first Thais were refugees driven out of China by the Han Dynasty, so the idea that these people would happily embrace the Chinese system and incorporate it into their own practice is somewhat unlikely. Only in the past 200-300 years have an increasing number of Chinese traders brought Chinese medical knowledge and herbal products to Thailand. Currently in Thailand, Chinese medical treatment has become more prevalent, but still, I think there is very little mixing of the two healing arts. Chinese practitioners in Thailand are still quite separate from Thai Ayurvedic practitioners, and there is a clear distinction between Thai Ayurvedic practitioners and Chinese doctors in Thailand who practice Chinese medicine.

So how do traditional Thai medicine practitioners work with their patients?

They will often perform a taste analysis on the patient, and prescribe medicinal herbs and sometimes minerals. They would possibly perform Thai massage, apply hot herbal compresses, etc. There is a wide range of practices that form the basis of traditional Thai medicine. To qualify as a Thai Ayurvedic practitioner you have to undergo rigorous training in Bangkok these days. One can study to become either a Thai Ayurvedic doctor or a Thai Ayurvedic pharmacist.

How do you feel about the commercialization of Thai Massage by relatively unqualified practitioners?

Well, I'm sure sad about it, but I also don't think there's much we can do. One of the side effects of the increasing popularity of Thai Massage is that there are also quacks who try to ride the wave and wind up teaching things that are incorrect or non traditional. But as with most fads, I'm confident that those who wish to practice seriously will eventually prevail and that the quality teachers will eventually have the strongest impact. Even the sub-standard schools in Thailand and in the West are raising interest in Thai Massage and anyone who gets started and can see the great potential will ultimately look for a serious teacher if they're truly interested.

How important is Thai Yoga massage to one's spirituality?

I don't think they can be separated, because Thai Massage was brought to Thailand in conjunction with Buddhism. Historically Thai Massage was taught alongside the teachings of the Buddha and remained closely connected to Buddhist tradition and also to meditation. The approach was that massage was an act of lovingkindness and mindfulness applied to another person. The spirit of Thai Massage is essentially a Buddhist spirit and to take it out of that context is to remove the heart of the process. If a massage is not practiced with lovingkindness and mindfulness, a certain quality can be missing from the end result. For me it's essential that the teaching of Thai Massage also incorporate the teaching of meditation and yoga.

To make one point clear that often appears as somewhat of a misunderstanding, Buddhist monks were not the ones responsible for teaching of massage in Thailand. It was the Ayurvedic doctors who arrived with the monks and in the same Buddhist spirit worked in the region to spread Ayurvedic medical knowledge. Buddhist monasteries were the first places where massage was carried out in Thailand, so there was a very close link between traditional Thai massage and Buddhist spirituality and principles. As far as is known, the first emigrations of Indian Ayurvedic practitioners and Buddhist monks began a few hundred years after the Buddha's death, around 300 BC.

And what about Jivaka Kumarbhaccha (the founding father of Thai Ayurvedic medicine and Thai Massage)?

Jivaka Kumarbhaccha is a mythological figurehead. He never set foot on Thai soil because he lived a few hundred years before the first Buddhist travelers came to the region. Those who began to spread knowledge of Thai Massage, however, were practicing in his spirit. He is specifically revered because he is the famous doctor mentioned in ancient Buddhist scriptures. He was the Buddha's doctor, - the physician of the Buddha's *sangha* - so anything medical that was associated with Buddhism became automatically associated with him. When Ayurvedic medicine was brought to this region, it was brought and transmitted in Jivaka's spirit and tradition.

So the elements of mindfulness, metta and lovingkindness inherent in Thai Massage have been transmitted over the years largely as a result of Jivaka Kumarbhaccha's personal relationship and interaction with the Buddha.

Yes, exactly.

Tell me a little bit about sen line blockages. How does energy healing take place?

Any kind of influence that we go through in our lives, whether emotional or physical, leaves an imprint on all the levels of energy manifestation that make up a human being. So it's important to understand how we view a human being from the Thai Massage perspective, as a compilation of five different bodies. These five manifestations of energies interact with each other. They're not layers on top of one other, but rather individual manifestations of energy. The one we most directly relate to is the physical body, the second is the *pranic* (energy) body, the next is our memory or subconscious body, the fourth is our intuitive body and the fifth is our link to cosmic energy flow. Each of these are different manifestations are so closely linked to each other that any disturbance on any level can become apparent on another level. If, for example, we go through emotional turmoil we may end up with physical problems. Or if we are involved in a car crash and break a leg, then this may have effects on the emotional or energy levels. In Thai Massage, our main tool is the individual's prana or energy body that we follow with the sen lines. We try to balance out any disturbance that exists on this energetic level and in doing so we influence disturbances on other levels too. If a physical problem is causing a disturbance in the energy flow, our work can have a balancing effect on both the physical and energy levels, as well as any or all of the other levels.

Can intuitive sensitivity be taught?

Only to a certain extent. You can teach people how to develop their sensitivity but intuition has to come by playing with the energy lines and feeling the energy. Ultimately it comes from one's intuition and most people have the ability to tap into it. Some people are naturals, they're right there from the first moment and can hone in on the energy flow. Others may look on in confusion and not understand what the heck we're talking about.

How do you guide your students in this regard?

I try to give very precise feedback on whether they are actually on the energy lines or not and ask them to feel the difference. It's important to try to develop a sense for how different it feels to actually be working on a line. After some time the sensing ability usually develops quite well.



Asokananda teaches to a group at the Lahu village school north of Chang Mai. *Photo courtesy Sunshine Massage School*

Traditionally we begin and end a session in supine position. Others sometimes deviate from this structure. What's your opinion on this?

My preference is to begin and end lying on the back. The final touch in Thai Massage is to bring major energy streams together at the forehead and the crown of the head, and then to balance the energy from there. This can also be done in the sitting position, and I'm not dogmatic about people having to lie down at the end, but the final work on the head is an important aspect of Thai Massage, and my preference is to do this while the patient is in supine position.

Is there a major release at the top of the head?

Yes, but this is actually happening throughout the whole workout, not just at the end. We release tension throughout the whole body during the entire massage. There's an energy exchange between the masseur and the patient happening all the time. Whenever we touch, we tap into the patient's energy. That's why it's also very important that the masseur take care of himself, making sure he protects himself properly before the session and cleans out his energy system afterward.

In addition to meditation and yoga, what can practitioners do to prepare for and unwind from a session?

I usually recommend an exercise to create an energy shield to protect oneself before you work, such as *prana eggs*, and then to do an exercise after the workout like *kaya kriya*, where you release tension very strongly from the body. Especially when we know we have a patient under duress, I'd recommend doing *prana eggs* before you start, and then take a shower or do a salt water cleanse, and perform *kaya kriya* after the patient has left.



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