

Experiences with Pichet Boothamme

By Josh Scoggins

My introduction to Pichet Boonthamme came in mysterious bits and pieces. While attending some of the main schools around Chiang Mai in 2002 and 2003, I heard references and rumors about an unorthodox master teacher of Thai massage in a nearby village. A woman who was teaching at ITM told me that he could actually see and read energy and auras. Another fellow I met on a bus to Myanmar told me that Pichet was 'the real thing'. But he also cautioned that if I weren't ready, it might not be a good way to spend my time. Pichet had a legacy of having influenced and taught many of the major teachers in Chiang Mai. Still, some dismissed him as an erratic eccentric who often did little teaching and offered no cohesive training format. Information about how to find him was vague. Most people knew how to get to his classroom but couldn't begin to explain the directions clearly.



Pichet performs a chest-opening back stretch in seated position. Note the triangle formed between her back, his knees/legs and the floor. Note also the position of his legs, with knees touching, feet apart and twisted inward.

Shortly after taking a course at the Old Medicine Hospital in 2003, I met a woman at my guesthouse who was then studying with Pichet and she offered to bring me along for a visit. Despite being quite sick with an infection I got as a result of a motorbike accident, I excitedly accepted. I had been taking intravenous antibiotics for a week, and I felt a little better that day. It was a Monday, so we went to Chiang Mai Gate market for flowers, incense, fruit and candles; the offerings given each Monday to Buddha and the spirits and ancient teachers of Thai massage. Then we crossed the street and caught a yellow *songthaew* toward Hang Dong. There was no real address to give the driver, so we had to watch for special landmarks. The big Sony sign on the right was first, about halfway from Chiang Mai. After a while we passed under two consecutive walkway overpasses, and that was when we started looking to the right for the American Standard billboard. At that point, we knew that Baan Chang Kham, Pichet's neighborhood, was nearby. We rang the bell, and got off just past a white four story building on the left. A bit further, beyond a small outdoor shop, a small lane made its way through a field to Pichet's home. We passed through his gates and entered his compound, comprised of a house, a teaching studio and a few rooms for rent.

Pichet greeted us as he intently arranged offerings from each student in red wooden bowls. I was really surprised how young he looked. After all the stories I'd heard, I imagined him much older! When all was ready, we began prayers; to God (Buddha), to the Father Doctor (Shivago Komarpaj), and to Kruba, a patron saint of Chiang Mai and one of Pichet's greatest inspirations. Lastly, there were prayers to the 'Earth Mother' as well as to "Mama and Papa." After prayers Pichet went through a ritual for each student, accepting his or her offering and presenting it before the altar. Using an inkless pen, he etched unseen figures on each person's forehead, evincing winces and anxiety as he spoke prayers above them.

That morning after ceremonies Pichet was in one of his 'low energy' phases and the students practiced among themselves. After lunch he began a demonstration. And that was when I got hooked! He exhibited amazing flow and performed effortlessly. He knew exactly where he had to work, and why, and it seemed like he simply melted on top of the receiver with all his weight and intention and compassion. It was not an old and tired routine; it was a dynamic and intuitive treatment. I saw right away that this man was a true healer. After his demonstration, he looked at the protrusion on my leg caused by the infection. I was very anxious and hoped he might offer some mystical solution or insight, but his advice was quite simple. He said "Oh, big problem... massage cannot helping. Go to the hospital". Two days later, in agonizing tears, a Thai friend brought me to the hospital. I succumbed to surgery, and lost my chance to return to see Pichet that year.

Now, two years after my first visit, I have spent a total of four and a half months studying with Pichet. He still seems as amazing and eccentric as when I first met him. He has an extraordinary psychic sense which enables him to read people very well, and to understand how they can be cured. Prayer and ritual are fundamental tools in his healing repertoire. He often sprays people with holy water and I have even seen him brandish swords and ancient farming implements over their bodies. One time he was working on a student with severely contracted shoulders, and what I witnessed seemed almost like an exorcism. The man was screaming and convulsing as Pichet worked on one side of his body, and then Pichet suddenly started hitting the student's opposite thigh with the back of his fist. The man was saying " I can feel the energy moving..." and Pichet warned people to not pass by his head because there was so much 'bad energy' coming out of him.



A vertical leg stretch in supine position. Note the external and internal triangles between her outstretched leg and his arms and upper torso.

Some days Pichet is active and sublime, and other days he is tired and passive, especially if someone in the class is causing a big energy drain. At times he will have students do the teaching and sometimes he will leave the classroom for hours with hardly a word. Some people are especially put off by his repetitive sermon-like morning chats. But really most of us need constant reminding of how mind, energy and emotions affect our well being. Massage technique alone is not sufficient for rooting out peoples suffering. In particular, westerners have a hard time grasping his explanation of how ghosts (or spirits) are hovering about us, manifesting physical problems in our bodies when we fail to listen to them. So he frequently admonishes the ignorance and indifference of *farang* (foreigners) with respect to prayer, ritual, and the Spirits. "Farang terrible" he says, " always don't know".

On a personal note I feel a very strong connection with Pichet and his teachings. I believe he understands the emotional and spiritual issues that humans face, and that he does have "answers". In this regard he is as much a counselor and spiritual advisor as he is a massage teacher. When I ask him how I can improve my massage skills, he doesn't talk to me about technique. "Go to the temple... for prayer and meditation" he says. Occasionally he will recommend lighting a candle and reading through the manual until the candle burns out. Then a little while later he will say, "burn the book". Instead of taking photos or drawing pictures, he tells his students to "keep in here," as he points to his stomach. More and more, he ignores the manual altogether. He demonstrates real therapy on real people, as they are in the moment.

His emphasis is on "relaxing" and "sensing." Technique becomes a spontaneous and natural adaptation to how each moment unfolds. How to use each part of your body in order to achieve the best result in your client, flows as much from intuition as from a routine. If you are not relaxed you cannot sense, and even the most subtle tension can transfer to the recipient. As he often says, "easy to see... but how to do? How sensing?" This is why meditation is so important. So much of our tension comes from emotional and psychic elements projected through our bodies, that we often are not aware that we are not relaxed. The more I study with him, the more I am aware of the subconscious tension that I carry with me at all times. He often reminds me to not think so much, to not worry so much. I have never met any other teacher who is so intent on pursuing quality and relaxation in his students.



A shoulder blade press in prone position. Notice the triangle formed between Pichet's straight back, his arms and the prone body of the receiver.

Pichet's powers, ultimately, are very hard to duplicate. In order to harness his extraordinary psychic sense, he often shuts himself off from much of what we call civilization. He rarely ventures into the city, he can hardly stand being there for more than a few moments, and he always comes back exhausted. "Cannot relax... too much energy." Few of us really have the desire or discipline for this kind of life. In 2000, he even went through a period of "big energy" as he calls it, when he spent several weeks in a hospital because family members thought he was acting strangely. He explained that it was a time of "too much energy", that he was visited by spirits and even interacted with the natural elements, calling upon the wind and the rain.

Pichet is certainly controversial, and there will always be people that don't understand or embrace his quirkiness and unorthodox teaching style. Those of us who return year after year learn something that is priceless. He is constantly changing, developing, improving. There is always so much to learn. And even when we are not feeling very productive in class, you might say that we are "relaxing." And if we are not, we should be, and that is a lesson in and of itself.

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