

History of Contorted Hermit

Collected By

**The Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine
Department of Thai Traditional Medicine Development and Alternative Medicine**

Ministry of Public Health

June 2006

History of “Contorted Hermit”

Introduction: Contorted Hermit

According to the Dictionary of Royal Institute (Thailand) 1999, Hermit means a kind of priest before Buddhist period who sacrifices his normal life to find a peaceful sanctuary and practice merit acts.

The first evidence of contorted hermit was found in the reign of King Rama I in 1788 during the renovation of Photharam Temple which at present is known as Phra Chetuphon Vimon Mangalaram Rajavaraviharn Temple (Wat Pho) and in the document of the Wat Phrachetuphon School of Thai Traditional Medicine mentioned that there was a contorted hermit's hill which was an exercise garden near the southern Vihara. King Rama I needed Thai Traditional Medicine, Art and Science since Ayuddha period to be collected. He hence initiated the contorted positions to relax body muscles and applied with Thai belief of Hermit who was considered as a master of knowledge in various sciences and therefore describing them in clay sculptures of contorted hermit for public study and medical treatment. Later in the year 1836, King Rama III renovated the whole temple and assigned Krom Meun Narong Hariraks (a son of King Rama I) as a chief of artisans in charge of molding contorted hermit with the mixture of zinc and tin in 80 positions. King Rama III, his Royal family members, entourages, and wisemen wrote pieces of verse and inscribed them on the stones and walls around Chetuphon Temple's hall as evidence of history of contorted hermit which was inscribed on stones as follows :

As to the year One Thousand One Hundred Ninety Eight;

In the year of the Monkey or the little era in Thai style;

On the day of precious Sunday in the half of the lunar month;

When it is the fifth day of fortnight of the Pig taking care and guarding;

Instruction is given to Krom Meun Narong Hariraks,

To be a chief of artisans for molding Contorted Hermit;

With expertise by mixing zinc with tin for such molding;

Of Contorted Hermit in 80 different positions of practicing merit acts.

After making and molding several positions of Contorted Hermit body;

The sculptures are situated in every pavilion all around the temple hall;

In the monastery of Chetuphon Temple, the name of the place for study;

Inscribed on the wall with several medical treatment methods.

In addition, there is another poem next to the above poem showing the wish of the King clearly that the Contorted Hermit story will be academic text for public study for every sex and every age accessing, studying and remembering for next use to oneself and family according to one's wish generally and widely all the time :

**The Contorted Hermit will be beneficial for good men everywhere;
The knowledge from this is like drug for curing;
The knowledge is to increase the accumulated good deeds;
From this the honor of the King is announced to the sky and ground forever.**

Contorted Hermit was found in the poem for the picture, such as Rama III's poem on body bending to cure waist pain and twisting legs, the text is as follows :

**This ascetic is very amazing;
His name is Sangpattihe-nga, he is wearing matted hair;
He stretched his legs to kick for curing fatigue and weariness;
Contorted Hermit method cured waist twisted and knee pain.**

Suphannahong Poem has the content as follows :

**The ascetic or hermit did not have any severe diseases;
Longevity he gets, no body can compare with him;
He sat cross-legged twisting his arms, lifting his body;
By this method, he taught the lessons for many years.**

Furthermore the ancient language expert, National library, Department of Fine Arts gave his opinion that : "Counting from the year building the Contorted Hermit up to present time, it can be said that Contorted Hermit is cultural legacy belonged to the people of the whole nation of Thailand that King Rama III of Ratanakosin Reign graciously gave to the people of the whole country, not specific only one person."

Positions of Contorted Hermit

Originally there are 127 positions of contorted hermit. At present, many institutes; Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine and Wat Phra Chetuphon School of Traditional Medicine have developed them for an exercise in different forms and styles.

"Contortion" means to make any part of body bend as needed in various forms such as stretching, shrinking, bending and twisting. Each position can be less or more flexible as practice.

Contorted hermit demonstrates relaxing positions of your body to relieve pains and stress. Those positions have been adapted from those of a hermit who concentrates on his hard practice on good merit for several hours a day.

Contortion is an exercise or acrobatic to make your body and mind in good health. The by products of contortion is to heal sickness such as systematic disease and muscle pains.

Originally there were 127 positions of contorted hermit, however, in the reign of King Rama III, it was mentioned only 80 positions. At present, they remain 24 positions of 25 hermits.

Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine has selected 15 out of 127 positions. All 15 standing, sitting, lying positions have consistent movements which benefit in balancing body structure. Public and private agencies are now using them as a general exercise.

Selection of Basic Positions

Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine has its own criteria in selecting 15 basic contorted positions out of 127 positions as follows:

1. A position which represents body movement which can exercise every part of your body from neck, shoulders, arms, chest, stomach, waist and knees to feet.
2. A general position for the beginners to get accustomed with and to see an importance of balancing your body's structure.
3. An original position of contorted hermit which is adapted for consistent movement of sitting, lying, standing positions.
4. A position that helps balance body's structure and uses for exercise in different dimensions such as vertical, horizontal and oblique. This is to examine an unbalanced part of body so that to avoid hurting it according to balancing concept of Dr.Ladawan Suwankitti.
5. A position that can exercise your facial muscle which was initiated by the late Dr. Krungkrai Jenpanitch, an orthopedic expert who studied Thai massage and 7 facial massage positions from Master Narongsak Boonrattanahiran, a royal household masseur.
6. A simple position that helps adjust balance of body's structure.
7. All the selected positions have been analyzed by conventional and modern medical studies for their effectiveness and efficiency. However, Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine has an idea to support a parallel research together with self practice.

Positions

At present, contorted hermit has been adjusted from the original record in Wat Pho to safer and more proper positions for exercise. They consciously focus on slow breath-in& breath-out and body movement.

Breathing Practice

In the textbook of practicing contorted hermit's positions, there is no mention about breathing. In Buddhism, the meditation needs breathing practice, therefore, positions of contorted hermit should concern about breathing and holding breath as well. Before exercising with contorted hermit's positions, meditation and breathing should be practiced correctly.

Inhaling-breathe the air into your body slowly and deeply to expand your stomach, chest, rib, and lungs, and raise your shoulders, hold your breath for a while which makes your stomach flats a little bit and fully expands your chest.

Exhaling-slowly breathe the air out of your body as much as possible by flattening your stomach, ribs, and lower your shoulders.

Contorted hermit is considered a Thai traditional exercise which is good for body and mind with meditation and breathing practice. It also helps heal your sickness at some level.

Benefits

Contorted Hermit helps awake, strengthen and relax your body as well as heal basic sickness as follows:

1. Help massage your arms, legs and joints to move naturally and flexibly.
2. Help circulate blood.
3. Prevent sickness, promote good health and a long life.
4. Elevate mind level from frustration, upsetting, stress and drowsiness by practicing contorted hermit with mediation.

Since Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine was first introduced positions of contorted hermit in 1995, no harms or dangers have been found. The slow movement with proper positions is safe for older people to exercise.

Use of Contorted Hermit

1. Teaching and Learning
 - 1.1 In the Thai traditional medical courses of Public Health Ministry, for 11 courses;
 - 1.2 Government/private work units requesting for approval of the courses through the Health Business Promotion Office, Health Business Promotion Department, Public Health Ministry;
 - 1.3 Government/private work units having cooperation on Thai traditional medicine with Thai Traditional Medicine Development and Alternative Medicine Department, Public Health Ministry;
 - 1.4 Government/private work units requesting for approval of the Thai traditional medical courses of Public Health Ministry;
 - 1.5 The teaching courses of Thai Traditional Massage School (Wat Pho);
 - 1.6 The teaching courses of Phisit Wetchakam School;
 - 1.7 The Thai traditional medical courses of Sirindhorn Public Health College;
 - 1.8 Teacher aid : documents/books/manuals/textbooks/VCD/ “Contorted Hermit : Thai Body Exercise”.

2. Direction and recommendation for curing pains for people who come to obtain Thai tradition medical service at several places in the government and private sectors.

Reference :

1. Dictionary of Royal Institute, of 1999.
2. Thai Traditional Medical Institute, Public Health Ministry. **Thai Body Exercise : 108 Positions, Contorted Hermit.**
3. Kongkaew Veeraprachak. National Library, Department of Fine Arts. May 20, 2006.
4. Contorted Hermit Recipe, Wat Pho, original, statues of Contorted Hermit at Wat Phra Chetuphon, Thai Traditional Medical School, Phra Chetuphon Vimoon Mangalaram Rajavaravivarn Temple (Wat Pho). May 24, 1990.
5. “Exercise Your Body, Make Your Life Happy” by using Thai Exercise in 15 Basic Contorted Hermit Positions, by Thai Traditional Medical Institute, Thai Traditional Medicine Development and Alternative Medicine Department, Public Health Ministry; 3rd edition, July 3, 2003.