

“In the name of the Founder”: Exploring the teacher-student relationship

By Mark Fletter

Thai massage is a beautiful bodywork tradition. As Westerners, we seem to be attracted to the sweeping, full body motions, the breath work, and the sense of harmony provided by this bodywork style. As attraction to this tradition becomes study, it is also common for the Western student to be taken aback in finding that the first step of any Thai massage sequence is to bow before a statue placed on an altar. Many prospective students don't realize that within traditional Thai massage, paying respect to a *Master Teacher* is more than just an empty ritual or superstition... it is at the very core of the practice. It is, in fact, this revered teacher-student relationship that has transmitted the wisdom of this elegant and effective tradition.

Have you ever had a teacher that you absolutely couldn't get enough of? A person who no matter what their expertise, seemed to inspire you in ways that didn't simply fit their subject of qualification? Whether it was in the form of a counselor at a childhood summer camp, or a professor at a university, we have all been touched by the influential power of a good teacher. It is my humble attempt through this article, to explore the universal dynamics of the ancient teacher-student relationship. And why the culture of Thai massage is rooted in this sacred exchange.

Pick up any text on Thai massage and you will find homage to Jivaka Kumarbhacca, the revered *Father of Thai medicine*. Jivaka is widely venerated in Thai culture and is seen as the Patron Saint of Nuad Boran, traditional Thai massage. Statues of Jivaka are commonplace in a Thai practitioner's treatment space; moreover prayers to the Father Doctor are offered routinely. In Thai culture, there is great recognition of the Doctor's piety, nobility and his power as a healer.

Traditional Thai massage schools begin their daily lessons by observing *Wai Khru*, honoring the teacher. It is in this ceremony that the 'Om Namo Shivago', or 'prayer to Shivago/Jivaka' is recited. In this offering to Jivaka, the Doctor is honored as a conduit for the "true medicine of the universe." In Chongkol Setthakorn's translation, the prayer goes on to state

“The god of healing dwells in the heavens high while mankind remains in the world below. In the name of the founder, may the heavens be reflected in the earth”.

In Ananda Apfelbaum's translation she writes, “Homage to you, Shivago, who established the rules and the precepts... I pray that with your help all sickness and disease will be released from those who I touch.” To this day, twenty-five centuries after Jivaka's time, the traditional ideology speaks toward keeping the original teachings alive. In order to do this we reverently honor and offer our gratitude to this saint-like figure who laid the foundation on which we practice this good work.

This position of master teacher, elder, high priest, or priestess is archetypal, and necessary for any social structure or community. In Carl Jung's work on psychological archetypes, he proposes that the basic themes of human life are formed by innate and universal images. His concept states that it is the impression of these images, these archetypes, will shape our individual experiences. Defined by Oxford English Dictionary, an *archetype* is "-a very typical example of a certain person or thing. - an original that has been imitated." Keeping this in mind, there is certainly no doubt as to how valuable people of exemplary character are in our lives.

Some of the essential archetypes defined in Jung's work, are the Mother, Father, Child, Hero and the Senex (Latin), Wise old Man. In Jung's work, this teacher/sage archetypal role is one of wisdom and sound judgment. "Offering guidance that, in a mystical way, may impress upon his audience a sense of who they are and who they might become, thereby acting as mentor" (1). In seeking guidance from Jivaka, whose example we strive toward, we see this archetype come to life.

Every tradition holds a position of honor for the Wisdom Keepers of that particular culture. A beautiful example of this is found in the ancient Vedic texts of India, in a yogic prayer entitled *Guru Puja*. Guru is best translated as teacher or elder, while puja is sanskrit for praying or giving respect. Within the supplication, the words "Gurur eva Parama Brahman" proclaim that it is the "Supreme Lord that is the true Guru (teacher)." The yogis invoke the Divine Guru, who "by the application of the ointment of knowledge, opens the eyes of one blinded by the darkness of ignorance." Here we see a clear image of those on a yogic path respecting knowledge itself, the very object of the teacher's purpose, as innately holy.

After all, the intention of a teacher is to educate. The word educate comes from the Latin root *educare*, meaning to pull out or lead forth. "While our modern use of the word education refers to collection of worldly facts, [it's essence] *educare* is to bring out from within" (2). The true Teacher is one who awakens the student to their inherent and underlying potential. Spiritual Teacher and Sufi, Sheikh Din Muhammad 'Abdullah al-Dayemi states in his Principles of Progressive Development: "Along with teaching traditional academic studies, teachers who promote true human progress will provide the greatest service to society." Change is essential to any seeker along the path of progress, compassion, and ego-annihilating kindness. So, it becomes very relevant to ask ourselves the questions: "am I willing to learn?" and, if so, "who will teach me?"

It is completely natural for a student of life to seek, stumble, find and/or fall into the company of a trustworthy Teacher. The master poets have likened it to falling in love. When we find ourselves in the Grace of sure guidance, our capacities to trust and to love expand. We are turned on to the opportunity of reaching deeper within ourselves and touched by the promise of becoming more. Our thirst for divine knowledge increases and, we seek to connect with what the traditional *Om Namo* prayer refers to as the "true medicine of the universe." *In the name of the Founder*, may we find the willingness to be better in this life. May our Teachers, our longing, and our efforts help us to embody *metta*, loving kindness, and to be of service to all. May we ideate on the true meaning and Teachings of our preceptor as we recite, "*may the heavens be reflected on the earth, so that this healing medicine may encircle the world.*"