

Interview with Chongkol Setthakorn of ITM Massage School, Chiang Mai

Chongkol Setthakorn is the founder and director of International Training Massage School (ITM) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. For many years, ITM has been offering classes in traditional *nuad boran*, and many current teachers and therapists in the west have studied at ITM at one time or another. Here is an interview conducted by Bob Haddad in early 2007 in the Santitham neighborhood of Chiang Mai.

Thank you, Khun Chongkol, for taking time today for this interview.

You're welcome. I enjoyed the articles in the *Living Traditions* newsletter, especially that one about the "blood stops." It is good that you spoke about "opening the gate" because in Thai we never say "blood stop." We say "open the wind gate" (to refer to this technique); to open the free mind for each other, so we share a good feeling from practitioner to client. An open mind, an open window. Those are the real things. Sometimes a doctor will disagree and say, "Oh no", but for over 2000 years no one has died from this (practice); they are happy and healthy.

Except it's good to know the contra-indications: high blood pressure, pregnancy...

Varicose veins, and heart disease....

And the variations are interesting. For example, on a strong or heavy person, we might use our knees to open the gate at the groin. But we shouldn't lean in too deeply.

No, just only enough to balance.

So let me ask you a few questions about your work and about ITM. You are always so busy there, with so many students....

Yes, we're quite busy all year round. We now have two buildings nearby the school, one about 20 meters away and another one next to Spa Mantra. We are renovating them as classrooms so when we have large groups, we can split them and hold classes in the new building. We are also training new teachers to support more students and new courses.

When did you have the idea to start ITM? And please tell us about when you were at Old Medicine Hospital. Which year did you begin to work there?

The first time it was in the 80s. I'm a cousin of Ajahn Sintorn. My mother and his mother are sisters. In my twenties, I studied law, and then I went there to work.

So you graduated law school, and you started to work at Old Medicine Hospital?

No, not yet, I continued to work at my law firm in Bangkok until I got to the top of my career in Bangkok after about 15 years. Then I came back to my home town of Chiang Mai when I was in my late thirties. That was around 1985, I think.

So that is when you began to work at the Old Medicine Hospital, and you were working there first as a lawyer?

Yes, as a lawyer and a consultant, whenever they would need me to work with them. And then later I also began to work there as a teacher. That period lasted about 2 or 3 years.

So when did you have the idea to start your own school?

After I came back from America. Rick Gold came to study at the Old Medicine Hospital, and there was a connection for me to come to California, in '89 or '90. Almost one year later, as soon as possible, I went to San Diego. It was the first time I had taught outside of Thailand. I stayed there about six months, teaching and studying. I was studying anything I could find in the school. When I came back, I still continued to work at the Hospital for another year. But when I went to America a second time, there was a problem. I think there was a problem with the length of time I was supposed to be there. Maybe they looked at the ticket and said "Oh, you will stay too long", so they refused to let me in. So they kept me in a holding area overnight, in a type of jail, outside the airport. I felt frightened, but it was OK because I knew I wasn't a criminal. Everybody there had visa problems. I had to wait there just one night, until they could book me on a return ticket to go back home.

Did you come with your wife on that trip?

Yes, and also with my daughter Kate. She was a teenager. But that night the two women slept in a motel (he laughs). For the women it was easier. As a man, I could not stay in the hotel. But they respected us, they didn't treat me like a criminal, and because I was a lawyer, they knew I wouldn't do anything wrong.

That must have been a terrible experience. So when you returned to Chiang Mai, how long did it take before you first opened ITM?

First I rented a room in downtown Chiang Mai and I began to teach some students, but then a month later, I rented a whole house, and then about a year later I began to look for a place to buy. That was in '93, and by then more and more students were beginning to come. Sometimes we had to have two classes - a day class and a night class. It was difficult sometimes. I trained the staff members myself, and we began to create our school.



So now it is 15 years later. How are you feeling about your work?

I am happy. I am happy to be a teacher, more than a therapist. To be a teacher means to always be a good friend. And now we are hoping to buy the building next to ITM, to make the school bigger. And we also have Spa Mantra (at the end of the block, run by daughters Kate and Liz - Ed.) We have an extra room there where we can teach Thai massage.

And you are also teaching Luk Pra Kob (herbal compresses) now?

Yes, Kate teaches that in the spa. We teach students there whenever they want to learn, in small groups or one-on-one. We teach them how to mix the herbs, to wrap the compresses and to use them.

So here you are in 2007, a successful business man with many years of experience teaching traditional Thai massage. What can you suggest to Thai massage therapists, so we can continue to be good practitioners?

To study and practice, that's all. Many people, many (western) massage therapists who come to study with us, always want to begin with the advanced class, without starting with a good introduction. This is a big mistake because Thai massage and western massage are completely different. So we recommend that they try Level I or Level II first. If they feel confident, then they can continue. Some people go to the advanced class for only one day, and then they say "I have a headache, I want to return back to the beginning." And most of them come back to the beginners class. Unfortunately some people in the west still associate Thai massage as a sexual thing, so it is important to make them understand what it really is, so they understand the truth about Thai massage. The two main styles of Thai massage are the Bangkok style, where there is more acupressure, and the Chiang Mai style, which has more stretching. We try to help them become good messengers of our work to the west, and we hope that will work.



Chongkol Setthakorn (center), with his wife Atchara and daughter Chulaluck (Kate) at ITM Massage School.

What can we do to help new students understand to learn slowly, to realize that we are students for the rest of our lives? How can we help to change the western mentality of those who want to become a Thai therapist very quickly?

We always try to tell them to calm down, slow down, don't rush, that's all. Work slowly and try to make it perfect. More experience can only help. Practice and more practice, that's all. That's the whole idea. Two weeks of practice in Thailand is just the first step. Now the government of Thailand requires a minimum of 80 hours. That is enough time to begin to learn, but not enough time to begin working.

You have been a strong supporter of the Thai Healing Alliance, thank you. Do you have any final thoughts about THAI?

Many schools stay alone, and there is no central organization. The government has tried to bring us together, but many schools still stay alone. Some people ask me, "why isn't there a center (an organization) in Thailand?" We do have associations in Thailand, but they are mostly for Thai people. I always tell my students that THAI is a good organization for Thai massage, because everybody can be friends, and share good feelings with each other. THAI is a good organization for all Thai massage therapists in the world. ☺



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