

Source: Bangkok Post, 6/2012

## Massaging the numbers

### Preeda Tangtrongchitr talks about taking Thai massage to the next level

Preeda Tangtrongchitr's business is the driving force of the country's traditional Thai massage and spa industries, credited with training around 200,000 Thai and foreign massage therapists at Wat Po Thai Traditional Medical School, which has moved with the times for almost five decades.



The 72-year-old director of the famous temple's medical school said that the idea of following in the footsteps of his father, who owned and operated the school, first came to him when he studied pharmacy at university. He learned a lot from his father and also experimented with Thai traditional medicine. As a result he decided to further study traditional Thai medicine, especially Thai massage.

"I thought that mainstream medicine was superior to traditional medicine," said Preeda, who grew up in pharmaceutical-business oriented family. "But, when I gained more experience of traditional Thai medicine, I was very impressed. That got me hooked on pursuing the family business. And the common goal of both modern and traditional Thai medicine is to cure illnesses and to help people maintain their health."

Preeda has run the school for over 22 years and he has passed on much of the work to his son, the third generation of traditional Thai medicine practitioners, while he maintains a supervisory role.

Judging by his appearance, the white-haired septuagenarian is really healthy for his age. He told Life that the secret to good health lies in diet, exercise and rest. And it's a reasonable assumption that operating a Thai massage school makes Preeda passionate about traditional Thai massage and also an exemplar of healthy living.

"Traditional Thai massage helps me feel relaxed and reduces stress. I have it once or twice a week," he said.

Although traditional Thai massage is successful at the international level, with the presence of such business in over 150 countries worldwide, Preeda sees room for further improvement.

"To achieve even greater success, it's vital to improve the practical skills of therapists," he said, adding that qualified massage therapists must be rigorously trained both theoretically and practically at certified schools. More importantly, practitioners have to gain years of practical experience prior to professional occupation.

"The health and safety of the person being massaged is a high priority. Some therapists are good at theory but not at practice," he said.

Preeda pointed out that a lack of experience is an issue as some therapists enter the industry too soon. A careless mistake can cause injuries that can be disastrous for the business and the industry.

"Old women, for example, are vulnerable. Unskilled therapists can give them bone fractures. And if people have a bad experience, they never come back," he said. Asked how people can know if they receive a proper massage, he paused for a moment, mulling the question. "Well, it's difficult to tell. One important thing, Thai massage doesn't cause severe aches and pains or inflammation. Those having it for the first time may feel slight pain and discomfort because they are not used to it, but the pain is usually bearable."

Before a massage session, Preeda continued, therapists will need to know their customer's health history. This is because people with certain conditions, those recovering from surgery, people who have heart disease or are prone to blood clots, as well as those with infectious skin disease or open wounds are not recommended to have Thai massage.

"Traditional Thai massage will not directly be done over bruises, inflamed skin, unhealed wounds and tumours," said the Thai massage expert.

He also explained that massage is one of the fundamental principles of traditional Thai medicine according to diagrams inscribed on the walls of Wat Po. And Thai massage is a natural, holistic approach to health and well-being. It's yoga-like stretches and acupressure balance the 10 major meridian or energy lines in order to help enhance blood circulation, increase energy and flexibility, improve the range of motion and reduce stress.

"Energy flows through the body along 10 major channels. If an obstruction occurs in any of these channels, it's believed to cause pain and disease," said Preeda, the author of Traditional Thai Massage Instruction, a textbook for practitioners at Wat Po massage school. "Thai massage is best for tension-related headaches and pains caused by hard work and other areas of referral pain."

He added that Thai massage is performed at a slow, rhythmic pace that allows the mind to escape from a hectic lifestyle into a deep, meditative state. A full-body session should last two hours for the greatest benefits as the receivers will feel harmony and tranquility after the session. Standard practice is also another of the industry's key issues, Preeda said. Competition in the Thai massage industry is intense these days, with a sharp rise in the number of Thai massage houses across the country.

"Even if therapists studied Thai massage at the same school, they may perform different ways in practice," he said.

Therapists should possess a good command of massage practice as well as a good personality, while good health and personal hygiene can also help raise the bar, Preeda said. It's recommended for them to have a regular medical check-up.

"I consider it's also important to be vaccinated against hepatitis B," he added.

To standardise massage and therapeutic techniques and provide more effective sessions in terms of safety and manners, Preeda said the government should consider developing a Thai massage training centre.

Preeda opened the Chetawan Health Centre in Pathum Thani in 2007, aiming to make it a prototype of Thai massage houses where both Thai massage masters and practitioners can learn and practise original Thai massage techniques.

"I opened the centre not for the sake of profit. I'm fulfilled. And I want to help other people succeed in life," he said.

He has planned free traditional Thai massage sessions for victims of the recent floods who have lost their jobs.

The centre prides itself on maintaining a high standard of traditional Thai massage. The centre, with spacious area and rows of beds, is typically decorated but its strength lies in the soothing environment that makes a session relaxing and rejuvenating.

"On top of that, the centre will help preserve Thai medical knowledge which is known as the wisdom of Thailand developed by Thais for many generations," said Preeda.