

Interview with Sunshine Massage School, Chiang Mai

The following are excerpts from an interview conducted by Bob Haddad with Max Scheuermeier, Founder of Sunshine Massage School (SMS) in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

THAI: Thank you for your time, and for agreeing to this interview.

SMS: And thank you for the opportunity.

THAI: You are the school's founder, but you don't have an extensive background in traditional Thai massage. How and why did you start Sunshine Massage School?

SMS: My involvement in Thai Massage began with a 12-day training program created by Asokananda, which was held in a Lahu village 70 kilometers outside of Chiang Mai. It was during this training that I met Asokananda, and we quickly became friends. As an extension of this friendship, I provided him with technical support for several books that he was preparing for publication. The programs that Asokananda established in the Lahu village offered a particular type of life experience to participants. I saw an opportunity to offer a similar type of training in a city setting, allowing students to study Thai massage while experiencing the vibrant city of Chiang Mai. Asokananda was a constant presence and source of guidance before and during the entire process of opening the school.



*The staff of Sunshine Massage School.
Max appears at far right. (photo courtesy SMS)*

THAI: In a short period of time, SMS has become well known for the quality and diversity of its courses and workshops. Please tell us about the programs of study at the school.

SMS: Our first goal is to offer high quality Thai massage teaching. I need to give credit to our teachers for the quality of training the students tell us they receive here. We are fortunate to have excellent teachers on staff. In addition to our standard 10-day courses, we help students determine their individual goals and then create individualized training programs for them, including private training sessions. Soon we'll be launching a training program for individuals that wish to teach Thai Massage. We don't believe that merely studying a given number of hours in a classroom automatically qualifies someone to be a teacher. Learning to be a good teacher is an organic process. Our program is built around the training curriculum that we use to qualify our own teachers at Sunshine Massage School.

THAI: Few people know about how things magically came together in order to construct the school building. Please tell us the story in your own words.

SMS: In late 2002, I made a commitment to start a Thai massage school in Chiang Mai based on Asokananda's teachings. I began soliciting funds from the existing network of people who had known or worked with Asokananda over the years, and from his own personal friends and business associates. But more money was needed before final plans and construction could begin. I was introduced to Jasmine, a spiritual healer and a builder of homes and buildings. After meeting Jasmine, I became convinced that she was the right person for the job, but I couldn't understand how she could possibly construct the school with the limited funds that I had available. Within two weeks, Jasmine had arranged bank financing for the balance of the construction costs, and had prepared an architectural plan for the building. Construction of the school was completed in five months and the school opened on 1 November 2004. The building is designed in traditional Thai style and *feng shui* principles are integrated into the design of the school building. The light and open feeling creates an environment that facilitates a relaxed learning experience for the students. Students frequently comment on the positive energy they feel while attending the school.

THAI: Tell us about the staff and the teachers at the school. Who are they, and how did you put the team together?

SMS: Magical energy is the only way that I can describe how the school staff came together. Ralph and Sicha were the first teachers when we opened our doors in November 2004. They were excellent teachers, and they set the standard for others to follow. Ohm was recommended to me by a friend of mine who was extremely pleased by a massage she had received from her. She is known for her perpetual smile and laughter in the corridors of the schools. Dot is known for her gentle Thai massage teaching style and broad knowledge of herbs and their healing qualities. Yan is a recent teacher with a tireless desire to improve his knowledge and to provide the students with the best possible training. Puk had taught Thai massage at other schools, and she inquired about a position because she had heard that the school had a good reputation. Rich has a background in Swedish massage, Yoga, and Thai Massage and he has a unique ability to assess students' needs and then tailor training sessions to meet those needs. Since Asokananda's passing, I receive professional advice from highly qualified teachers; Itzhak, Felicity, Robert, Arnaud, and many others.

THAI: What makes studying at SMS unique, and how are Asokananda's teachings reflected in the curriculum?

SMS: We strictly follow the structure of Asokananda teachings, which have proven to be an effective and efficient way for Westerners to learn the basics of Thai massage. But there are a few other things that make SMS unique. We have a defined core-training curriculum so that there is consistency in all classes. Beyond that, the teachers are encouraged to apply their own unique approaches to the teachings; each teacher has a spiritual foundation from which they teach.

THAI: Is there a direct connection between the Lahu village school and Sunshine Massage School, or do they operate independently of each other?

SMS: The Sunshine Massage School in Chiang Mai is a partner in the Sunshine Network. Like other Sunshine Network partners, the school is run independently following the spirit and tradition of Asokananda's teachings.

THAI: Aside from the beginners and advanced Thai massage courses, SMS often sponsors specialty courses and unique workshops. How did this come about, and what are some of the most interesting workshops that have been offered recently?

SMS: Three workshops that come to mind: *Thai Massage meets Osteopathy*: This class gives a clearer understanding of the types of manipulations that can be done with Thai massage and a greater awareness of firm yet sensitive touch during the practice. *Thai Massage - Western Therapeutics*. This class focuses on how to assess each individual body and determine how specific Thai massage techniques can be used to empower clients to help heal themselves. *Fieldwork*: This course allows the student to start to use skills in a practical environment - how to relieve pain, how to mobilize joints, and how to work with emotional issues.

THAI: How would you characterize students who come to take classes in Chiang Mai these days? Do you see a trend toward more serious ongoing study, or do you have the impression that many students come to Thailand looking to learn Thai massage in only a few weeks?

SMS: Our focus and reputation is that we offer quality education that is designed for serious students. We are receiving more and more requests for extended training programs. We sometimes facilitate educational visas that allow the serious student the time to extend their stay in Chiang Mai and to focus on their training needs.

THAI: Do you have any suggestions or advice for Thai massage practitioners and students who are planning a trip to Thailand in upcoming months?

SMS: There is not one school that can meet the needs of all students. Do your home work and find the school that appears to meet your personal goals but also look for a school that feels right for you. Researching the internet for information on schools and speaking to others that have trained in each place can help you reach a final selection. If time permits, visit each of the schools that you are considering.

THAI: How do you expect SMS to grow over the next few years?

SMS: To date we have grown through the recommendations of our own students. We are pleased that they feel strongly enough about SMS that they would recommend our school to others. Quality programs taught by excellent teachers are at the very foundation of our school. Aside from our regular programs, two special trainings will be offered in 2008 in Pai, a quiet country village in the northern mountains. I intend to provide similar trainings over the years. I am always looking to find interesting and innovative ways to offer unique educational opportunities to our students.

THAI: Is there any other information you'd like members of THAI to know? Do you have any suggestions or further comments?

SMS: I continue to see an increasing number of people from all over the world beginning to learn Thai Massage. I am delighted to be a part of the continued growth of this ancient practice. As in any professional practice, continuing education is the foundation of success. As Thai Massage grows and becomes more and more recognized, it is important that there be an organization to help guide and give direction to this growth. I feel that the Thai Healing Alliance can play a strong role in providing this guidance.



Sunshine Massage School in Chiang Mai. (photo courtesy SMS)

