

Master Healer Lek Chaiya

By Janice Vitavec

I met Lek Chaiya on my first sojourn to Thailand in 1997. At that time I had no idea what she would come to mean to me. Lek Chaiya, affectionately called “Mama Lek,” learned Thai massage and healing medicine from her father, a traditional Thai doctor, and her mother, a practitioner of midwifery and massage in the village of Jom Thong, Chaing Mai. Lek’s given name is Lek Thiwong. The name “Chaiya” was handed down to her by her teacher when Lek was made the lineage holder prior to her death. Lek also studied herbalism and traditional massage in northern and southern Thailand, and eventually founded her own style of Thai massage, called “Nerve Touch” or *Jap-Sen* (meaning “to grab the sen lines”). It is a deep tissue approach that improves the mechanical functioning of the body by restructuring and aligning muscles, tendons and bones, and by stimulating pathways in the nervous system. This unique style of Thai massage works to stimulate the flow of energy or “*lom*” throughout the body by plucking and manipulating the intricate system of *sen* lines.



Mama Lek Chaiya.

Photo courtesy Nerve Touch Massage School.

I first experienced Thai massage in Canada about ten years ago. It was magic to my mind, body and spirit. As the session unfolded, so differently than other forms of bodywork, I felt drawn into a powerful healing mystery. After a footbath with scented oil and warm water, I lay on a mat, fully clothed in loose-fitting cotton pants and top. The therapist started on my feet and worked slowly upward. With smooth, rhythmic compressions, she brought me deeply into my body, and I relaxed into a meditative state. I was relaxed, yet fully aware and energized. She stretched and moved my limbs into all kinds of positions that flowed from one to the next. As she stretched my body, I easily focused on my breath and physical and emotional tension was released from my body.



Janice Vitavec and Lek Chaiya, 2005.
Photo courtesy Janice Vitavec.

Afterward, I felt as if I had done two hours of yoga – alert and revitalized, with relaxed muscles and a limber body. By the end of the session I was hooked: I knew that I had to learn this ancient healing art. Following this intuition, I packed up my life and moved to Thailand to immerse myself in this work.

For me, world travel is cultural immersion. I had done solo travel throughout Europe and Australia, studied yoga in India, and had gone for lengthy yoga and meditation retreats in Greece. Accordingly, it was easy for me to give away most of my possessions and put my valuable and sentimental belongings into storage. I said my farewell to friends and family, and left Canada with a one-way ticket. I left for Thailand with the idea that I would learn a new skill and embark on interesting adventures. I also knew

I needed a career change. For ten years I had worked in high stress and emotionally demanding occupations in the field of crisis intervention, program development and skill-based training. My field was personally and professionally rewarding, but my psyche was slowly being depleted by the intensity and strain of the work.

I arrived in the Northern Thailand city of Chiang Mai the day before New Years Eve. For two months I studied with Chongkol Setthakorn at the Institute of Thai Massage (ITM). Chongkol, or John as foreigners call him, speaks English very well and the school quickly attracted English-speaking students. At that time, ITM had only been open for two years, so there was a sense of being involved in the pioneer stages of the spreading of Thai Massage to students from around the world.



Jack, Lek's son, works on a student at Nerve Touch School, Chiang Mai. *Photo by Bob Haddad.*

Through a chain of new acquaintances, I became close friends with a delightful Thai woman named Pong who invited me to live at her house. She owned a small natural products and clothing shop called My Home on the outskirts of the city.

It was wonderful to be out of the tourist loop and to be more immersed in the cultural aspects of Thailand. I helped her design and make natural crafts that we sold out of her shop and at festivals throughout northern Thailand. Through a meaningful coincidence that Jungians call synchronicity, I discovered that a half a block away lived a woman in her 60s who was said to be a master in Thai Massage and an herbalist. “Mama Lek” was known to have helped many Thai people with minor to serious physical problems and medical conditions.

For the next four months I alternated between working at the nature shop and studying with Mama Lek. I was fortunate to have private study with her, as she did not advertise to tourists at that time. I learned by working side by side with her in sessions that treated conditions like persistent back and knee pain, or easing and facilitating a smooth pregnancy, and even more serious cases such as paralysis. With regular treatment, a man who was paralyzed and in a wheelchair was able to walk and even garden once again. I was fascinated and moved by Lek Chaiya’s knowledge, confidence and trust in her own abilities. As we worked together I came to appreciate the nearly miraculous therapeutic changes that took place in her clients, and I began to understand the potential of Thai massage to evoke deep healing on all levels; physical, mental, and spiritual. I observed one of her clients, an elderly man hunched over with pain and walking with a cane, become pain free and able to stand straight after only two sessions. In another case, a recent stroke victim, 95% paralyzed on one side, was restored to 100% functioning after just a few months of weekly sessions. Witnessing Lek Chaiya and working closely with her gave me a lifetime of inspiration for this work. For the past nine years I have returned to Thailand every year to study with her, as well as at other schools.

The impact of watching a master working in their element is both fascinating and emotionally moving. What is it that makes her a “Master?” A refined and polished sense of touch, lead by purity of heart and excellent intuition. An intention for healing with the focused guidance of an ancient foundation and tradition. She begins and ends each day with prayer to the *Buddha*, the ancestors and the founder of Thai massage, *Shivaka Kumarabhacca*. To her, this healing art is an integral part of her everyday life.

One night when we were in San Francisco for a sightseeing weekend, I couldn’t sleep. She advised me to recite the traditional mantra “*Om Namo*” until it calmed my mind. I realized that the spiritual foundation of this ancient healing art is available at each moment. These teachings are handed down through the generations from an early age. I hold dear to me the beautiful image of Lek in the mornings with my young daughter sitting at her side with hands in prayer, eyes closed and hearts open. When Lek Chaiya is giving a Thai massage, she holds this consciousness, this prayer in her movements with a child-like curiosity. This type of mindfulness and confidence clearly evokes change and facilitates deep healing.



Jack, Mama Lek, Maew and Pikun; the backbone of the staff at Nerve Touch, Chiang Mai, Thailand. *Photo by Bob Haddad.*

Lek Chaiya has become a mentor, teacher and motherly figure in my life. Thai massage has become the avenue I was looking for in my growth. It nurtures all levels of my development. I am honored to host and assist Lek here in the United States at my school, the Spirit Winds School of Thai Massage. I truly love what I do, and I believe that my work serves as a mutual exchange – there is health and healing for clients and students and also for me. I highly recommend continuous, ongoing training for anyone involved in this ancient healing art and in its vast potential for healing and growth on all levels.

Lek Chaiya has a school and clinic in the center of Chiang Mai called *Nerve Touch Herbal Massage*. She maintains a staff of teachers for both Thai and international students, and she has been passing on her lineage of Thai massage to her son Jack who is very skilled and is developing his own style of work.

Lek Chaiya is truly a living treasure. It is a blessing that Lek has graced the world through her loving stewardship of the tradition of Thai massage.