



To get to the massage clinic you have to pass us! We are yak (giants) and we sometimes challenge the yak from Wat Arun, when you're not watching!

## Massage with a Message

By BTO

There is more to Traditional Thai Massage than first meets the eye. For instance *Nuat Phaen Boran* is relaxing and revitalising for both the masseur and the person getting the massage. There is a message in this that makes it worthwhile to consider becoming a trained masseur yourself – a very rewarding hobby ... or even a part or full-time job.

A relaxing and fulfilling passive activity to experience after a tour around the Grand Palace on Sanam Luang in the old centre of Bangkok, is a visit to Wat Po, just behind it. Wat Po is also

known as the temple of the reclining Buddha. Inside its walls is a Traditional Thai Massage (*Nuat Phaen Boran*) clinic where for a few hundred baht you can get a revitalising workout of two hours,

or more. Since less than two years ago, the clinic also offers foot (reflexology) massage. Though the sudden popularity of foot massage may suggest that it is a new invention, it is in fact as old as *Nuat*



*Phaen Boran* itself. Exactly how old, is anybody's guess, but it surely goes back thousands of years. The true origins are buried in the past, partly because of the destruction of the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya in 1776.

However at Wat Po, stone plaques are witness to King Rama III's order to preserve the surviving texts in stone. Oral tradition names *Jivara Kumarabacca* as the founder of *batthasastra*, as this type of massage is referred to in Sanskrit. The *waii* that the masseur makes before starting each session is not a greeting for the customer, but in honour of the ancient teacher, who is mentioned in the *Mahvagga* scripture of the Buddhist *Tipitaka* canon as Prince Sithatha's (Buddha) personal physician.

On a busy day, there is a queue of both foreigners and locals at the Wat Po massage clinic. The space inside is crowded with dozens of



That's how it's done! This German student came all the way from Germany to learn this ancient craft.

masseurs and masseuses working on their charges, with no room between one work station and the next. A reflexology foot-massage section has been added to the already crowded space. It is

squeezed in a corner at the entrance. Despite the squeeze this clinic is very popular with both locals and foreign visitors. Outside a dozen or so people wait patiently for their turn. The staff at the counter give



Many people who come to the clinic of Wat Po feel so much better after a work-out that they decide to learn Thai Traditional Massage themselves.





After a stroll around beautiful Wat Po, it's a good idea to get a massage.



Using your own body weight makes Traditional Thai Massage light work.

newcomers a ticket with a number that will be called when a masseur becomes available.

The temple opens at 8 am and the massage clinic opens its doors half an hour later. At that hour small groups of people gather here waiting for their teacher; who will take them to the nearby massage school. There are two locations, both on adjacent Maharaj Road. One of the addresses (No. 312) doubles as the office. The *Wat Po Thai Traditional Medical School* is at least as well known as the clinic. The office manager explains that the school dates back 48 years and that the connection to the temple does not mean that today's monks participate either as masseurs or instructors.

The first course a new trainee can take is the *General Thai Massage Course*. The cost is 7,000 baht. This first course teaches the basics such as the correct posture of the masseur and traditional Thai massage ethics. With skills gained at this level, certificate holders can begin work as masseur capable of relieving fatigue, muscular cramps, nervous tension, loosening of joints and muscles. They also know how to apply Traditional Thai Massage to stimulate blood circulation and the body's organs and thus help improve fitness and immunity against disease. All this is achieved in just 30 hours of instruction and practice, spread over 15 days.

While some other Traditional Thai Massage schools offer longer courses, the same principles apply throughout, namely that learning and practising are part of each other, that one keeps learning from people at different levels and that receiving and giving a massage relaxes both the masseur and the customer. That is so because bodyweight is used instead of straight physical strength. One of the instructors explained this technique by comparing a





Massaging the head relieves stress.



Special equipment for back treatment.



Certificates are given in Thai and English.

playground see-saw being worked by one single person, with the same see-saw being moved by using the bodyweight of one person at each end – the Traditional Thai Massage way. Another distinctive trait is that the customer dons loosely-fitting pajamas of soft cotton or silk to allow for flexible movement.

The name Traditional Thai 'Massage' is a bit misleading in that it is a *method* that involves manipulation of the body's physical structure and form, rather than the usual western concept of a lubricated rub down as in Swedish massage, for instance. A Traditional Thai Massage involves pressing energy lines ("sen") and points, as well as a large variety of slow stretching movements. The energy lines can be compared with the meridians of Chinese acupuncture, which follow the energy flow associated with specific organs. Thai tradition recognises 72,000 such lines, but in practice only 10 main lines form the foundation of *Nuat Phaen Boran*. Pressure is exerted with the palms of the hands, thumbs, elbows and feet. For the customer the effects of the massage are similar to yoga, hence the term 'lazy

yoga' used to describe Traditional Thai Massage.

The second course costs the same as the first and is of the same duration. All fees must be paid in cash at the time of enrolment. New courses start daily. Classes are small with usually only four to six trainees. And like the first course, trainees can make arrangements with their instructor regarding their preference for when they will attend classes. This second course covers the *Thai Fundamental Massage Points*, used in treating more than 80 ailments, such as sprained muscles, tennis elbow, lower back pain and atrophy, the wasting away of muscles in paralysed patients or elderly people who are unable to exercise themselves.

The third course covers reflexology or foot-massage. The cost is 3,600 baht and the course takes 15 hours, spread over three days. The foot is regarded as the terminal that connects to the body's organs. Hence by stimulating certain points of the sole, these organs are stimulated to give a healing effect. The techniques of reflexology originated in China and go back at least 3,000 years.

At the time of BTO's visit to the classrooms above the school's office, there was only one foreign trainee. She said she had already made many friends, during her first two days at the school. She told BTO that she didn't plan to use her new knowledge to make money. However, most of the local trainees hoped to eventually be able to open their own business, beginning their new career doing house calls or at a friend's massage clinic. Setting up a new business in Bangkok can cost several million baht, one of the trainees told BTO. She received her certificate – in both Thai and English – while the BTO team was there. The office manager said that many foreigners do the course to add their newly acquired skills to their repertoires as professional masseurs.

When these professionals return to their home countries, they become ambassadors of a unique piece of Thailand that demonstrates without doubt the importance of what it has to offer the world. In fact, Thailand is a haven for spiritual revival and lasting soul-nourishing experiences such as those offered by the *Wat Po Thai Traditional Medical School*. Together with an increasing awareness of Thailand's natural heritage and the importance to preserve it, Thai Massage provides an excellent opportunity to explore the true essence of this so often misunderstood culture. **BTO**