

# Om Namó ... What ? The Thai Massage Wai Khru

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Every serious practitioner of traditional Thai massage is familiar with the *wai khru* – the famous prayer that begins “Om namó Shivago,” and which invokes Jivaka (Shivago), the Ayurvedic doctor who is revered in Thailand as an ancestral teacher. Thai massage practitioners may recite it silently or chant it aloud in a group before beginning their lessons, but what does this prayer really mean?

Pali is an ancient language from India, and although many Thai people recite or chant in Pali within the context of Theravada Buddhist ceremonies, they often don't know the meaning of the prayers, much like Christians who routinely memorized and recited prayers in Latin years ago. Adaptation to Thai language over the years makes it more difficult to decipher the original Pali words. For Thai massage, the situation becomes even more complicated because the translations offered by those who composed, modified, or promoted the prayers have been spread all over the world in English, mostly by foreign students who have studied Thai massage. From these English translations, additional translations have been made by practitioners whose first language is not English. In addition, the common translations of several versions of the Thai massage wai khru are simply not correct.

For these and many more reasons, the Thai massage wai khru is often misrepresented, misinterpreted, and misunderstood. The purpose of this article is to address the wai khru ceremony, to shed light on the Pali words, and to discuss the common translations and true meanings of the words in this prayer.

## The wai khru ceremony

The wai khru is not unique to practitioners of traditional Thai massage. Throughout Thailand, people perform wai khru ceremonies that are specific to individual jobs and ways of life. Schoolchildren gather in schoolyards and classrooms to recite a wai khru to thank the Buddha, their parents, and their school teachers. Graduation celebrations for any type of study or discipline always include a wai khru. Muay Thai kick boxers perform ceremonies that feature a dance to honor their teachers and the ancestral teacher and founder of this martial art. Musicians, performers, doctors, and soldiers all perform wai khru ceremonies. Although each of these may involve the recitation or chanting of different prayers, all pay homage to the Buddha, all include offerings of flowers, incense, and candles, and all invoke the intercession of a higher power in order to carry out a specific deed or action with respect, clarity, and integrity.

The Thai word *wai* means “respect”; it is also the name for the common gesture of bringing two hands together in prayer position while slightly bowing with deference toward the receiver of the action. The word *khru* is a Thai language adaptation of the Pali/Sanskrit word *guru*. So wai khru literally means “respect teacher.”

## Buddhist veneration

In the Theravada tradition, it is customary to pay homage to the Buddha, to recite a prayer called the Three Refuges (the Triple Gem), and to observe the *Pancha Sila* (The Five Disciplines) upon visiting a place of worship, or at the start of a Buddhist ceremony. One may recite the stanzas alone, or they may be led by a Buddhist monk. The prayer is in the Pali language.

In addition to the two main versions of the Thai massage wai khru known today, other variations may also be found throughout Thailand. These may include the Triple Gem, chants that pay homage to one’s parents and teachers, and even prayers directed toward *reusi*, who are credited with transmission of *reusi dat ton*, Thai massage, incantations, traditional medicine, and other sciences.

In some places in Thailand, it’s customary to recite prayers immediately preceding the main wai khru to Jivaka. Reproduced below are the Vandana (the homage to the Buddha that is recited three times) and the Tisarana (also known as The Three Refuges, the Triple Gem, and the Three Jewels):

<i>Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa.</i>	Honor to the blessed one, the exalted one, the fully enlightened one.
<i>Buddham saranam gacchami</i>	I go to the Buddha for my refuge.
<i>Dhammam saranam gacchami</i>	I go to the dhamma for my refuge.
<i>Sangham saranam gacchami</i>	I go to the sangha for my refuge.
<i>Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami</i>	For the second time I go to the Buddha for my refuge.
<i>Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami</i>	For the second time I go to the dhamma for my refuge.
<i>Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami</i>	For the second time I go to the sangha for my refuge.
<i>Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami</i>	For the third time I go to the Buddha for my refuge.
<i>Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami</i>	For the third time I go to the dhamma for my refuge.
<i>Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami</i>	For the third time I go to the sangha for my refuge.

### The Thai massage wai khru

Most students who arrive in Chiang Mai to study Thai massage will encounter the northern-style wai khru, the one that was spread largely through the Old Medicine Hospital and ITM Massage School. This wai khru reads as follows, with slight variations in spelling from place to place:

Om Namō Shivago Silasa Ahang  
 Karuniko Sapatatanang Osata Tīpa Mantang  
 Papaso Suriya Jantang Gomalapato Paka Sesi  
 Wantami Bantito Sumetaso  
 Aroha Sumana Homi (*recite 3 times*)  
 Piyo Tewa Manussanang Piyo Proma Namutamo  
 Piyo Nakha Supananang  
 Pininsiang Nama Mihang Namō Puttaya  
 Navon Navien Nasatit Nasatien  
 Ehi Mama Navien Nawe  
 Napai Tangvien Navien Mahaku  
 Ehi Mama Piyong Mama Namō Puttaya (*recite one time*)  
 Na-a Na-wa Roh-kha Payati Vinasanti (*recite three times*)

And this is the common translation that has been offered to Thai massage students in recent years:

We pray to you, Shivago, you who led a saintly life.  
 We pray that you bring us knowledge, and that you allow our prayers  
 to bring us the true medicine of the Universe.  
 We pray that you will bring us health and all good things.  
 The God of healing lives in the heavens, and we live in the world below.  
 We pray to you so that heaven may be reflected  
 in the world below, and that healing medicine  
 may encircle the world.  
 We pray for the one we touch, that he will be happy,  
 and that all illness will be released from him.

According to several trustworthy sources, however, this translation is not accurate. In addition, the Thai massage wai khru mentioned above is not as old as is commonly believed. The English translation of the northern-style wai khru was probably done in the 1980s, and the prayer itself was put together only a short time before that.

### The Wat Po wai khru

The wai khru used at the Wat Po massage school in Bangkok is quite different from the Old Medicine Hospital version. The first verse is the same as its northern counterpart, but it is preceded by the standard Buddhist veneration that begins with “*Namo tassa*,” which was described previously in this essay. In addition, the consonants of several words of the first section are pronounced differently. The northern spelling “*silasa*” is pronounced “*sirasa*.” The letter *r* reflects the original Pali pronunciation and is not necessarily the result of the common linguistic confusion of the letters *l* and *r*. Finally, the word “*aroha*,” as in “*aroha sumana homi*,” is absent.



Ajahn Sintorn prays at the Old Medicine Hospital's altar, 2003

The Wat Po wai khru contains three main sections, and each section is preceded by the familiar *Namo Tassa* (“Homage to the Buddha”). Here is the Wat Po version of the Thai massage wai khru. Note in the first section the variations in spelling and pronunciation from the northern version:

Namo tassa prakawatoe arahatoe samma samphudtasa (3x)  
 Ohm namo Chevago sirasa arhang      Karuniko Shapphasattanang  
 Osata Tipphamantang                      Praphaso suriyajantang  
 Komarawattoe Pakasaysi                  Wontami Phantitoe  
 Sumaythatoe Sumanahomi  
 Namu Tassa Prakawatoe Arahatoe Samma Samphudtasa (3x)  
 Sahamuti Sumuhakatoe Saymatang Phatasaymayang  
 Sahanitampho Aewang Aehe Nathod Mothon Phudkhon Takhueain  
 Yaluelain Ludloihai Sawaha Sawahai  
 Namu Tassa Prakawatoe Arahatoe Samma Samphudtasa (3x)  
 Phuttang Pajakame Thammang Pajakame Sankhang Pajakame

### The truth about the Thai massage wai khru

As may be seen above, the Wat Po wai khru doesn’t contain the second and third sections of the northern version. Instead, two other sections are found, described as “spell before massage” and “spell for protection against bad incantations.” The presence of these two sections in the Wat Po version, and the way they are described, reflect the fact that the second and third sections of the northern-style mantra also have their roots in magical incantations.

When Ajahn Sinthorn Chaichakan moved to Chiang Mai and founded what would become known as the Old Medicine Hospital (Thai Massage School Shivagakomarapaj), he developed a new style and sequence of Thai massage techniques based, in part, on what he’d learned when he studied at Wat Po. Around that same time, he put together a new wai khru to use in his business endeavors in Chiang Mai. This new northern-style wai khru was based on the older first verse from Wat Po, plus two additional sections based on incantations and magic spells. This has been confirmed to me personally by Ajahn Preeda Tangtrongchitr, the founder and long-time director of the Wat Po massage school, and also by Sintorn’s son, Wasan Chaichakan, the current director of the Old Medicine Hospital.

In addition to its use at Old Medicine Hospital, this version of the wai khru was used by Chongkol Setthakorn, who had spent several years working at the Old Medicine Hospital in the 1980s, when he opened his Chiang Mai school, ITM.

As a result of the commercial success of these two schools among Western students, the northern-style wai khru (and its incomplete and misleading English translation) began to be spread all over the world, and was even translated into other languages. All of the teachers mentioned above have acknowledged to me that magic spells are contained in the wai khrus, and that they have deliberately not been translated, in keeping with Thai traditions regarding *khathas* and magic incantations.

### Meanings of individual words

Here is a list of many of the individual words used in the commonly known Thai massage wai khru, along with reasonable translations. The majority of them come from Pali, though there is also some intermixing of Thai words. This information was supplied to me by one of my teachers, and many of these words are available through research:

<i>ahang</i>	I, me, my
<i>arahato</i>	an arhat, a worthy one
<i>aroga (aroha)</i>	to be free from disease
<i>chandang (jantan, candam)</i>	moon
<i>dewa</i>	see <i>tewa</i> , below
<i>dibba (tipa)</i>	divine
<i>dibbamantang (tipa mantang)</i>	divine mantra
<i>Jivako</i>	one who has life, Jivaka
<i>bhagavato (bhagawato)</i>	blessed one
<i>homi</i>	to me, for me
<i>jantang (jantam)</i>	moon
<i>karuniko</i>	compassion, one who has compassion
<i>Komarabhacco (Gomalapato)</i>	Jivaka's second name
<i>kru (khru)</i>	(Thai) teacher, guru
<i>mantam (mantang)</i>	mantra
<i>manusanang</i>	the human race
<i>naa (nakha)</i>	naga, a deity that takes the shape of a great serpent
<i>namo</i>	homage
<i>vien (wien)</i>	(Thai) spin, spinning
<i>osadha (osatha)</i>	medicine
<i>pabhaso (pabaso, papaso)</i>	luminous, to give light

<i>pakasesi</i>	to shine, to declare
<i>pandito (bantito)</i>	pandit, or wise man
<i>piyinsiang (pininsiang)</i>	one who has clarity of the senses and control of their faculties
<i>piyo</i>	beloved, revered
<i>proma</i>	Thai pronunciation for Brahma, of the Indian pantheon
<i>Putaya</i>	Thai pronunciation of <i>Buddhaya</i> or <i>Buddhaaya</i> , which means Buddha
<i>pujaya</i>	(Thai) worship, from <i>puja</i>
<i>samma</i>	perfectly, fully, or in a correct way
<i>sapasatanang (sabbasattanam)</i>	all sentient beings
<i>sirasa (silasa)</i>	The correct meaning of <i>sirasa</i> is "head."
<i>sumana</i>	healthy, happy
<i>sumedhaso (sumetasso)</i>	intelligent, wise, accomplished
<i>supananang</i>	heavenly beings
<i>suriya</i>	sun
<i>tewa</i>	<i>deva</i> , celestial being
<i>vandami (wantami)</i>	to pay respect
<i>wai</i>	to respect

### Prayer to Jivaka, first section

<i>Om namo Shivago sirasa ahang</i>	I pay homage to Jivaka with my head
<i>karuniko sapasatanan</i>	with compassion for all sentient beings
<i>osatha (osadha) tipa mantang</i>	He who gave divine medicine
<i>papaso suriya jantang</i>	Kumarabhaccha glows as
<i>Gomalapato paka sesi</i>	brightly as the sun and the moon
<i>wandhami (wantami) bantito</i>	We pay obeisance to the pandit, the
<i>sumethaso arokha</i>	wise one, to be healthy
<i>sumana homi</i>	and at peace

### Second section, first part

Some words in the first part of the second section are taken from the Buddhist *ratanamala*, which is well known in Thailand, Burma, and throughout Southeast Asia, and which is used primarily to pay homage to the Buddha. In this

context, however, it does not appear to be specific to the Buddha. It is generally used as an incantation (a magic spell) to attract beneficial people and things to oneself, and to become more beloved by those beings. It prays that actions may have a beneficial outcome:

Piyo dewa (tewa) manussanang piyo proma namutamó  
 I revere the one who is beloved by devas, by Brahma, and by mankind  
 piyo nakha supananang pininsiang  
 beloved by nagas, cherubs, and those with pure senses  
 nama mihang  
 I pay homage

### Second section, second part

The rest of the second section is a magical incantation used for disorienting and overpowering people. After confusing them and spinning them around, it then reestablishes them and attracts them closer to the one who is casting the spell. It is generally forbidden to literally translate magic incantations, and in keeping with Thai tradition I will not offer a complete translation of this section of the wai khru. It's important to keep in mind that this portion has never been accurately represented in commonly available explanations of the prayer. In fact, in a way, it has been deliberately misrepresented. It represents a magic spell that should be respected and held secret:

namo Puttaya  
 Nawon (navon) nawien (navien) nasatit nasatien  
 Ehi mama navien (nawien) nawe napai tangvien navien (nawien) mahaku  
 (makaku)  
 Ehi mama piyong mama namo Puttaya

### Last section

The last section of the wai khru is a mantra in and of itself, though not all words are translatable:

Na-a Na-wa

These are known as “heart syllables” in Thai, and “seed syllables” in Sanskrit. They don't have a direct translation and have no meaning in and of themselves. They are short mantras that are generally attached to a longer text.



Roga (rokha) payati (vyadhi) vinasanti  
 May all illness and disease be healed

### A new, more accurate translation

Keeping all of the above information in mind, and without translating the magic incantations, I offer to the international Thai massage community a new, accurate, and vernacular translation of the commonly known northern style wai khru:

I pay homage with my head to Jivaka.  
 With compassion for all beings, he has brought us divine medicine.  
 Kumarabhacca shines as brightly as the sun and the moon.  
 I pay respect to the great pandit, to the wise one.  
 May there be happiness and freedom from illness.  
 I revere the one who is adored by deities, by humans, and by Brahma;  
 the one who is adored by nagas and by heavenly beings;  
 the one who is of pure faculties.  
 May all illness and disease be healed.

### The practice

For students, practitioners, and teachers of Thai healing arts, performing a wai khru is an integral part of practice. It helps calm the body and mind; it establishes a respectful, humble atmosphere within which to live and work; and it reinforces the practice of Thai massage through prayer, reflection, and gratitude.

The wai khru may be carried out on a daily basis, and can be added to a regimen of meditation, yoga, or other spiritual and physical practices, whether in the morning or in the evening. It is considered most important in the morning, before the start of a day's work. It is performed before an altar containing images or statues of the Buddha, Jivaka, and sometimes other deities or respected ones such as a reusi, a monk, or a revered person. Photos or mementos of deceased parents and teachers are also customary to include on an altar, as well as candles, incense, and other offerings, such as old coins and fruit. Traditionally, offerings that represent the elements are routinely placed and changed on an altar. Incense represents wind (*lom*), candles represent fire (*fai*), water represents water (*naam*), food represents earth (*din*), and flowers represent space (*aagaasathaat*).

The Wai Khru is performed kneeling, with the feet behind the body. In Thailand, men curl their feet under their toes, rather than laying the top of the foot flat on the ground. The practitioner bows three times before beginning the recitation of prayers, and three times afterward. If candles are lit during the ceremony, they may be extinguished with the fingers or with a candle snuffer, but not with the breath. Blowing out a candle is believed to disperse the offerings.

Although the wai khru ceremony is inextricably connected to Buddhism, Thai massage practitioners who follow other faiths and religious beliefs can adapt their altars and prayers accordingly. Prayers for guidance and intercession in your work may be offered to other gods and deities, but you should still give thanks to your teachers of Thai massage, your life teachers, and to Jivaka, if possible.

However you structure your wai khru, it is important to recognize and respect that traditional Thai healing arts are inextricably connected to the life concepts and teachings of the Buddha, and that to practice Thai healing without embracing these basic concepts is not in keeping with tradition. Fortunately, the teachings of the Buddha are such that it would be difficult to find a person, whatever religion they may follow, who disagrees with the basic underlying truths embodied in Buddhist philosophy.

I hope this essay has provided Thai massage practitioners around the world with a deeper understanding of the wai khru and its history, meaning, and translation. Maintaining an attitude filled with respect, reverence, compassion, and loving-kindness is essential to a deep and effective practice in traditional Thai healing arts. Regular practice of the wai khru can help to promote and prolong these spiritual elements, and can strengthen our abilities to help others through our work. Remember to practice safely, and with great respect for your teachers, for your lineage of instruction, and for Thai spiritual traditions.

# The Thai Massage Wai Khru

Om Na mo Shi va go si-la sa hang  
a

ru-ni ko pa ta-nang o-sa ta  
ka sa sa

ti man-tang so ri ya-jan-tan  
pa pa pa su

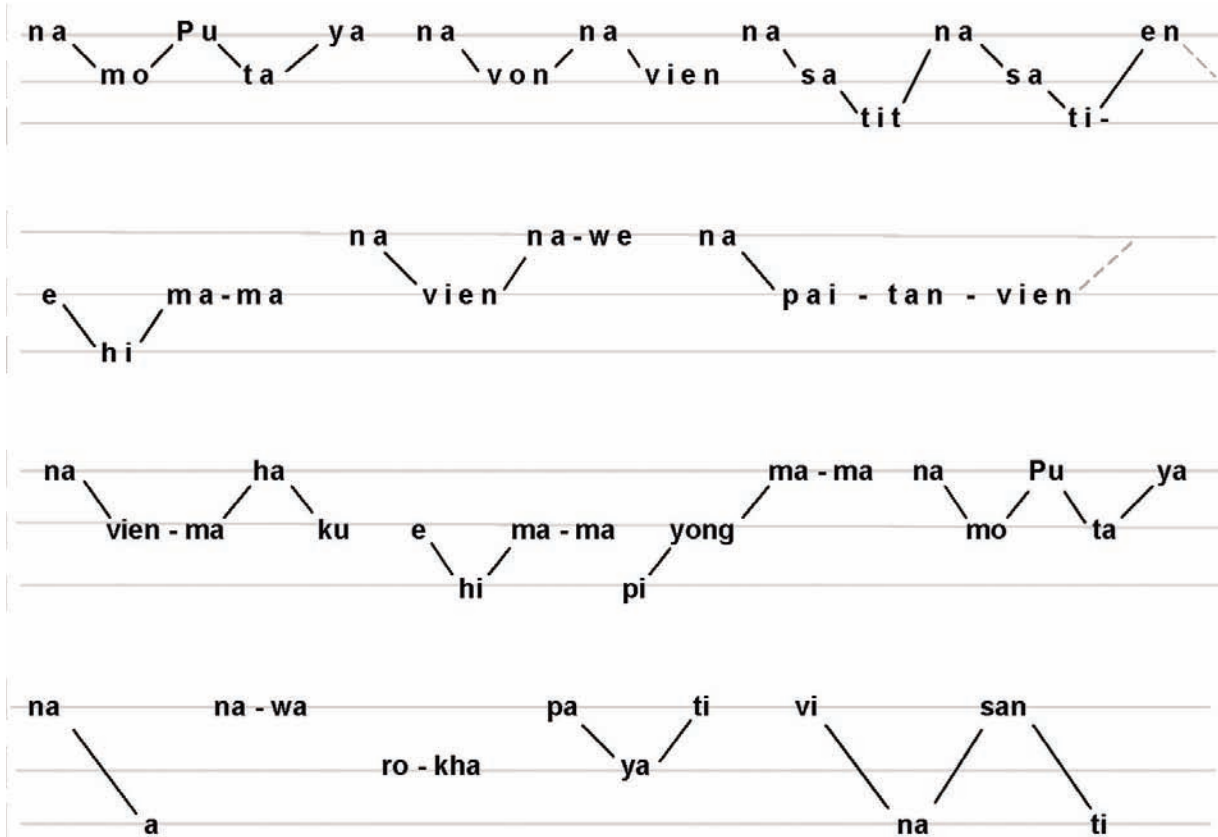
Go-ma-la pa to se mi  
pa ka si wan-ta

ban to ta-so ma mi  
ti su me a ro-ha su na ho

yo-te wa ma-nu na-mu  
pi sa nang pi yo-pro-ma ta mo

yo-nak ha pa-na-nang pi-nin-si-ang na mi hang  
pi su





### Chanting the Thai Massage Wai Khru (Om Namo Shivago)

In some lineages, this mantra is chanted, not simply recited. This is a transcription of the three-note melody, annotated in an easy-to-use format. The solid lines between syllables guide the singer from one note to the next, and the dashed lines indicate when there is a different tone at the beginning of a new line.

