

One Week with Pichest Boonthumme

By Michelle Tupko

Pichest is always smiling. Except when he's pretending he's going to hit you on the head with his Buddhist cane. "Pok Pok!" Well, even then, he's smiling.

Mary and I have been with Pichest for one week, and there's so much to say it's difficult to condense into one introductory post. I'll start with some basics. Pichest lives in Hang Dong, which is not in Chiang Mai, so going to study with him every morning is an adventure of its own. The first day you go, you might be lucky enough, as we were, to have a piece of paper with some directions on it, that go something like this: "get in the yellow song tao (shared pickup truck taxi); look at your watch when you start the journey; 13 minutes later, when you pass the second of two pedestrian bridges, start looking for a big field; when you pass the building at the end of the big field, ring the buzzer and get out of the taxi, etc. So the first morning is filled with the great excitement of buying offerings (lotus blossoms, fruit, incense and candles) for Pichest and his temple at the energetic and confusing Chiang Mai market, filled with sweets, curries, those flattened fish that scare me, people, motorbikes, other colorful things, and then finding a yellow pick up truck, and then staring eagerly and frantically out the window, discussing the "directions," causing the good-humored Thai people in the taxi with you to smile at you a lot.



Pichest's classroom is in the middle of a very normal neighborhood in Hang Dong. It's right near a rice field. It feels like the countryside compared to Chiang Mai. The room where we practice has a very large shrine area. I estimate that it takes up about one full third of the total area of the room. There are three parts of it – one part for teachers and family, one part for the Buddha and the Dharma, and one part, a free-standing white house in the corner, that I don't understand at all. Near this house is a sculpture like a cardboard boat covered in gold that I understand even less. I don't think it's part of the shrine.



Construction is going on right next to the classroom. Pichest is building a new spirit house. The men working there work incredibly fast – the first day we came, Monday, there was just the most basic frame. This picture is from Wednesday.

Each day is structured in basically the same way, with some variations and improvisations – it's like jazz. We sit around either inside or outside of the classroom from about 9:00 to 9:30. Sometimes, Pichest talks to people. He usually smokes a lot of cigarettes. Sometimes he talks in a more formal way to all those in the room, and sometimes just to one or two students or to an individual student. He has certain subjects he likes to talk about best...perhaps that will be its own post, the sayings of Pichest. I'm

still collecting them. In general, these talks center around keeping the 5 precepts of Buddhism, honoring one's mother and father, not thinking too much, not thinking at all, 7-11 as a stand-in for all that's gone wrong in our contemporary society, the illusion of the body, the certainty of death and other related subjects. Recently, he talked about how if trying to be a thai massage therapist makes you too worried, or makes you think too much, you should become someone who sells boxes, because that is a job without stress, and anyway, everyone always needs boxes, all kinds of boxes, including the one you find yourself in when "stop life."



Then we pray. We pray what I consider to be a rather formal Buddhist set of prayers, including a recitation of a vow to observe the 5 Precepts (as Pichest says "no killing, no lying, no sex, no stealing, no whiskey.") We recite some of the prayers together, and Pichest says a fair amount of the prayers himself. We pray to all three areas of the shrine. We say the Om Namō to Jivaka somewhere in the middle.

After the prayers, Pichest often gives a kind of Dharma talk. He talks about the same subjects as mentioned above, with variations, and sometimes directs a fair amount of his speaking at a particular student. When he does this, I think it's an example of what would be called "transmission" in Buddhism...the teaching he's giving is heard by all, but the inner energy of the teaching is for someone in particular. I think, in fact, that this direct transmission is a very important part of his bodywork, as well as a part of the way he works in the role of teacher.

Then, somehow arising from this talk, he chooses someone and starts talking about what's going on in their body. He will often go suddenly over to someone and say "see, block here," and point to some part of them. He'll elaborate, and sometimes do some work on this part. Oftentimes, he'll say to us, "Feel. Sense. Where is the block?" And then he'll sit in the corner for a while smoking a cigarette, and talk about the way their block is affecting their body from across the room. Then he'll come over after a while and do some more stuff. Sometimes, he'll have another student work on the body that's being observed and sensed. This all happens in a very organic and fluid way. Sometimes there are questions, sometimes if you ask a very "thinking" question, you get threatened with a hit on the head (in a playful way), sometimes you get a demonstration of

something really interesting, sometimes you get no response at all. Pichest teaches entirely in the moment, and absolutely refuses to commit himself to any answer that would make the *particular* situation, the *particular* body in front of him into an example of things in general. He will work only with what is there to work with, and refuses almost all conceptualizing and abstraction. This can be totally and utterly maddening, but it also forces us to look very closely at who is actually lying in front of us, and to give up the belief that we can work from our *ideas* about what someone needs. This is very hard work, but, as Pichest always says, laughing “for you, hard; for me, easy.”



Then, lunch. Often, Pichest’s wife kindly cooks us some delicious vegetarian food. Othertimes, we go to the little food stand down the road, where they also kindly cook us some delicious vegetarian food. There, we drink cha nom – thai iced tea with sweet condensed milk – or cha manao – thai iced tea with lime. Sometimes, we need to go and get the cha nom even when we eat at Pichest’s. The heat makes us crave it. And, besides, it comes, like almost any liquid in Thailand, in plastic bags, and that is just delightful. It’s also funny that when you need to put your cha nom in a plastic bag down, you can’t! So you can hang it on a hook, as we once saw Pichest do.

After lunch, whenever you consider lunch to be over, you can come inside and work with someone. This, like the rest of the day, happens organically. No one decides when lunch is over, or who should work with whom, or in what way. Often, some people are working, some are watching, some are sleeping. Usually, by an hour or two after lunch, everyone is working with someone. At times, Pichest receives massage from one of the students, and then will often show them some new things and work on them for a while. Other times, we will go around and give some adjustments and advice. Other times, he sleeps. In Pichest’s class, one finds oneself looking to the other students as well as to Pichest for answers, ways to work and experience.



This is one of my favorite aspects of his way of teaching. The room is a mix of beginning, intermediate and advanced students, and so a lot of knowledge is exchanged in a variety of directions.

Pichest's son On also helps out some days, and gives a lot of wonderful adjustments to us. Both Pichest and On give very hands-on adjustments. If you can't understand something, like how to use your knee pressure in the right way, they will take your hand and put it under their knee so that you can feel how the pressure feels to the recipient. I like this feeling way of learning quite a lot – it's very direct, and like so much that Pichest does, avoids over-conceptualizing.

At around 4, or a little bit later if Pichest was asleep, we pray again, this time just a short invocation to the Buddha and the Om Namó. Then we leave. Sometimes, Pichest sits around outside and talks with us.

So, this is the way the days have been, with a few notable exceptions of Pichest seeing people from the outside and treating them in the context of the class.

A man named Nigel came on Wednesday to receive a massage from Pichest. I personally didn't realize that Pichest still gave sessions, but now I believe that he gives them when they are really necessary. My understanding is that he has been seeing Nigel for close to one year. Nigel is an American living in Chiang Mai, and suffers from Parkinson's. Nigel was given his massage in the main room, with all the students gathered around watching, and shooting a lot of photos. We shot 650! Pichest had one of his students do some bloodstops – oops – I mean arterial compressions! — on Nigel when Pichest began working on him in side lying position, but other than that, he did all of the work himself. A student who has been studying with Pichest for many months told us that he does sometimes have the more advanced students begin Nigel's massage and then takes over at some point. I was glad to have this chance to watch him work. He doesn't talk or explain much while he's working, but being able to follow the thread of his thought – I mean, his non-thinking! – is really amazing. Pichest is truly a master of finding the simplest, most direct and most effective way to work at any moment in any position, and he works with astounding fluidity.





Here are a few pictures – one in which I look confused, one which shows a move you should probably not do until you're Pichest, one in which he's giving a good Pichest smile, and one in which he's doing a totally awesome move, which you probably also shouldn't do. He was smiling in that one too.

On Friday, a former student of Pichest, a Thai woman, came into the room the middle of class unannounced, bringing with her an older Indian-British man who had polio as a child and 6 months ago, against the advice of his doctors, underwent a surgery to have his Achilles tendon lengthened. His leg was still very stiff and swollen and causing him a lot of pain. He had been receiving Thai massage as well as massage from the woman with him. He was hoping Pichest could look at his situation. Pichest sat down and gave him a diagnosis that the man said was exactly what his doctor had said. The most surprising thing to me that Pichest said was that the man should definitely not receive Thai massage, because the kind of pressure was too intense and only increased the block, and would make it hard for the man to sleep. (I asked about it again later, and he did say that bloodstops would be alright, but nothing else). Instead, he recommended oil massage for the man. He went to the back of the room where there was a big tub of dark,



herbed sesame oil. One of his students brought him various containers, bowls and cups, to put the oil in, but none of them were the right one. Pichest apparently wanted an earthenware container for the oil. Finally, after 10 minutes of looking for the right container, he brought the oil over to the man, and showed one of the students how to give a kind of slapping massage to the man's leg, meant to stimulate the blood flow in the leg. He also recommended to the man many, many times that he stops drinking whiskey and ride a bicycle and get rid of his big belly. He usually smiled when he said these things.

One week with Pichest is both a long and short time to be in his presence. The main idea circulating in my thoughts after this first week is about the way that he teaches so directly from the bodies and the energies of the students in the room. The familiar superstructure of curriculum, plan, knowledge made concrete and authoritative that mark most classes of all subjects are totally absent from his way of teaching. He teaches from the situation as it is, and so one can have no doubt at all that one is indeed in that very situation. This, I am realizing more and more, is the essence of meditation itself. I complained to Pichest that he should teach meditation in his classroom if he's going to talk about it so much, but I realize now that he already is.

Today, at the end of class, just before closing prayers, he suddenly stood up, went to the window and called for us to come and look at the light. When we crowded around, he opened his bottle of water and poured some into the cup made by the veins of a large leaf outside, then held the beautiful and simple water droplet up to the light. "Just like this," he said. "Just like that."

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