



LIVING TRADITIONS

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Phussapa Thai Massage School, Bangkok

An interview with Yoshinori Fujigaki, by Jill Roberts, RTT

How were you first introduced to traditional Thai massage?

I had been working in a machine tooling company for 29 years. I worked most of the time overseas as a proposal engineer to car manufacturers all over the world. I was assigned to come to Thailand to establish the company here after three years working in the USA. I worked very hard to perform my duties, but I needed some extra help to energize me. Then I found Thai massage. I was surprised that Thai massage was totally different from other (types of bodywork) I had received in other countries. The first time I received a Thai massage, I felt something very different from what I knew. I didn't know what it was. Now I know that it is not only physical bodywork; it is also mental and moral support. I began studying Thai traditional medicine while I was still an employee with the company, but after about six years, I decided to resign, and that is when I began to establish our school with my teacher, Mr. Sermsak Srinate. I finally received a Thai massage teacher's license from the Thai ministry of Education after many negotiations and examinations with government officers. They told me "We don't need a foreign Thai massage teacher! Can you really teach?" You can imagine how hard it was for me, but I wanted very much to teach Thai massage. I think I am the only foreign Thai massage teacher registered with the Ministry of Education in Thailand.



Teaching staff at Phussapa. Yoshinori is at top right.

How did you and Mr. Srinate meet each other, and what is his professional background?

We met at the Wat Sampraya traditional medical association where I was studying. He was a vice chairman there, and I often went to him for advice. During those consultations, I received his consent to become the principal of our school. He has a national license as a Thai traditional doctor, Traditional pharmacist & midwife. Thai massage is an indispensable part of being a traditional doctor in Thailand.

Please share the early history of Phussapa Thai Massage School.

In the year 2000 there were no schools teaching Thai massage theory and practice to foreigners using foreign language materials. I had a hard time studying Thai massage because of the language barrier (I am Japanese). So in 2001, along with Mr. Srinate, I established a school so that foreign students, especially Japanese students, could study Thai massage without language problems. Phussapa was the fifth school to teach Thai traditional medicine or Thai massage under the recognition of Thai Ministry of Education in Bangkok. Now there are many more.

What does the word Phussapa mean in English and why did you choose this name for your school?

Phussapa is actually *Phurussapa* in Thai. It means the month of May. We used this name because we opened the school in May, 2001.

What is the connection with students in Japan? How many of your students are Japanese, and how many are Western or Thai?

95% of our graduates are Japanese and the rest of are Western and Thai. Both theory and practice segments are conducted bilingually, in Japanese and English. The school is promoted by word-of-mouth through alumni in Japan, and by internet search engines and magazines.

The school is located in the Sukhumvit area of Bangkok, which is a popular destination for tourists. Can you describe the neighborhood? Which accommodations do you recommend for those staying near the school?

Yes, we are located in a very popular neighborhood, with easy access by bus, skytrain, taxi, and tuk tuk. There are many hotels and guest houses nearby, and we make recommendations to our students based on their budget.

Tell us about the training and experience of your teachers: Where are they from? Where have they studied Thai massage; and for how many hours? How are they trained to teach at Phussapa? Are they multilingual?

In addition to our principal who speaks Thai and a little English, the three main teachers are myself, Wootichai and Ladder. I studied *samunphrai* at Wat Sampraya for one year, and taught Thai massage & Thai foot massage teacher at Phussapa for seven years. Mr. Wootichai Sukserwet, is Thai and speaks a little English. He studied physiotherapy for athletes for one year, Chinese reflexology for one year, at Wat Pho for two years, and with Professor Sunan of Wat Sampraya. Ms. Ladder Thumsud is Thai, and speaks English and Japanese. She studied Thai massage at Pisit Thai massage school for one year, worked as a therapist for six years, and trained and taught at Phussapa for seven years.

Which style of Thai massage do you teach at Phussapa, and what is the maximum number of students for one teacher?

We are convinced that there is only one type of Thai massage. It's true that there is a special type of learning for stretching or working sen lines; however only one type of Thai massage comes from Thai traditional medicine. This is one of the basic truths our students learn in the beginners Thai massage course. One teacher works with a maximum of 5 students. We rarely accept more than 10 students in each course.

How are the courses designed, and who created the sequences that are taught at Phussapa?

Most of our courses have been based on the *tamra* (old text book) of the Wat Sampraya Traditional Medical Association, and the techniques have been handed down orally from the Ayutthaya or Sukhothai period. I translated and edited them after long-term study and practice.



Exam room at Phussapa Thai Massage School

How many different courses and levels do you teach at Phussapa?

Thai massage basic course, 30 hours; Thai massage middle grade course, 30 hours; Thai massage advanced course, 60 hours; Herbal compress *Samunphrai* course, 30 hrs; Thai treatment (Ayurvedic) course, 120 hours; Thai foot massage, 18 hours; Chinese reflexology, 30 hours; and *Ruesi Datton* basic course, 9 hours.

Tell us about your herbal massage and Ayurvedic courses.

Our principal Mr. Srinate is a Thai traditional doctor who is a famous *samunphrai* specialist in this country. He wrote a manuscript of *samunphrai* application in Thai and I added details and translated it into English and Japanese for our students. All of our courses are taught with theory and practice. The *samunphrai* course is very enjoyable and students practice herbal sauna, dry herbal ball, fresh herbal ball and post-partum treatment, with theory and practice. Regarding the Ayurvedic course, as you know many aspects of Thai culture were derived from India. Thai traditional doctors have regarded Thai traditional medicine as being influenced by Indian Ayurvedic medicine. They respect and use the name Ayurveda or Ayurvedic even though the original concepts were modified in Thailand. In this course we touch on diagnosis and *samunphrai* medical prescription a little bit, but not very much because it is not a medical training course.

How do you feel about students who study in Thailand only for a few weeks and then return home to begin practicing Thai massage? How can new students understand the importance of further practice and study before beginning a professional practice?

If we massage 100 different clients we may have to perform 100 different types of Thai massage. I always tell my students that they can study one or two styles of Thai massage here in our school. But then they have to learn more on their own through continued practice. Our clients are our greatest teachers – we must respect them."



A practice room at Phussapa Thai Massage School

Is there any thing else you would like to share with members of THAI?

I am now in the process of writing an article about the history of educational facilities that teach Thai traditional medicine in Thailand. One common misconception is that Wat Pho is the oldest school to teach Thai massage in Thailand, but that is not true. The oldest educational facility to teach Thai traditional medicine is actually Wat Thephthida's traditional medical association. Wat Sampraya traditional medical association was established in 1952, five years before the Wat Pho traditional school opened.

What do you think about the Thai Healing Alliance? Is an international organization for Thai massage important in today's world?

I think very highly of THAI's activities because we need a certain basic standard for Thai massage practitioners all over the world. Everybody knows it is difficult to standardize, but I hope THAI continues to establish accurate and reasonable standards that are recognized internationally.

