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Pichest Boonthumme: A student's experience with a great master

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I feel honored to have been asked to write about Pichest Boonthumme. It is hard to put to words just how amazing he is.

Pichest was born on June 19, 1958 to Bauw and Bauw Jan Boonthumme in Hang Dong, a small village in northern Thailand. They named their baby son Narin. Narin's father, Bauw, was a traditional Thai doctor and herbalist. His mother, Bauw Jan, was a cook. When I asked Pichest when he had started to learn massage, he told me that as a young child he used to walk on his father's back to help him relax before going to sleep. Later, when he was seven or eight years old, his father started to teach him massage, herbs and traditional medicine. Pichest said he really did not understand much of what his father taught him until years later, but that, at the time, it taught him patience.

One day when Narin was 23 or 24 years old he accompanied his father to the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai where his father needed to pick up some herbs. At the time, Narin was hoping to find any kind of work as he had recently gotten married and needed to support his wife. It so happened that he was offered work that day at the Old Medicine Hospital. He gladly took the job and learned the hospital's Thai massage techniques. Then, in 1983 he was asked to become a staff member and went on to become one of the hospital's lead practitioners and teachers. After some years of teaching at the Old Medicine Hospital, the daily commute from Hang Dong to Chiang Mai (about twenty minutes) got to him and in 1990 Pichest decided to quit.

A couple of years later I found myself studying Thai Massage in Chiang Mai. I studied with various teachers and then wound my way to the Old Medicine Hospital. While studying there, I asked who the great local teachers and practitioners were and Pichest's name came up.

I soon set out to find him. It wasn't so easy to find Pichest's place in Hang Dong, but eventually the driver of the sam-lor (three wheeler auto rickshaw) I was in, did. Pichest warmly welcomed me into his home and sat me down in the main room. Somehow he communicated with me that in order to start studying with him I had to come back with lotus buds, incense, fruit and the class payment. At that time, Pichest spoke no English, so I can't remember how we communicated.

I soon returned to Chiang Mai with the driver and the next day went shopping for all the required offerings. Then, since I now knew where to get off in Hang Dong, I took a songthaew (open bus) to Hang Dong and then walked down a dirt road that ran along a rice field to Pichest's house.

Pichest lives in his ancestral home, which is an old two-story building. Upstairs there is a large shrine room where Pichest meditates. It seemed very magical to me the few times I was up there.

When I first started studying with Pichest, he had only one other student. He taught each of us individually. Class was held in the main room, which had a raised section with a Thai mat on it at one end of the room. Even though Pichest and I couldn't talk to each other, I was able to learn by feeling what he was doing. At that time he was still teaching a sequence that covered techniques in the supine, side lying, prone, inverted and seated positions.

Pichest told me and the other student that he wanted more students, but it seemed hard to get people from Chiang Mai to his house. We tried to help him by making posters, but things really did not pick up. At the time, he was giving sessions to Thai people. There were no "farangs" (westerners) coming for treatment, as no one knew about him. After I had studied with Pichest for a while, he told me I should leave and practice what I had learned. So I left.

About a year later I returned to Thailand and was taking some very boring classes elsewhere. One of the students there told me she was going that afternoon to get a massage from someone outside of Chiang Mai. She invited me to accompany her. I had no idea where she was going. When we arrived in Hang Dong, I realized we were going to Pichest's! As I watched Pichest work on her, I realized how greatly his work stood out from the various other teachers and practitioners I had been meeting in Thailand. His every move seemed ergonomic, precise, powerful, fluid like a dancer's and magical. He seemed to have an uncanny sense of what was needed and seemed directly tuned into her. After the session, she and I decided to quit the boring school in favor of studying with Pichest. That was a turning point for me. From that time onwards, whenever I have been in Thailand, I have only studied with Pichest.

By this time, Pichest knew a little more English, so we could converse some. That was when I found out how he got his name Pichest. When he was twenty-seven years old, he had massaged a monk who was so moved by the treatment that he told Pichest that it was time for a name change. At the time Pichest was still called Narin. The monk then blessed him with the name Pichest which means special, unique, extraordinary. Pichest also explained that Boon, which is the first part of his last name, means good or merit. His name is so apt as he truly embodies a special, extraordinary giver of healing.

While studying with Pichest this second time around, I had my first massage session with him and I remember that his pressure seemed very intense. I also recall the experience of drifting away into a profound state of relaxation when he sat on my leg in the side lying position for a "blood stop" (arterial compression). During consequent treatments I thought that his pressure was less and less intense, but then I realized that it was me who was changing as my body was becoming more and more open; not his pressure lessening!

Pichest told me he hoped to find a place nearby to teach. He wanted to teach in a temple and then confided in me that he really had always wanted to be a monk, but, now that he was married and had a son, couldn't. The search for a temple for Pichest to teach out of was underway when one day Pichest suddenly announced that he was going to build a school on the land in his garden next to the house. A few days later, construction of his school began.

Before long a building with two rooms was completed. One room was for Pichest's wife's spirit work; the other room was for classes. About a third of the classroom became a shrine area filled with statues and pictures of saints, Buddhas, Ganeshas, Jivaka, Kruba Srivichai (Chiang Mai's patron saint), the Thai royal family, flowers, incense, fruit and beautiful hanging decorations.

From then on, I went annually to Thailand to study with Pichest. His English got better and more students started to come. We decided to run the classes every two weeks starting on the first and third Monday of every month. On these days students were expected to bring offerings – flowers, incense, fruit, money. Pichest would then draw on the top of our heads with a sharp object as if inscribing a blessing.

Classes were from nine to four Monday through Friday. There was a break for lunch, which we took at a little nearby restaurant. Sometimes Pichest would join us there, but more often than not, he ate food prepared by his wife at home. In class, he was often busy reciting prayers and making candles with prayers wrapped inside them. At times, local people came by for his blessings. Many families who were losing a family member from HIV came to him. He would pray for them. It was very sad.

Pichest, however, didn't seem to get saddened. I learned that he believed this life was just one in a series of reincarnations so there was no need to be too attached to this incarnation. This really came home one rainy night when we were driving in his car. There were many little frogs on the road and I was so worried we would run them over. Pichest tried to console me saying, "No problem, another life coming." He has this detached side even though he is so alive and so involved with life.

I think Pichest's larger view has to do with his meditation practice which he stresses is the most important practice in his life. He explained that meditation has taught him so much, including ways to improve his teaching and massage practice. Pichest also relied on his dreams a lot and often had dreams which he said were direct transmissions from Jivaka. I remember at one time he was teaching us three inside leg lines. Then one day he told us that from now on we would be thumbing two inside leg lines. When I asked him why, he said he had received instruction from Jivaka to change to two pathways in a dream the previous night.

When I asked Pichest who his teachers are besides Jivaka, he told me they are the Buddha, the yogi spirit and his father. He also often mentions Kruba Srivichai and Professor Dol Jai who taught at Wat Po and the Old Medicine Hospital. Sometimes he also brings up Lung Ta, a man who used to live in Hang Dong who taught Pichest how to read the old northern Thai language.

Whenever, there was a student in class who had a professional background in some modality such as osteopathy or chiropractic, Pichest wanted to learn from them. After understanding these new techniques, they became a part of Pichest's work.

Learning with Pichest is much more than learning Thai massage techniques. It is about learning to be present without preconceptions. He tells people again and again, "Too much thinking" and tries to get them into feeling. Sometimes, when he felt I had a particularly "thinking" question he would raise his cane over my head, but then with a smile lower it.

One of his first words in English was "connect". He would say connect, connect over and over again while pointing out how each part of the body was connected with the next. He would have us feel areas of tension and show us how they connected to places of tension above and below that area. He always seemed to know exactly what to do to relieve the tension.

In those early days at his school, he did not give dharma talks in the morning, nor did we recite Om Namoh, but he now does that. In those days, we just started practicing under his guidance or, if he was busy or sleepy, which he often was, he would nap on his couch and would ask me to teach. I was always amazed how he would wake up and know just who was making what mistake and would then correct them. At the time, we practiced a routine flow over the course of two weeks, which was more or less repeated every two weeks.

Sometimes, I got upset that I was there in Thailand hoping to study and paying for classes, but instead Pichest was sleeping! Finally Pichest and I had a talk about this and he agreed to give me private lessons after class was over. It was during this time that my practice started to get refined and to deepen even though Pichest often became sleepy when I worked on him.

Every day after class, Pichest had clients. His treatments were incredible and I was blessed to have several sessions with him as well as to be able to observe him treating others. His psychic ability would shine through especially when he did blood stops (arterial compressions), as he then seemed able to access hidden information about the person he was working on. Often, after the treatment he would advise the person as to what prayers and offerings they should do to remove certain negative entities or energies.

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Pichest is a master. Years later, I can still "feel" his touch and remember his predictions, advice and care. Pichest's mastery is from his complete union with his work, with his body and with the person before him. He tunes in to them and knows exactly where they need help and just how to release them.

Eventually, as Pichest was teaching full time and seeing clients every day after class, except Sundays, it became too much and he had a melt down which landed him in the hospital. He was there for quite a while, but finally to everyone's relief, he came home. After that, Pichest no longer gave treatments after class and the class structure changed. He stopped teaching sequences and instead focused on therapeutics. There was no special format for this. He would work spontaneously on whomever he felt needed to be worked on, using them as a demo for the class. Sometimes he worked on outside people who needed help but they were treated within the context of the class. His teaching continued to emphasize "non thinking" and being present.

In closing, I pray with folded hands, that Pichest continues to be there for all of us who seek his blessings. May he be blessed with long life, good health, joy, loving kindness, peace and ease.