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## Resurgence of Thai massage brings employment for the blind

Thanks to its many health benefits, Thai massage is enjoying a resurgence in the country of its creation, shedding an image long associated with the seedy “massage parlours” that proliferate here.

Thai massage -- some call it “lazy yoga” -- is an ancient technique which uses acupressure and a series of bodily manoeuvres to open energy paths and improve blood circulation.

“The benefits are relaxation and better circulation to the muscles,” says Chirapan Vinaikulpong, a doctor in rehabilitation medicine at Samitivej Hospital in the capital Bangkok. “I think we (doctors) should learn about Thai massage too, so we can recognise more its benefits.”

But massage masters like Joseph Sribuapun, a practitioner for 26 years and teacher for 17, have long been patiently singing the praises of the art -- and its side benefit of creating employment for Thailand’s often-neglected blind. On a thin mattress laid beneath a small Buddhist shrine and framed family photographs in his shophouse home, Joseph, who has been blind since the age of eight, treats up to seven clients a day.



Blind Thai massage therapist

Some have ailments they turn to him to heal or manage, but others like 39-year-old business owner Sasi Marican come simply seeking relaxation. “If you’re worried, it helps a lot to clear out your mind. It’s refreshing,” Sasi says, as Joseph begins her intense weekly 75-minute session, costing just 300 baht (seven dollars). “After a session I feel relaxed, very relaxed.”

Feeling his way by touch as he kneels beside his client, Joseph uses his hands, forearms and at times feet to rhythmically prod as he feels for knots and twists in the muscles.

Joseph was taught his trade by a 70-year-old masseur whom a friend heard over the radio warning that the ancient technique was dying out. “Older people were worried about losing knowledge of Thai massage. All the good Thai masseurs were almost gone because they were getting old and dying,” he says.

Eventually he founded the Caulfield Foundation and started teaching blind students himself. To date, some 300 masseurs have graduated from his six-month course, among about 1,000 blind masseurs working in Thailand.

Pecharat Techavachara is another at the forefront of training blind masseurs. As president of the Foundation for the Employment Promotion of the Blind, he decided massage training was a better bet than the usual agriculture or carpentry courses.

"I felt like massage was very good, because blind people do not need any expensive tools (to perform it). What they need are strong hands and a willingness to give service to people," he says.

The popularity of Thai massage escalated after the 1997-98 economic crisis, he says, when the expense of Western medicines blew out. "After the economic crisis, people began to realise they could not really afford to import lots and lots of foreign drugs and medications and they turned back to Thai treatments."

"I think the Thai government made a mistake by turning to Western medication too much and overlooked, or devalued Thai medicine."

But the government is now realising that Thai treatments are a viable complement to Western medicine -- and a money saver. "Seventy percent of ailments could be cured by the principle and theory of Thai traditional medicine, such as Thai traditional massage and herbal sauna," public health ministry permanent secretary Winai Wiriyakitja said recently at the opening of a traditional Thai medicine unit in a rural hospital.

"Thai herbal medicine could reduce imports of foreign drugs by 3.0 billion baht per year," he said, adding that the ministry's Thai Traditional Medicine Institute would be upgraded to a department later this year.

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