



THE HEART OF THAILAND

Journey into the Unknown

by Danko Lara Radic

Once, when I spoke with one of my teachers about Chiang Mai, about the ways in which the city is changing more and more, she told me: "Everything is changing so fast. Everything has become much more expensive. All these changes are aimed at satisfying the desires of thousands of tourists who come here. Hotels, restaurants and bars are constructed, instead of schools and hospitals. And we, the local population, are somehow left out of account in all of this."

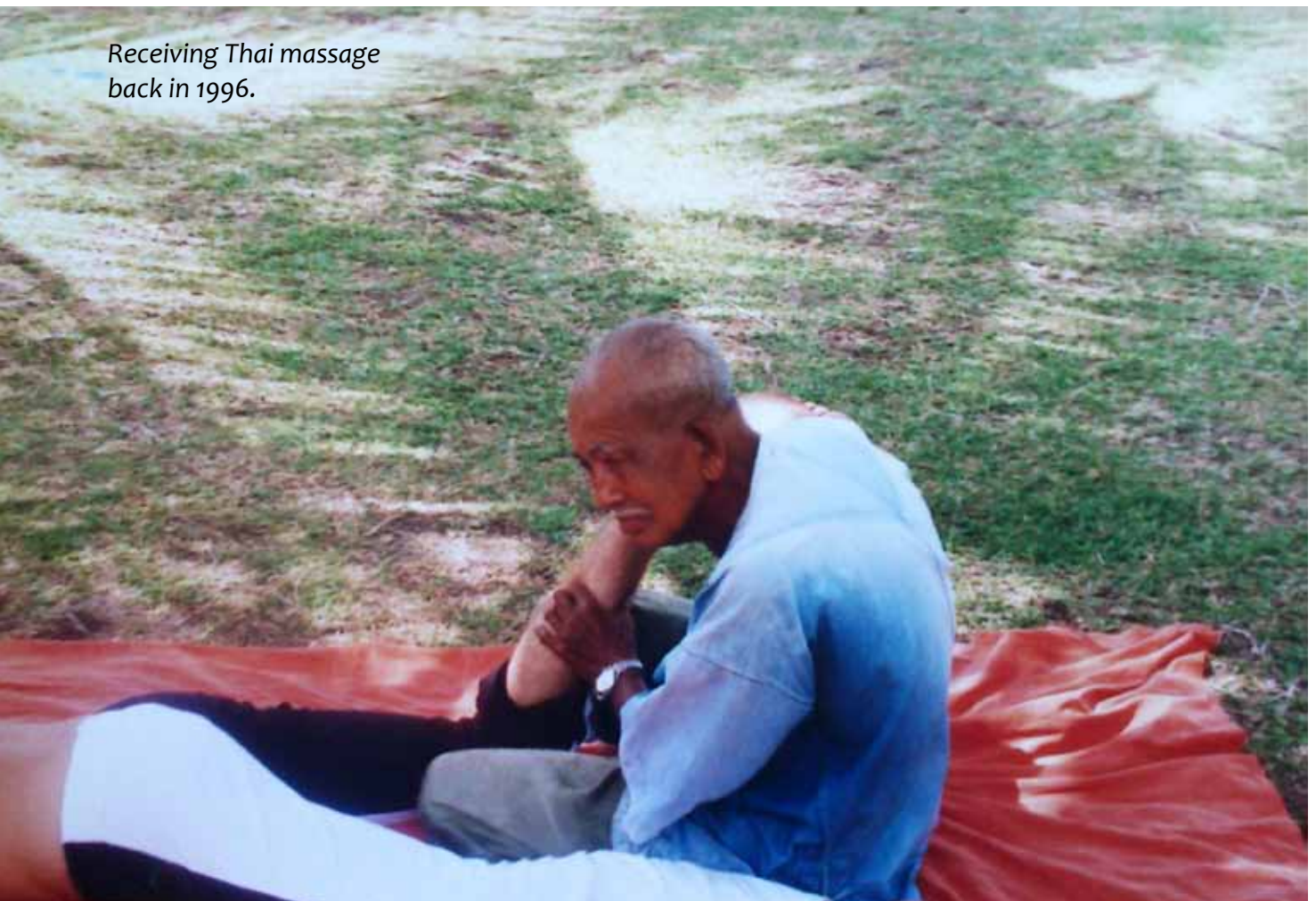
It's been twenty years now since I travelled to Thailand for the first time. Back then, in the mid 1990s, when the Internet was still young, there wasn't much information about Thailand that you could get your hands on before you go there. It used to be a distant, mysterious country barely heard of from scarce stories and rare books. After the initial shock, which the traveler experiences on his first encounter with any Asian country, it was evident pretty soon that the people who came there from other parts of the world were not like your average neighbors, but rather real globe-trotters, mostly young people with adventurous spirit, brave enough to set off into the unknown, to step into another culture, another language, and to mingle with different people. The village on the island that I went to was accessible only on foot, through a forest, because

a large section of the road leading there was not paved yet.

Today, 20 years later, not only is the road paved and the beautiful, once deserted beaches packed with ugly-looking massive bungalows, but even an airport is being built on the island, while it is slowly turning into a top tourist destination ready to receive flocks of travelers every year. Today you will find Wi-Fi on every palm tree, while the visitors staying in the bungalow next to you will most likely look exactly like your average neighbors. New times also bring new values, so the old Thailand progressively gives way to inexorable globalization and the philosophy of pure profit.

I have been practicing Thai massage for 15 years now. Just like most people, the first time I went to Chiang Mai I aspired to learn this mysterious art that seemed intriguing to me, making a step further on the

*Receiving Thai massage
back in 1996.*



path toward mastering the discipline of massage that I was already practicing at the time. Back then, fifteen years ago, Chiang Mai was a small, charming, delightful provincial town. For its particular geographic position, the town has been under huge influence of the surrounding civilizations for centuries, and bearing in mind its size, the wide range of its offers can be matched by few other places around the world. It charms and captivates you as soon as you step into the shade of the street vendor's canopy. At that time, there used to be several schools and a number of teachers who could introduce you to Thai massage. For the past 15 years, Chiang Mai has grown and developed incredibly, it has become noisy and hectic, turning into the major tourist center in the North, where you can now find schools of massage on every corner. Tens of thousands of people

have become skilled in Thai massage and spread it across the world, so nowadays almost everyone knows about it. Add to this the Internet, and all the mystery is gone. But is it really so? Not long ago, a student of mine, who travelled to

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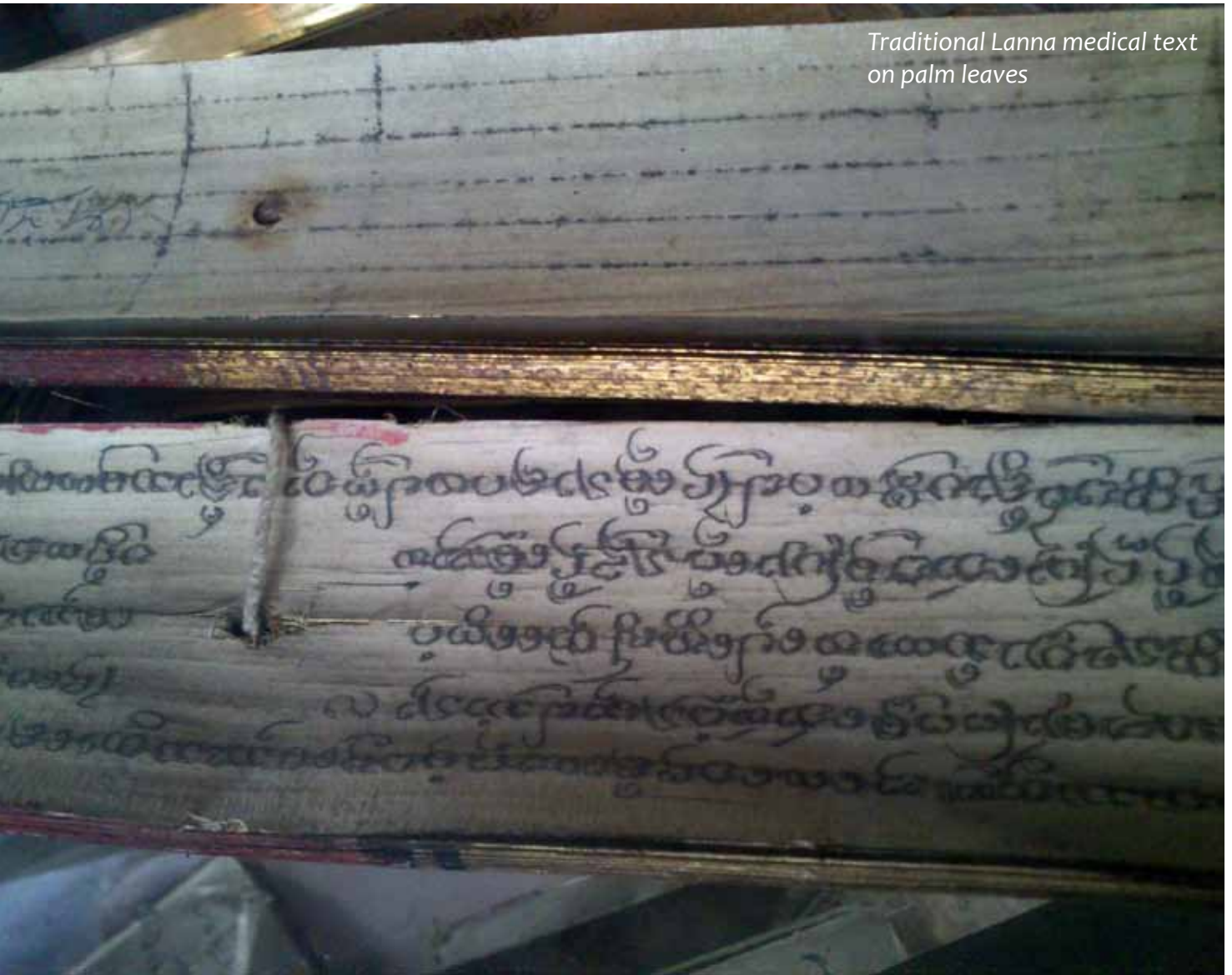
Chiang Mai on several occasions, said to me: "I acquired knowledge from many teachers, but every time I came back, I felt something was missing ..." The thing that is missing is that which is not meant for tourists. Most of us tend to forget that we come to a country that has never been conquered, and we all know what a farang likes most when

he goes to other countries – to seize and grab and take whatever he wants, whatever he needs, usually without asking whether he may, and throughout history, it was mostly by force. That's how it was for centuries, and that's how it is today. In order to prevent that, Thai people wisely set an obstacle in our way – language. It is spoken only there and nowhere else in the world, and it is very difficult to learn. Over the course of approximately ten years, I learned from many teachers, both Thai and Westerners, and just like that student of mine, I always had the feeling that something was lacking in my practice. Although I have managed to master *how* to do it perfectly, I haven't mastered the knowledge of *what* I am doing actually. So I went further on in my quest, with perseverance, until one day I eventually found the piece that was missing. The teacher who made



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Traditional Lanna medical text
on palm leaves



The teacher who made me immerse so profoundly into Thai culture and Thai medicine, into this vast universe of whose existence I hadn't been aware of, or only faintly imagined, that I simply forsook everything I had done up to that moment, throwing it away as dead weight, and started from scratch.

me immerse so profoundly into Thai culture and Thai medicine, into this vast universe of whose existence I hadn't been aware of, or only faintly imagined, that I simply forsook everything I had done up to that moment, throwing it away as dead weight, and started from scratch. With his blessing and support, I set out on a road not trodden by tourists. I embraced the local culture, spirituality, language and customs. And then, right before my eyes, a parallel universe opened up for me, a universe of traditional medicine, in which there are doctors no one knows of, who live right next to those known to everyone, and practices that are familiar to all, yet no one knows the proper way of performing them. A universe stretching throughout the country, not only in tourist centers such as Chiang Mai,

Bangkok or Phuket.

Once you become initiated in traditional medicine, once you get to know its foundations, and learn to carry it out in practice, then you begin to search for a place where you can realize this practice. Once you go deeper into it, once you go beyond the confines of wellness and spa centers, once you acquire skill and courage to apply your knowledge as medicine, then you start searching for people who are in the need of it. The moment arrived for me to go to a place that I had heard of many years before, so I asked my teacher if I could go there and I was granted with permission. I set off into the heart of Thailand.

Being a lifelong backpacker, I got on one of those buses to Northeast in which you get all stiff after bumping for 15 hours or more, and eventu-

ally I got off in one of those transit towns, from where I headed to my new destination, far away from any tourist route. I got on a local bus, ramshackle and dirty, looking like it came from the early 20th century. I was riding the bus together with some 20 Thais. From that moment on, throughout the whole adventure which followed, there wasn't ANYONE who spoke English, and EVERYTHING around me was written only in Thai language. Fortunately, I was well-prepared and already conversant with the basics of Thai, otherwise the whole action would have been absolutely impossible to achieve. I would have gotten lost just around the first corner. During the bus ride, a soldier explained to me that there was a hotel right next to the bus station at my destination. After an hour and a half or so, we arrived to a small town. I was soon to understand that I was the only white person around within radius of hundreds of kilometers, and it was the first time in my life that I found myself completely alone, in the midst of a civilization that was in a way distant and foreign to me, among people that I didn't know well, who didn't understand any language that I speak, except for that rudimentary Thai in which I could communicate on a basic level. And when they spoke in their mother tongue, I either had difficulties in understanding them or did not understand them at all. That feeling of communicational isolation is one of the most intense experiences that I have ever had.

Although I found the hotel in no time, the room was too expensive for my shoestring budget, and since there was no guesthouse in town, I had to find some cheap room to rent. I will never forget the moment when I was walking down the dusty road in that far-off provincial town, in the middle of nowhere, carrying my whole life in my backpack, and it was getting dark fast, while packs of stray dogs were eyeing me ... and I thought to myself that it was



a perfect setting in which I could just vanish without a trace, and if something would happen to me, if I were to disappear off the face of the earth, no one would ever find me. Scary. Finally I found what I was looking for in a narrow side street – a dilapidated, creepy, dirty concrete building that had the appearance of something from Japanese horror movies from the 1960s. I asked the receptionist for a room, so she took me upstairs to show it to me. On the door, there was a padlock the size of a corkscrew placed on a rickety lock, and it crossed my mind that the next day, when I come back, I would find the room completely empty, with all my personal belongings gone. The thought probably occurred to me because of my memories of India ... The room was spacious, but without windows, there was a big mattress, a wardrobe and a TV set, and that frustrating neon light. It was a total dump, like a hideout for a heroin smuggler.

At the break of day, I felt relieved because last night's horror movie scenes quickly turned into idyllic scenery of a small provincial town in Thailand. I realized that my loc-

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Monks on treatment



ation was excellent, close to the market and the main street with the inevitable 7-Eleven convenience store. At the market, I bought some fruits for breakfast, flowers, incense and candles. I went for a short walk through town and inquired about the way to get to my destination point. Soon I was sitting comfortably in a three-wheeled cart (there are no tuk-tuks there), enjoying the sight of rice fields passing by during the 30-minute ride.

After a two-day trip, I finally reached the end of my journey, my final destination – clinic for traditional medicine. It is part of a Buddhist temple and it specializes in paralysis-related conditions. Patients from all over Thailand, as well as surrounding countries, come there looking for help. I came there wishing to do volunteer work and to learn. I was received by the Abbot of the temple, and I explained who I am

and what my motives for coming were, whereupon he approved my engagement. I was taken to the room for physical therapy, where I was introduced to the doctors and showed a mat that was to be my working space. Half an hour later, I attended my first patient, followed by many patients who poured in until 6 p.m., when I called the man with the three-wheeled cart to take me back to town. My heart has never been so full as that day.

I was the only white person who ever came to this place, so every time someone entered the room they would ask: “Who is this guy?”, and the whole day through I heard the answer: “farang, Slbia (Serbia), farang, Slbia” over and over again ... Likewise, when I walked around town, I constantly felt people’s stare, often followed by their murmur. However, when I returned to my room, I saw all my belongings neatly

in their place, and moreover during my entire stay there, I didn’t experience the slightest inconvenience (apart from the time when a pack of stray dogs attacked me when, in the middle of the night, I went out to get something at 7-Eleven; luckily I managed to frighten them away, scaring off the leader). On the contrary, once the word spread around town about who I was and why I was there, all the people were very polite to me, including vendors, grocers, and cart drivers. They smiled at me candidly, with all their heart, and not because they wanted to sell something.

I went to the clinic every day and worked from 8 in the morning till 6 in the afternoon. I worked in the Sala Nuat together with 5-6 doctors. As part of the physical therapy, techniques of massage, Luk Pra Kob and Yam Khang were applied sim-

Luk Pra Kob



ultaneously. The clinic also has an herbal steam bath where 108 different herbs are applied, and patients are also administered herbal medicine. At the clinic, there were some 20 patients admitted for inpatient treatments, while others came to be treated therapeutically on a daily basis.

Massage which is applied there has very little in common with Thai massage taught at schools and the way it is usually represented in the West. In this place, massage has solely therapeutic purpose, it implies a high degree of intensity and pain, and to a large extent it is applied by means of stepping (therapists hold on to a handrail placed all around the mats), lots of squeezing and acupressure and very little stretching is applied. Luk Pra Kob and Yam Khang are applied all the time. There is no music, possibly the TV might be on showing some Muay

Thai fight, while doctors often talk to each other and the patients alike. This is constantly punctuated with strident sound of heel against the hot tin plate. During therapy I also used Tok Sen, which was welcomed approvingly, while the doctors were eager to see the tools, some of which I had personally assembled.

Patients were mostly people suffering from paralysis, ranging from completely paralyzed people in wheelchairs to those paralyzed in half of their body or a limb. The causes of their paralysees were various, including cases of stroke or traffic accidents. Some of them fully recovered, others only partially, and others yet never. Paralysis often goes paired with other serious conditions; therefore, treating such patients requires great skillfulness, knowledge and experience – knowledge of Thai anatomy and physiology and an understanding of the bodily functions

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Residential building for patients

Paralysis itself has a rather specific nature of its own. It usually affects a person all of a sudden, turning his/her life totally upside down. One wrong move at the steering wheel can change the course of your life forever. You are still alive, you are not in constant pain, yet you are incapable of having a normal life, at least the kind that you used to have up to that moment. What does that message, sent to you by the universe, mean? One is inevitably faced with the question: "why did it happen to me?" which remains weighing on every patient, and which leads to a deeper contemplation on the karma phenomenon embedded into the philosophy of life of Thai people. I remember the peculiar atmosphere of certain peacefulness during my stay with these people, people who suffered such a heavy blow in their life, a knock-out so to say, after which there is no room for any anger, arrogance or intolerance. People suffering from paralysis are mostly quiet, likeable and good-tempered.

from the perspective of traditional medicine and the way it is applied for healing purposes. There is no room for any kind of abstraction or fantasizing. Treating such patients, the therapist is ushered into a specific spiritual state of mind; his work is a great karmic lesson which is best summarized in the question posed to me during treatment of an officer; a young man barely 27 years old, who suffered an accident which left him completely paralyzed in the left part of his body: "Please sir, tell me would I be able to walk ever again?" And then you have to reply something ...

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With the five Mo



Lunch break

We would sit down on the floor and fifteen different plates would be served to us, plates like I have never been served in any restaurant

buy one thing, but I got all confused before a vendor and brought something completely different. I treated each and every one of them and they were all pleased, which meant so much to me. If you want real feedback in your practice, there's no better person than a Thai doctor. Their appearance was utterly charming to me, because when you see them in town or on the market, you'd take them to be members of a street gang rather than doctors at the clinic. Every day we had a half an hour lunch-break, when we went to the temple where I was dumbfounded at the marvelous sight of a variety of meals. I am a food-lover, but the food that I ate there was a real treat that I had nowhere else in Thailand. We would sit down on the floor and fifteen different plates would be served to us, plates like I have never been served in any restaurant. In their tradition of hospitality, they would be constantly pouring more food into my plate, and I'd be stuffing myself, and eventually, when the lunch was over, we'd just

move a few meters to savor fifteen types of dessert that were out of this world. Jaw-dropping! The intimate and friendly relationship that I struck up with those doctors is the most humane and most beautiful thing that I have experienced in so many years. Only few days afterwards, someone mentioned Mo Puu Ying, and then



Mo Puu Ying



Reusi statue



Steam bath

I realized that there were also women doctors at the clinic, who were working in another building. Once they explained to me where it was, I went to see the place and, much to my surprise, I discovered there was a huge room, approximately three times bigger than ours, where female doctors worked. There were maybe ten to fifteen of them, and as soon as I entered their room, the place went nuts! When they saw me, their reaction was so sweet, they giggled and it was very funny ... I was personally delighted with my discovery. Although I realized that there was a gender-based segregation among doctors, since female doctors, for example, did not apply Yam Khang, there were patients of both sexes in each Sala.

At one moment, I went to find a steam bath. In front of it, I saw a beautiful set consisting of a dozen Reusi sculptures, all in positions of Reusi Dat Ton exercises. The steam bath had several small cabins filled with hot steam saturated with vapor from 108 herbs. The temperature inside is around 80oC, and when you go outside into the scorching hot Thai air of 37oC, it feels like light summer breeze.

At the end of each working day, I was offered supper, and then I sat together with the patients. In the evening, everyone gathers on a small porch in front of the room with a TV set and a table, like some sort of extended family. I was deeply touched by the affection that the personnel showed to the patients. They were gentle and kind, there was not a tinge of arrogance or aloofness that often characterizes physicians in the West.

I spent some ten days there and then I had to leave to catch a flight to go back home. We made our farewells wholeheartedly, and it was not an easy leave-taking, because I grew to love them all, just as they did me. It was one of the most beautiful and moving experiences in my entire life, and I left the place with firm promise that

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one day I will return. The greatest lesson for a therapist, which I learnt there, is this: "Before you is a person who genuinely suffers, and you can feel this suffering everywhere, in her eyes, in her voice, in her body, in the air between you and her, it is so strong that it pervades your entire being. It is up to you to do your utmost to reduce the suffering of this other being, as much as you can. And at that moment, everything else in this world is absolutely insignificant."

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The place that I went to remains untouched by such changes. No one is making profit there, and no one is famous. It still represents Thailand as it once was. Warm, humane and compassionate.



Danko Lara Radic is professionally involved in massage practice since 1997. He is committed to preservation, research and teaching of authentic Traditional medicine of Thailand. He practices at the Institute of Thai Massage in Belgrade and holds numerous trainings and workshops both in Belgrade and abroad.
