

To THAI members:

Originally appearing in the Bangkok Post in February 1999, this article describes the revival of Traditional Thai massage among Thais, specifically at Wat Nong Yah Nang, run by the abbot Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij. For the last few decades, this wat has turned into an informal hospital gathering patients from all over Thailand. Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij describes his vision and practice of Thai traditional Medicine. The article as well contains experiences and opinions of some patients

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The common touch

By: Chompoo Trakullertsathien

Photos by Somkid Chaijitvani

*THAI TRADITIONAL MEDICINE:
Outlawed a century ago as quackery,
Thai traditional medicine is on the road to
recovery as patients, disillusioned with
western treatments, look to home-grown
healers*

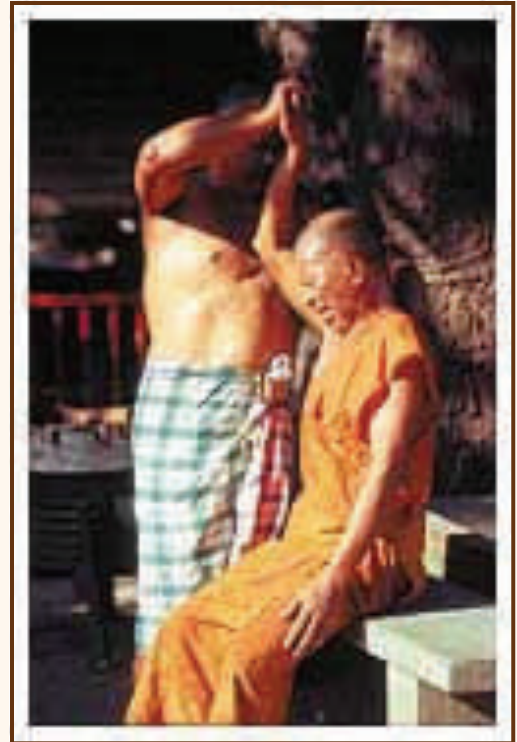
Red hot coals mean it's time. The chubby, middle-aged man places his right foot on the smoking steel plate covering the stove. He doesn't scream. When his foot is good and hot, he starts stamping it along the body of a man whose face is contorted in pain.

In the corner of the room, a young girl is lying on the floor while another therapist massages her legs with his feet, supporting himself on a bamboo bar. Nearby, other arms and legs are being bent and stretched in all sorts of odd ways.

This is not a circus troupe in training. It's a healing session at Wat Nong Yah Nang in Uthai Thani province where the long-neglected science of Thai traditional medicine is bouncing back to health.

Hundreds of patients who suffer from varying degrees of paralysis come to the temple seeking help from practitioners who specialise in massage therapy. They all learned the techniques from Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij, the abbot of Wat Nong Yah Nang who started traditional treatment at the temple in 1973.

Failing to find relief in western medicine's costly treatments, many patients are turning to indigenous medicine and massage out of sheer desperation. Though some people may still look down on the age-old knowledge as unscientific, 63-year-old patient Preeda Yongyuth is not one of them.



Massage therapist Kanong Muenhan straightens a patient's arm to stretch his tight tendon at Nong Yah Nang Temple's clinic in Uthai Thani. Thai traditional healing arts are making a comeback as many patients with chronic conditions find little comfort with modern medicine.

"I was about to give up hope, then I sought help from the abbot and tried traditional medicine and massage," said Mr Preeda who was once partially paralysed. "Now I have regained my health."

Such cases are no longer rare or considered "miraculous" for patients suffering from chronic conditions as more and more people, disillusioned with modern treatments, are discovering the merits of the old ways.

Traditional medicine was, in fact, outlawed as unscientific with the advent of western medicine in Thailand a century ago. As a result, the ancient knowledge was cast aside because practitioners were afraid of being arrested as charlatans. It was only recently that Thai medical authorities began to pay attention to traditional medicine, especially when it comes to chronic illnesses that western medicine cannot help.

"We need to revive our ancestral knowledge in medicine," said Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij. "Patients need all the help they can get."

As well as performing his religious duties, the temple's abbot has devoted himself to treating the poor free of charge in an effort to revive the traditional practices.

His work won him the 1993 Cultural Outstanding Person Award in the field of local wisdom (herbal treatment) and the 1998 Prem Tinsulanonda Award which honours those who dedicate themselves to their communities.

The abbot first learned the science of Thai traditional medicine from his uncle at the age of 13. Sixteen years later as a Buddhist monk, he had his first chance to treat patients in his village.

"At first, those who suffered broken bones came to see me. After applying the herbal medicine, many of them got better. Word spread and people have been flocking to my temple ever since," recalled the 55-year-old head monk.

To cope with the ever-increasing number of patients and the different diseases they have, the abbot sought knowledge from his uncle's Thai traditional medicine texts. He has since become something of a specialist in treating paralysis-related illnesses.

"Most modern doctors pay no attention to these chronic illnesses. They prefer to specialise in other kinds of sickness that modern medical technology can cure," he said.

Today, Wat Nong Yah Nang has turned into an informal hospital where people throughout the kingdom come to seek help from the abbot and his nine volunteer masseurs, all of whom have been trained by the abbot.

Some of the masseurs are former patients or patients' relatives. They get no money for their work which keeps them busy from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. every day.

"I visited the temple 12 years ago and saw a lot of paralysed patients," said Kanong Muenhan, 53, who has been a volunteer masseur at the temple for 10 years. "I felt sorry for them and wanted to help. So I decided to learn how to help them from the abbot.

"My reward is the joy of having a chance to help ease the patients' sufferings. Seeing them able to walk again makes me happy," he said.



A volunteer therapist works on a patient who suffers from paralysis.

"I feel that what I am doing here is like making merit every day," added Sombat Tueorn, 32, another masseur. "My work helps me learn the reality of life. That life is short so we should do good things now. And helping others is one way to make your life worthwhile," said the Samut Prakan native.



Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij, abbot of Nong Yah Nang Temple: "We want to offer ordinary people more choices in health care. And we can do this by respecting the wisdom of our ancestors and keeping it alive by practising it."

To shelter the patients who need long-term treatment, an old wooden *sala*, or open pavilion, is used, although it is in poor conditions. The patients' relatives are also allowed to stay at the temple until the patients recover.

The *sala*, which can comfortably accommodate 60 persons at most, is now packed with around 100 patients. A new building is needed, but plans are on hold due to lack of cash. A temporary shelter was built nearby to relieve the congestion but it doesn't help much. As a result, some patients can't stay overnight and must return to the temple every day. Many cannot afford transportation expenses and so cannot get treatment.

Like any hospital, all patients have to register their names as well as details of their symptoms. In January alone, the temple received about 600 patients from all parts of the country.

Apart from traditional therapeutic massage, the patients at Wat Nong Yah Nang are treated with herbal medicine and herbal sauna.

The daily routine begins with walking practice using a walking stick and with the help of temple volunteers. Next comes a massage session which normally takes about one hour. The patients and the practitioners then rest until 3 p.m. when the patients line up for a herbal sauna. These procedures are repeated until the patients get better.

One special method that requires great dedication and stamina from the masseurs is hot massage. After applying oil on their foot, the masseurs place it on a hot steel plate, then stamp the hot foot on the patient's legs and arms. The process takes about half an hour which means that the masseurs must endure extreme heat for a long while. The sole of their foot is dry and cracked by the heat as a result.

The treatments cost the temple about 5-6,000 baht a day. This includes expenses for herbs and wages for villagers to dry and grind the herbs for a variety of traditional medicinal recipes. The expenses come mostly from public donations but, according to the abbot, the temple still owes payments to many herb stores.

While countless patients have gotten better from the treatment over the years, many have lost heart because recovery is often a very slow process.

"I'm paralysed. I've been practising walking for 20 days but there is no sign of improvement," said 62-year-old Chan Lanketkarn, an Uthai Thani native.

"Before this, I went to see modern doctors several times but they could not help me either. They gave me some medicine but my condition did not improve. I have no hope for recovery. I want to die," he said, sobbing.

Morale, said, the abbot is important for recovery. Apart from herbal medicine and massage therapy, all patients need support from their relatives. The practitioners, too, must be sympathetic counselors.

According to the monk, the country is now facing an acute shortage of true "folk doctors" who work out of dedication, as in days of old. He lamented the fact that traditional medicine has become big business and is open to abuse.

The expertise of traditional herbal medics has also become too limited.

"In the old days, folk doctors normally handled a wide range of diseases. Now, most of them deal only with specific complaints," said the abbot.

There is little hope for improvement because few people are interested in learning the science of traditional healing, added folk doctor Kanong. "This is because traditional healers have low status and they have to deal mostly with hopeless cases already turned down by modern doctors."

Thai traditional medicine takes a holistic approach, seeing illness as a sign of imbalances in one's body and mind and seeking to restore harmony.

"It goes beyond a person's physical discomfort to embrace that person's relationships with others and the environment, which can cause illness. Thai medicine tackles the root of the illness, not only its symptoms," explained the abbot.

Traditional medicine, therefore, doesn't separate itself from religious beliefs, human relationships and the environment.

"All these factors affect one's health. A physician's understanding must therefore go beyond the patient's symptoms in order to be effective," he added.

That is why the abbot asks all his patients, as well as the masseurs, to strictly observe Buddhism's five precepts, namely, no killing, no stealing, no sexual exploitation, no lying and no drinking alcohol.

In addition, they have to abstain from unwholesome foods. Stronger patients are expected to help take care of paralysed ones. With a limited budget and little assistance from the government, Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij and his team of folk doctors are struggling to revive the science of traditional medicine and to help those who have lost hope in modern health care.

The abbot said he realised that Thai traditional healing has its limitations. But it also has its strengths.

"We want to offer ordinary people more choices in health care. And we can do this by respecting the wisdom of our ancestors and keeping it alive by practising it," said the abbot.

Info for donations:

Name of Organisation: Wat Nong Yah Nang Address: Ban Nong Yah Nang, tambon Nong Phai Ban, Muang district, Uthai Thani province

Contact person: Phra Khru Uppakara Pattanakij

The temple has no telephone or fax. If you want to help by donating to the temple's project, send a cheque payable to Post Publishing Public Company Limited (For Wat Nong Yah Nang). Send it to Mrs Kusuma Mintakhin, Editorial Manager, 136 Na Ranong Road, off Sunthorn Kosa, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110. Her telephone number is 2403700 ext 3224-5. Please also include your name and address with your cheque so we can send you a receipt.