

A Tale of Thai Massage

This story begins in a time long ago, in a land far away under the deep seas and over mountains tall in a city then known as Rājagṛha. In secrecy, a baby boy was born and set near the palace gates with a fire next to it to attract the attention of the palace¹. Prince Abhaya of the city adopted this baby and named him *Jīvaka*, “he who is alive”. Later, *Jīvaka* was given the surname *Kumārabhacca*², “Fed / Raised by a Prince”.

When *Jīvaka* came of age and went to find a trade, he decided to study medicine. After seven years of study, his teacher tested *Jīvaka*’s medical knowledge by sending him on a journey into a pine forest in search of something he could not use as medicine. *Jīvaka* returned empty-handed. His knowledge of medicine was already vast.

After treating kings, wealthy merchants, and others in-between, Dr. *Jīvaka* met a mighty Lord; a living Buddha. After assisting the Lord Gautama Buddha with various ailments, Dr. *Jīvaka* was so deeply impressed that he began to follow Lord Buddha. Together alongside the Lord Buddha, Dr. *Jīvaka* offered great aid and health to the *saṅgha*³ while also benefiting from practicing *BuddhaDharma*⁴ and eventually realizing the level of enlightenment known as *sotāpanna*⁵.

Dr. *Jīvaka* came to be enormously significant to the history of Buddhist-based medicine. He was a continual student of medicine and *BuddhaDharma* throughout his life, learning from five profound masters: Medicine Buddha *Bhaiṣajyaguru*, Lord Gautama Buddha, *Maitreya*⁶, *Indra*⁷, and a giant *yakṣa*⁸.

¹ from the *Mirror of Beryl: A Historical Introduction to Tibetan Medicine*, Sde-srid, 2010

² Some claim that the sanskrit version of his last name, *Kumārbhṛtya*, referred to his expertise in “*kaumārabhṛtya*”, or the medical care of infants.

³ practicing community of *BuddhaDharma*

⁴ the teachings and practice that Lord Buddha Gautama proclaimed to the world; “The *Buddha’s Dharma*”; skt. *Dharma* here meaning: 1. nature, true nature; 2. teachings leading one towards realizing that true nature

⁵ commonly translated from Pali as “Stream-Enterer”, referring to the fact that they have truly entered the stream towards *Nirvāna*; หลวงพ่อฤๅษีลิงดำ taught that Dr. *Jīvaka* attained *arhant*-ship after the Lord Gautama Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*.

⁶ the future Buddha of this world system’s current cycle

⁷ Also known as *Śakra*, or King *Sakka*; in Thai he is known as พระอินทร์ ‘*Phra In*; -‘*dhra*’ is spelt out but left silent and not pronounced.

⁸ a giant, as in the famed life-form both on earth and also Mt. Sumeru; this *yakṣa* taught Dr. *Jīvaka* how to properly treat a Buddha, as a Buddha’s anatomy and constitution is quite different than that of us normal people.

In the two millennia following his passing, Dr. Jīvaka Kumārabhacca is now acknowledged as the figural head of *Nuad Thai*⁹, as well as all of Thai Medicine¹⁰. However, in his day it was not known as Thai Medicine. Thailand did not exist then. Nor was the system of medicine practiced then identical to what we see in Thailand today. What Dr. Jīvaka did know, he passed on to the monks and nuns of the monastic *saṅgha*, as well as to his apprentices over the years. The knowledge passed down through the great *bodhisattva*¹¹ Nāgārjuna to Āyraseva, and eventually to the great Vagbhāṭa¹².

As the knowledge carried on through the ages, the monastic universities¹³ of old funneled their studies into five great categories known as *vidyās*¹⁴. These were: *śabdavidyā* ‘science of language’, *hetuvidyā* ‘science of logic’, *cikitsāvidyā* ‘science of medicine’, *śilakarmasthānavidyā* ‘science of fine arts and crafts’, and the *adhyātmavidyā* ‘science of spirituality’.

The first four sciences were common in all schools, while the fifth was the theory, or view¹⁵, of each school of thought. For the Brahmins of ancient India, the fifth science would have been the four *Vedas*. For Buddhists, this would have been Lord Gautama Buddha’s compiled written teachings known as the *Tripitaka*¹⁶. Although the first four ‘mundane’ sciences did not directly lead to realization, the Buddhist monasteries considered them to offer a great deal of benefit to the daily life of humans.

Buddhism has always played a large part of the history of Thailand. It is recorded that the famed Indian King Aśoka ordered Buddhist monks¹⁷ and followers to inhabit areas around southeast Asia in the second century B.C. This means that the area would have

⁹ นวดไทย; literally: “Massage/Knead” “Thai”; word commonly translated as ‘Thai Massage’

¹⁰ of which *Nuad Thai* is but a part of

¹¹ *Bodhi*: ‘enlightened’, ‘awakened’; *Sattva*: ‘being’, ‘sentient being’

¹² Vagbhata wrote the *Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdayam* - arguably the most influential classical text on Indian Medical Science next to the *Caraka* and *Sushruta Saṃhitā*; The Indian system of medicine that came to Thailand with *BuddhaDharma* was not Ayurveda, especially as we see it today, but Ancient Indian Medical Science that predates Ayurveda

¹³ The ancient and great university of Nālandā is the primmest example

¹⁴ knowledge, field, subject of knowledge; often translated as ‘science’, although some scholars state that the sanskrit word शास्त्र *Śāstra* is the more appropriate term for ‘science’

¹⁵ *dr̥ṣṭi* in Sanskrit, *dit̥ṭhi* in Pali; the outlook, perspective, view of life and the world that one holds to be true

¹⁶ Buddhist Canon

¹⁷ Sohn Uttar Sthavira is one example

received not just an influx of spiritual practices, but of the day-to-day life skills of those people who travelled to these distant lands. Medicine would have been one of these knowledges. And thus, Doctor Jīvaka Kumārabhacca would have held a position of great influence and reverence within these societies.

As T'ai people came into the region around 800 A.D., it was previously inhabited by both the Mon and the Khmer nations. The Khmer empire, under the leadership of King Jayavarman VII¹⁸, initiated an infrastructure within the land that included health-care. Records show that the king built 102 hospitals to care for his people and from this we know that Khmer medical practices would have been used by the T'ai peoples of the time. When the Khmer empire fell in the 13th century, various kingdoms came to thrive within the region including the T'ai, Mon, and Malay. Also, groups from what we now know as the Yunnan province of modern day China had started sojourning south. Kingdoms rose and fell. Power changed hands frequently. Consistent wars between rivaling kingdoms over the past 500 years in the region plagued the area's past. Eventually, some kings strove to bring the regions together into one whole. This is the landscape in which Siam was birthed.

The first official Thai - Siamese - state is considered to be the Buddhist kingdom of *Sukhothai*¹⁹, and was founded in 1238 A.D. Though sub-kingdoms²⁰ still existed - and thrived - within the larger whole, Siam was formed. It was not until a century later that the famed kingdom of *Ayutthaya*²¹ came to power and exerted a significant influence over the land. When the old capital of Siam, *Ayutthaya*, was ransacked²² by the Burmese, many of the temples and buildings were burned. With this, much of their recorded medical records and tradition of the time were either lost or severely scattered; though some still exist²³. Under the direction of the current *Chakri* dynasty, Bangkok was established as the kingdom's headquarters, and remains so to this day.

The oldest royally-approved manuscript that mentions the compiling of various Thai Medical texts and formulas - including massage - from the various surrounding kingdoms of old Siam is known as the ตำราโอสถพระนารายณ์ '*Dahm-ra Oh-soht Naa-rai*'. This '*Dahm-ra Oh-soht Naa-rai*' was composed during the reign of King Narai the Great who ruled the area from 1656 A.D. - 1688 A.D.; during the *Ayutthayan* era. The world changed as European influence grew, and another codification and compilation of medical manuscripts was finished during the reign of King Rama 5 of the *Chakri*

¹⁸ known to be a Mahayana Buddhist

¹⁹ อาณาจักรสุโขทัย, 1238 A.D. - 1438 A.D.

²⁰ *Lanna* and *Lan Xang* kingdoms were pre-established, each with their own medical system

²¹ อยุธยา, 1351 A.D. - 1767 A.D.

²² circa 1767 A.D.

²³ <http://www.ayutthayastudies.aru.ac.th/content/view/148/32/>

Dynasty²⁴ - 1873 A.D. to 1910 A.D. - and is called the แพทย์ศาสตร์สงคราม 'Paet-Saht Song-kroh'.

In talking with traditional doctors practicing today, one²⁵ said:

"The important thing to remember is that the medicine comes from the land. It is a result of the environment around the people. The medicine we use is indigenous to the area. The theory is based on the experiences we encounter on a daily basis. So as long as there were people, with organized civilizations inhabiting this land, there was Indigenous Medicine."

There are Thai people who firmly state and believe that their practice of *Nuad Thai* goes back to the time of the Lord Gautama Buddha. In reality it is a difficult thing to track, because there are not consistent records of it over the past 2,500 years²⁶.

Lineage is a tricky thing. In the early 20th century, King Vajiravudh Rama 6²⁷ of the *Chakri* Dynasty officially outlawed the practice and education of traditional - non-western - medicine throughout all of Thailand. Traditional medicine in Thailand took a huge blow. This resulted in an 'official'²⁸ break in legal, capable and experienced massage doctors. Due to national identity²⁹, and fear of heresy or treason, a Thai would not in their own mind want to go against royal decree.

Not until the following reign of King Prajadhipok Rama 7 was traditional medicine officially allowed to be practiced again. Rama 7 reinstated Traditional Medicine³⁰ to the kingdom and decided to organize it further into four main categories:

1. เวชกรรม - Medical Theory & Therapeutics
2. เภสัชกรรม - Pharmacology, Herbology

²⁴ ราชวงศ์จักรี

²⁵ Wit Sukhsamran

²⁶ the traditional medical system, including physical therapies, of *Lanna* in northern Thailand is said to not have been broken and may indeed trace its lineage back to the time of Lord Buddha

²⁷ 1911 A.D. to 1925 A.D.

²⁸ in personal talks with 'old-school' traditionalists, they stated that in order to have a lineage, you need to have three things: 1. Texts, Manuscripts, Manuals - time tested and proven to work; 2. Oral Transmission - the 'how-to' knowledge given from teacher to student; 3. Practitioners who are efficiently and proficiently practicing

²⁹ love and devotion to the following three attributes are classically considered the essential factors in defining a person as Thai: 1. ประเทศชาติ Thailand as a nation and land; Nationalism, 2. พระราชา The nation's royal heritage; The Royal Family, 3. พระศาสนา Buddhism; Religion

³⁰ แพทย์แผนโบราณ 'Phaet Phaen Boran': Traditional Medicine

3. ผดุงครรภ์ - Midwifery

4. นวดแผนโบราณ - Massage³¹

Currently, these are the four major medical licenses that people aspiring to be traditional Thai doctors are able to receive and practice on the public. They are considered to be the four major branches that one can choose to focus on.

If the four categories listed above are the branches of the tree that constitutes Thai Medicine, is it enough to look at, or focus on, one alone? Perhaps even as separate to the others? Old world doctors greatly disagree with the view of disconnecting these sciences and focusing on them separately³².

Here, we get to the core of Thai Massage and of this article: Thai Massage cannot and should not be separated from Thai Medicine. Every branch needs a tree to be a branch on, as well as part of the roots which make up that tree. What then are the roots that feed and nourish this system? Traditionally, there are five major roots to Thai Medicine:

1. Medical Science: pharmaceuticals, food, plants, minerals, animals, etc.
2. Physical Therapies: massage, physical exercises
3. Astrology or Divination: assessing what time or day is most beneficial for a specific action or medicine, what measures to take if a patient has a certain disease at a certain date of the year, etc.
4. Sorcery Sciences: incantations, demonology, blessings, etc.
5. *BuddhaDharma*: the teachings and practice for full-realization and the resulting liberation from *Samsāra*³³.

A friend of mine³⁴ and I were discussing the five roots and he further described their importance:

“These fives roots make up the whole body and thus tree of Thai Medicine. You cannot say that you choose to focus on one or the other. You have to have knowledge of them all, as it is innately ingrained in the system of medicine itself. For example, even if you just focus on massage, you have to know about herbal compresses, which involves herbology. Also, if you use mantras or incantations, you thus have to know about the sorcery sciences.

³¹ in 1998 A.D. this changed to นวดแผนไทย; in 2013 the Traditional Thai Medical Professions Act changed it again to นวดไทย ‘*Nuad Thai*’

³² personal talks with traditional doctors in Thailand

³³ the repeating cycle of birth, life, death, and reincarnation known within Hinduism, Buddhism, Bön, Jainism, and Taoism

³⁴ Tevijjo Yogi - a practicing traditional doctor

If you want to learn the proper way, you have to learn all five roots. You limit yourself if you do not learn the system as a whole. With a good teacher, sometimes people learn them without even realizing they are learning them.

The four branches are made up and standardized by licensure boards, so that people can have different licenses. But, for example, even a midwife needs to know about all five roots in order to practice fully and properly.

The reason they are called roots is because the whole tree comes from the roots, so you can't say that in Thai Medicine you can choose one of the roots to focus on. As for the branches, that's a different story. Then you can say that you're going to specialize in one thing, but you still have the roots as the basis."

In the old days, an apprentice would take years to learn the material, not a few workshops in a classroom setting. The apprentice would just about live with their teacher, observe them day in and out, and the learning style was very intimate with a lot of hands-on practice. They would learn little by little, with a great emphasis towards the development of their character and virtue. If they did not have this, then they could not become a qualified '*Maw Nuad*'³⁵. On a cultural and social platform, Thais uphold practitioners of *Nuad Thai* as real doctors. This infers that they should champion the ethics³⁶ of a doctor. Massage was not a hobby for side income, it was/is a valid profession and doctors were expected to take it very seriously. In becoming a qualified practitioner of an ancient knowledge, it demands a lot of commitment, time, and even sacrifice.

Nowadays one has to have a medical license in order to practice. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer traditional doctors practicing traditional medicine fully and only utilizing the medical theory and application of their traditional system. Even in Thailand today, most people prefer to visit a western-trained medical practitioner; many looking down upon Traditional Thai Medicine as archaic and outdated.

There are those who ask why all this traditionalism is important? Why not just practice massage, and if it works then it works and that should be the end of it? The issue at hand is - as you hopefully now understand through this article - a layered one. The very word 'traditional' necessitates the existence and importance of a lineage. A lineage that has been successfully tested over time and has proven its practices to be viable, providing beneficial results. A practice that the ancients have compassionately passed down through the generations. From the nation's perspective, Thailand is not like the west. They have specific customs and traditions, and are very proud of them.

³⁵ หมอนวด, common term given to massage therapists which literally means "Massage Doctor"

³⁶ i.e. practice of four *Brahmavihāras*, avoid the *Attha Loka Dhamma*, maintain the moral disciplines *Pañcasīla*; try review of: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/desilva/bl132.html> and the *Vejjavatapada* by Bhante Dhammika

Thai Massage is officially under the umbrella of Thai Medicine. And as it is under a system of medicine, that medical system needs a medical theory in order to exist. It needs a medical theory that a practitioner can refer to for diagnosis, prognosis and the appropriate therapies and treatments that an ailment or condition requires in order to be properly treated. Then healing can take place. A therapist needs to have both technique and medical understanding. This is what makes someone a *Maw Nuad*; qualified to be giving a massage in the first place. 'Going with the flow' and following 'intuition' is not enough.

If Thai Medicine - with Thai Massage as a traditional subdivision of it - ever wants to stand on its own feet alongside Indian Ayurveda and Chinese Medicine, then its practitioners need to be fully versed in all aspects of it. Not only that, they need to experience and know that it is a sound medical system that produces real results. If one zooms out to the big picture of the world and its history, some people see the idea of Thai Medicine taking a presence in the world's traditional medical systems as a somewhat naive and pathetic attempt at validity. It may indeed appear to be somewhat belittled when reflecting on the great stature that Indian Ayurveda and Chinese Medicine have in the world, perhaps even more so when taking their impact to the medical theory upon which Thai Medicine is based.

Although there are many similarities, if one wants to give the most respect and honor to the tradition, they would view Thai Medicine - and thus Thai Massage - through the scope and context of its own system and theory, and not through that of another. Such persons would say that Ayurveda is Ayurveda, Chinese Medicine is Chinese Medicine, and Thai Medicine is unique to itself; perhaps even more unique because of the way it has been influenced by multiple medical systems.

And with all of that said: if it works, then it works. The existence of a national traditional medical system that is unique to itself and fits into the qualifications of national identity, is of growing national pride to Thais. Even the fact that the system has taken influence by its neighbors over the years, with open-mindedness to what works, is another source of pride for many Thais.

Nuad Thai continues to evolve, as the Thai people do. With the great flood of westerners into the kingdom, we have to be careful of how we approach the practice of *Nuad Thai*. Many fall victim to glazing over the depth of Thai Medicine, and thus massage, *in-lieu* of making an easy buck off the new cool thing. Some dare copyrighting and standardizing not only something they do not fully understand but what is also not their national or spiritual heritage. Knowing the background and history of where something comes from is known as an essential way of properly putting it into practice. Properly, so that it shamelessly benefits those receiving the practice.

I hope this story aids in that endeavor.

In service,
Joshua Jayintoh