

## Learning Thai massage in Chiang Mai

**Ingvild Skodvin Prestegård, MFHT, provides an introduction to Thai massage and explains why she travelled to Chiang Mai in Thailand to learn the technique**



Chiang Mai in the North of Thailand is the undisputed capital of Thai massage. There are many schools to choose from, but at the moment ITM (International Training Massage School) and Ong's Thai Massage School are said to be the best.

I chose Ong's school because their courses and setup suited my travelling schedule. There are rumours that some schools just hand out certificates because the students have paid their fees, but at this school students have to work for their qualifications. At least one student didn't pass their test while I was there. I started out with the basic Thai massage course that runs over five days and followed up with the professional Thai massage, lasting another five days. This led to a 60-hour certificate in Thai massage. The courses are intensive and I would say perfectly suited to body workers and therapists rather than absolute beginners as they don't teach anatomy. There were a couple of people who did a course for fun but most of my fellow students were body workers or therapists from the USA, Europe and Japan. The teaching staff are highly professional and they all speak good English. The class sizes are small so there's lots of individual attention. Students can start when it suits them and a wide range of courses are available. I found the workbooks well made with

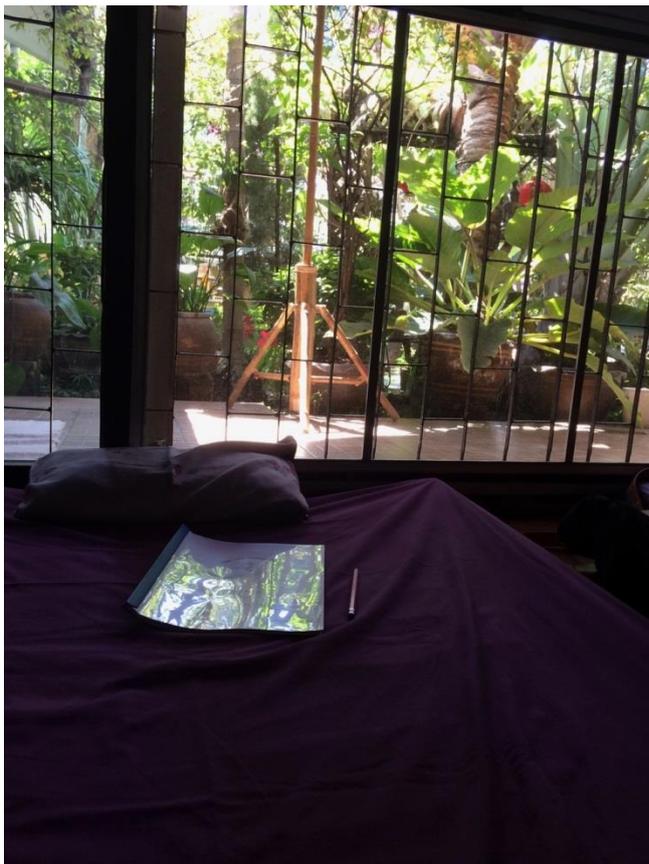


clear layouts and good space for writing notes. The teachers would instruct and the students write down the steps, asking questions along the way. Then there would be time to practise. There were only four to five people in my class, so we all received plenty of one-to-one support. I must admit I really struggled with the professional course due to my height. The other students were a lot shorter than me (I'm 6ft tall) and this made a real difference when it came to learning and

polishing the techniques. I learned that I could be really clumsy and all arms and legs – just like I had been when I was 12 years old. It affected my confidence and took me a little longer to get into the swing of things but both the teachers and other students were very supportive. Luckily I was able to practice on my partner in our room at night so I didn't miss out. Thai massage is all about confidence and flow, and Ong's school has a positive and enabling atmosphere. Everyone chats during the breaks and helps each other in class. Stories are shared about personal growth and development and obstacles that have been overcome.

The day starts at half past eight. Everyone washes their feet from the washing station by the water troughs. The troughs are filled with water and flowers petals, lime, lemon grass, ginger and galangal and there are coconut bowls for rinsing and small towels for drying the feet. People then gather in the main room for Thai yoga, or gentle stretching and warm up. This is followed by the wai khru – a Thai ritual greeting and sign of respect. Straight away the student is immersed in Thai culture. On the first day, everyone feels out of place not knowing what to do at first. By day two they've settled in and are repeating the wai khru and on the third day they are helping newcomers. There are regular

breaks during the day including a 90-minute lunch break. School is over by 4pm and then it's time to go home and sleep, eat, revise or go exploring.



### **Thai massage in context**

For newcomers to Thai massage it is surprising how it untangles the body. The massage itself can be painful but the after effects are often described as euphoric. There are many explanations of how Thai massage developed. The history is said to go back to the Buddha and his physician friend who is now honoured as the father of Thai massage. Another explanation is that Thai massage was developed over centuries for hard working farmers who spent their days in the rice fields and who needed a good massage in the evening. The therapist will work along pressure points on the legs before including the back, arms and head.

There are many styles of Thai massage – in the South the therapist may walk on the client's back but here in the north of Thailand the massage therapist mostly uses his or her hands and sometimes knees and elbows. The client is always clothed in loose and comfortable clothing and the session usually takes place on a thick mat on the floor.

Thailand is a melting pot of influences from India, China and other surrounding regions. The Thai population is far from homogenous with over 70 different ethnic groups and a large variety of languages. It is an industrialised country producing vast amounts of software and technology, but also home to hill tribes living traditional lives, practising swidden agriculture and peasants farming rice by hand. This is a region where asking about something's origin is the wrong question – the right

question is how it's being used and developed now. Thai massage and Thai Traditional Medicine (TTM) in general are great examples of this. We do know there were hospitals, massage treatments and herbal medicines in use during the 13th century. We also know that Thai massage continues to develop since its revival in the 1980s, as new textbooks have been produced and training at schools like Ong's is now being adapted for foreign tastes and requirements.

Thai massage is also a story of a country in transition. Massage work was once upon a time for those with low status as it involved touching the client's feet. Now, due to the influx of foreign visitors, Thai massage therapists have increased in status, as it provides a solid income for many people. Thai massage is done slowly and deeply in order to enhance the body's own healing processes as well as encouraging good energy. It is often likened to doing yoga to somebody, and may resemble a dance between therapist and client. One of the cultural values to bear in mind is that the massage should be 'beautiful' in order to be good or effective. There is in other words an aesthetic value to the massage and the way in which the bodies move throughout the session. Another cultural insight is that pain is understood to be hiding in the body and that can lead to sickness – the therapist therefore doesn't cause the client pain but rather he or she finds it and releases it for the client. It is also worth bearing in mind according to Traditional Thai Medicine, the primary cause for illness is supernatural attack (Chokevivat, 2005). This means that the client is constantly at risk of being struck with or lured into illness, and one way of ensuring health is frequent Thai massage.

### **Why train in Thai massage?**

I trained in Thai massage in order to broaden my skills and to adapt techniques for my yoga classes. I will be able to support my students' progress in a more holistic way. Many of my students experience joint and hip pain, in particular. Thai massage offers many techniques and approaches to help deal with this, reduce pain and increase mobility.

### Why train in Thailand?

My main reason for training here and not with one of the many excellent training providers in the UK is that as a social anthropologist I wanted to learn more about the cultural aspects of Thai massage. Being here immersed in Thai culture from day one has enabled me to ask questions and learn more deeply and fully. Thai massage is a cultural phenomenon much like the temples, street markets and food. Learning here has helped me gain a deeper respect for Thai beliefs and culture and that's important for me when I take my practice back home. It's also been a great opportunity to travel and broaden my horizons – this too is important for personal and professional growth. Chiang Mai is a welcoming, friendly and relaxed city. There are plenty of local attractions and things to do so it's worth staying an extra week at least. Coming here in January/February is good, the weather is warm but not uncomfortably so. And I can think of worse places to earn my DPN.

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[allmenningen.org/in-english/](http://allmenningen.org/in-english/)



### References

Chokevivat V, Chuthaputti A. (2005) The role of Thai Traditional Medicine in health promotion. *Bangkok Thailand*, **7(11)**: 1-25.

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