



## CHAPTER

# 8

### *History of an Ancient Healing Art*



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### The Origin, Background and Development of Thai Massage and Thai Traditional Medicine

#### The Origin

The origin of Thai massage is interwoven with the history of the Thai people and the development of their unique culture and traditional values. Historical evidence in the form of court archives and official records dating back to the Ayutthaya period documents the existence of departments of Thai massage organized to serve the royal family in the palace. However, this does not mean the practice of Thai massage began during the Ayutthaya period.<sup>35</sup>

To begin a discussion of Thai massage it is necessary to take a look at the overall concept of Thai traditional medicine as well as the relationship between medicine and Buddhism.

***Thai traditional medicine is composed of four branches:***<sup>3</sup>

1. Thai traditional medicinal healing
2. Midwifery
3. Orthopedic medicine
4. Thai traditional massage

Thai traditional medicine and how the different branches were utilized by the Thai people can be traced throughout the history of Thailand. The Thai way of life and methods of healing are entwined with Buddhism and the sense of spirituality, as well as individual wellbeing.

The majority of Thais follow Theravada Buddhism. The appearance of Buddhism in the region which eventually became known as Thailand predates the arrival of the Thais. Merchant routes crisscrossed the region and became paths for the dissemination of religious teachings by Indian and Chinese traders. Another channel for the introduction of religious teachings to the Thais was the journeys of Thai scholars directly to Sri Lanka and India in quest of knowledge.



Monks praying at a temple



Painting of Buddhist monks on pilgrimage<sup>46</sup>

Buddhist teachings in relation to traditional medicine are well documented in the Buddhist canon.<sup>47</sup> Detailed explanations of treatments with traditional medicine using herbs, plants, animal parts and organs, as well as techniques and discussions on the application of medicine and the healing methods for certain ailments are contained in religious writings. This extensive knowledge was compiled from several important and religiously-linked channels: the knowledge of Indian monks who were also physicians prior to ordination; input from observing the result of treatment given by healing monks; and reports on findings to the Lord Buddha. Lord Buddha implemented rules and/or remedies for treatments based on the presentations of the monks or by giving his own orders. These later became healing rules and prescriptions for treating sick monks and afterward they spread to communities.

### Doctor Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha (Thais called Jivaka Komoraphat)

Doctor Jivaka was a renowned physician whose life has been detailed in the Buddhist scriptures and in the history of Ayurveda. He



A painting depicting the Lord Buddha bestowing blessing on Doctor Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha<sup>33</sup>

also had the opportunity to serve Lord Buddha and the monks in his time. However, there is no document or clear explanation of how his teachings in traditional medicine were transferred to the Thai people even though Buddhist influence eventually reached Thailand and were disseminated throughout the country. Students of Thai traditional medicine and Thai massage are most likely to be familiar with this ancient model handed down the Lord Buddha's physician and, by virtue of faith, revere him as the great teacher of Thai traditional medicine.<sup>48</sup>

### The Practice

Thus, treatment using traditional medicine has been in practice since well before the Buddhist era and this sacred knowledge was compiled and recorded in the Tripitaka (the Buddha's Teachings) as tenets to be upheld. In Thailand, Thai monks study the *Tripitaka* and apply the knowledge of healing to help treat monks and laymen within temples, which in