

# STUDYING WITH PICHEST BOONTHUME (PICHET)

by James Peckham

## Always learning, always unlearning

When I first studied with Pichet in 1999, I had been practicing Thai massage professionally for three years and had studied with two different teachers. I knew by the second day that Pichet was the teacher I wanted to study with. I also realized I would have to start learning all over again.

That first time, I studied with him for six weeks, to unlearn what I had learned before, and to feel confident with his style and begin to incorporate his guiding principles into my practice. Each time I return to study with him, I have to start over again in some way, because he is always changing things slightly, and I always have more to learn. He may even change what he teaches from one day to the next.



Ajahn Pichet Boonthumme in the classroom, Hang Dong, Thailand.  
*Photo by Bob Haddad.*

## Beginner's mind is best

Prior experience in Thai massage is just as likely to be a liability as an asset. There may be some value in knowing some techniques and moves, but there may be just as much to unlearn, because of differences in styles among teachers. Pichet is emphatic about using our bodies properly and effortlessly, and about "sensing," which means tuning in to the person receiving, knowing how much pressure to use where, what is connected to what, and when to use certain stretches and omit others. Other teachers may talk about the same concepts, but Pichet demonstrates them more thoroughly and consistently than anyone else I have met. His skills in body reading and palpation are unmatched, and he is amazing at quickly assessing a person's needs and designing a treatment that is right for that person in that moment. Therefore, the actual moves, techniques and sequences are secondary, and of value only to the extent that they support the fundamental principles of clear energy, sensitivity, mindfulness, good body mechanics, flow and economy of movement. Consequently, a student with previous Thai massage experience would be wise to have a beginner's mind while studying with Pichet. A little bit of humility, and willingness to start all over again, will go a long way.

## Class size and structure

Pichet's classes, as all classes in Thailand, tend to be more full during peak tourist season, which is November through March. During the hot season, April through June, or the rainy season, July through October, there may be fewer students. Something that sets Pichet's classes aside from others is the relative lack of structure. Other Thai massage schools and teachers try to cater to western comfort zones by sticking to a syllabus, so you know exactly what material will be taught in a given week or ten-day period. Even though there is less

structure In Pichet's classes, I always learn exactly what I need to learn, as long as I am patient and trusting. There may be diversions, sidetracks and order changes, but somehow it all works out at the end of the day. There are no levels in Pichet's classes. In the same class, there may be people who teach Thai massage, advanced students and people who have no background at all in any type of body therapy. It all works, and all the more so when students accept it all as being perfect.

### **Making Arrangements**

It is a good idea to call Pichet at the end of the week before you plan to begin studying with him. Good times to call are Monday - Friday 8:00 - 9:00 AM and 4:30 - 8:00 PM, Thailand time. Mornings are best since he is almost always home prior to beginning class. If you are a new student, introduce yourself, perhaps mention a recommendation, and kindly ask if he will allow you to study with him beginning the following Monday. Classes are Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM. His classroom is located in the village of Hang Dong, about a 20 minute bus ride from the center of Chiang Mai. Especially if you are a new student, I recommend that you ask if you may visit his class the week before you plan to start studying with him. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays are preferable, as by then the class has started to settle in and to run smoothly enough to permit a visitor. Opening prayers are usually around 9:15 - 9:30 AM, followed by discourse.

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*James Peckham has been practicing and studying traditional Thai massage since 1996, and has returned to Thailand regularly to continue his studies with Pichet Boonthumme.*