

**MEDICAL ARTS AT WAT PHRA CHETUPHON:
VARIOUS RISHI STATUES**

by
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Within the outer *bot* courtyard at Wat Phra Chetuphon are two mounds with bamboo clumps and 18 images of hermits (*rishis* or *asiddhas*) in contorted postures which portray cures for several kinds of physical suffering. Mr. A.B. Griswold commented on nine of these statues in the issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society* honouring H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat¹, and it is with gratitude to both of those scholars that this further note is offered pertaining to the remaining nine figures.

The *rishi* statues consist of stucco, although a zinc-tin alloy was projected initially by King Rama III, and they were at one time polychromed in natural colors. Each performs distinctive yogic exercises to allay particular illnesses. Such visual medical aids were also associated with herbal gardens scattered throughout the *Buddhāvāsa* precincts during the third reign. Indeed, both the statues and the pharmaceutical plants were related to the medical schools—being a primary manifestation of the monarch's intention to make Wat Phra Chetuphon "a seat of learning for all classes of people in all walks of life"².

It has already been mentioned by H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat in a definitive article concerning the Wat Phra Chetuphon inscriptions that these were engraved on marble slabs which were installed in various parts of the *wat*, in order to preserve ancient and nineteenth century

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1. A.B. Griswold, "The *rishis* of Wat Pó", *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS), in *Felicitation Volumes of Southeast Asian Studies Offered to H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat*, vol. II, 1965, pp. 319-328.
2. The Royal Academy Council, compiler, *ย่อประวัติวัดพระเชตุพน-พระพุทธรูปสำคัญ* Bangkok, B.E. 2472 (A.D. 1929), p. 15. Reprinted in B.E. 2503 (A.D. 1960). Hereafter called "Abridgement".

branches of traditional knowledge. The so-called "medical library" dealt with such matters as childbirth, pediatrics, massage, and cures for smallpox and tuberculosis, besides other dreaded diseases³.

In B.E. 2379 (A.D. 1836) King Rama III commissioned his kinsman Kromamun Nāraṅga Harirakṣa to assemble skilled craftsmen to cast images of 80 *rishis* displaying massage exercises⁴. Unfortunately executed in perishable stucco, less than one fourth of them survives today. Their initial installation was a merit-making enterprise, and explanatory verses were inscribed on plaques on appropriate walls in relation to the three-dimensional enactments⁵. Both pertain to basic Siamese concepts toward disease and its cure. By the nineteenth century, empirical methods of India and China had been modified by traditional usage in Siam. The body was thought to comprise four elements: wind, earth, fire, and water. If one was out of balance with the others (either in excess or deficiency) in any person, he became sick. The most common expression for illness in colloquial Thai is still "*pen lom*" ("it is the wind"), signifying that this particular element has disturbed the harmony of the other components⁶. In the 1830s massage played a major role in rearranging the four constituents; medicinal prescriptions were prepared from bark sections, roots, and herbs.

3. H.H. Dhani Nivat, "The inscriptions of Wat Phra Jetuphon", *JSS*, XXVI (2), 1933, pp. 143-170. Reprinted in 1969. See also Rudolf Hofbauer, M.D., "A medical retrospect of Thailand", *JSS*, XXXIV (2), 1943, pp. 183-198.
4. "Abridgement", p. 8, and Royal Institute, *ประชุมจารึกวัดพระเชตุพนฯ* Bangkok, B.E. 2472 (A.D. 1929), p. 20. Reprinted in B.E. 2517 (A.D. 1974). Hereafter called "Inscriptions".
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 713-740, and list of poets, pp. 741-743. See English translation in Griswold, *op. cit.*, pp. 321-322. I am indebted to the assistance of Nai Narong Puttaraksar for elucidating these ambiguous verses of artifice at the National Library of Bangkok.
6. Mgr. Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam*, vols. I & II, Paris, 1854; especially vol. I, pp. 339-344. Cf. Executive Committee of the Eighth Congress, *Siam: General and Medical Features*, Bangkok, 1930, pp. 185-244. Also note Hofbauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-185.

The variety of massage attitudes demonstrated at Wat Phra Chetuphon signify an educational purpose coupled with amusement. It is lamentable that the few remaining have suffered much breakage; existing examples have been repaired with cement. Furthermore, it is a pity that correlative inscriptions have been separated from the statues. Established at their present location, there is little to indicate their names or the ailments for which they are enacting cures. Yet there is an indirect means of obtaining some of this information. What Mr. Griswold did for nine of these figures will be supplemented here by further researches concerning the other statues.

In B.E. 2381 (A.D. 1838) when both sculptures and texts were juxtaposed, the explanatory verses were carefully recorded in accordion-like folded *khò* paper manuscripts with accompanying illustrations⁷. Such rare books now preserved at the National Library have aided us in an attempt to reassemble the existent images in their original sequence. This does not follow the arrangement devised during the reign of King Chulalongkorn: 15 sculptures were established at the rockery near the southern *wihan*, while three others were set up at the rockery within the southwest corner of the outer *bot* enclosure where visitors initially enter the monastic precincts⁸. This discussion will be determined by the original placement of the figures within sequential pavilions of the third reign, but it should be mentioned that all of those described below are located on the largest hillock near the western *wihan* (see figure 1).

Each portrayal wears a simple *dhoi* and conspicuous prayer beads. These are *jatilas* or ascetics with matted hair which has been neatly stylized as semi-peaked headdresses. As yogis who practice the virtues of extreme asceticism, they represent a Hindu theme which has been assimilated within the Buddhist *milieu*. Since *rishis* are understandably eccentric and act in ways contrary to the norm, they are suitable

7. Mss. สมุดภาพฤษีตัดตนแก้โรคต่าง ๆ ๘๐ รูป Bangkok, B.E. 2381 (A.D. 1838). There are additional abbreviated editions which depict 14, 13, and 12 poses, respectively.

8. Helen Bruce, *Nine Temples of Bangkok*, Bangkok, 1960, p. 91.

practitioners of bizarre massage postures, which, in practical applications, are efficacious.

Most of the nine sculptures of our series manifest cures for stiffness and sprains. One stretches his neck to the utmost, and forces his fists to sink into the ground (see figure 2). This is the *rishi* Natanta who suffers from sprained shoulders⁹. A similar figure is more upright, but displays the same pushing gesture of (now-restored) arms (figure 3). His name is Salēkhakām, and he enacts the cure for over-all stiffness¹⁰.

A poorly preserved, squatting statue has its legs crossed in a scissors-like pose, while straight arms massage them slightly (figure 4). This is probably Thēpmonthō, who alleviates stiff legs and knees¹¹. A different aid to cure this ailment depicts the patient with sharp pains in his left shoulder (figure 5): he massages muscles and nerves to dispel spasms and numbness. This is the *rishi* Kālasiti who melodramatically swings his body with conspicuous movements¹². Another restored figure of equally theatrical posture is thought to be Kralaikōt with stiff legs (figure 6). Two palms push into the chest as elbows pull back the upright legs at the knees. This special procedure aids the legs as well

9. Variously illustrated; e.g. เที้ยววัดโพธิ์กับโสดทกิจ Bangkok, B.E. 2503 (A.D. 1960), fig. 13. "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, probably *khlong* (โคลง) 15, p. 717, verses by Nai Prīdārāt. It is analogous to *khlong* 16 on the same page.
10. *Ibid.*, probably *khlong* 16, p. 717, verses by Phra Mūnīrāyok. It is analogous to *khlong* 15 as indicated above. Both illustrations are extremely close in terms of their depictions and ambiguous *khlong* verses. Since the latter were meant to be works of art, they often are not descriptive. Words included in the poems were often chosen for euphonious rhyming rather than for factual content. Thus it is lamentable that these figures have been separated from their identifying inscriptions.
11. See Hofbauer, *op. cit.*, fig. 7 and p. 198 for clear photograph of the then better-preserved image in 1943. If we adhere to Dr. Hofbauer's medical opinion, this statue might be identified with *khlong* 57, p. 718 ("Inscriptions", ed., 1974), verses by Phra Yānaphriyat. But the image is more likely to be associated with *khlong* 17, p. 718, verses by Luang Chāyaphūbet.
12. See Hofbauer, *op. cit.*, for a different view. "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, *khlong* 32, p. 723, verses by Luang Likhitaprīchā.

as the chest and back. Wind is thus eliminated from the body, and all four elements are in balance once again. The head of this figure has been incorrectly restored to resemble human physiognomy. In the illuminated manuscripts, Kralaikōt is portrayed with a deer's head like Isisīṅga who slouches to squeeze his right knee while the other arm is akimbo, rubbing his left hip¹³.

A different seated figure is difficult to identify because of other restorative measures. Possibly this is Sumēt depicted in *angali* posture as he kneels atop the rockery (figure 7). This attitude is supposed to be a cure for dizziness, but the depiction of Kālaḥatīla is far more graphic: besieged by blackouts, vomiting, and general debility, Kālaḥatīla bends slightly forward and kneads his forehead and massages his chin¹⁴.

Indeed, some of the sculptures are so severely deteriorated, it is quite difficult to identify them with certainty. One example is a statue with erect arms and a vividly grimacing mouth (figure 8). No less than three verses might be associated with this representation of yet another practitioner of a cure for over-all stiffness¹⁵.

13. "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, probably *khlōng* 40, p. 725, verses by Phra Srīwisūt-tiwong. Perhaps the restorer confused this image with that of the *rishi* Janaka suffering from strained shoulders as well as hips described in *khlōng* 44, p. 727, verses by Phra Ratanamūnī. Isisīṅga's amorous activities are recounted in the *Alambusā Jātaka*, no. 523. See Griswold, *op. cit.*, fig. 18 and p. 325. Note "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, *khlōng* 21, p. 719, verses by Phra Yānapariyati. Also illustrated in small trilingual guidebook sold in the northwest *wihan* at Wat Phra Chetuphon, *Textbook of Basic Physical Training—Hermit Style (Rishi)—Wat Phrajetuphon (Wat Po)* by Ven. Dhammasaro Bhikkhu. Bangkok, n. d., fig. 12. Most of the 20 figures illustrated are no longer in existence.
14. "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, probably *khlōng* 52, p. 729, verses by Phra Ariyawongsamūnī. The description is quite similar to *khlōng* 34, p. 723, concerning the *rishi* Akata. Kālaḥatīla is variously illustrated: Griswold, *op. cit.*, fig. 16 and p. 325, and Hofbauer, *op. cit.*, fig. 3 and p. 197. See "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, *khlōng* 30, p. 722, verse by Chao Phrayā Phra Khlāng.
15. *Ibid.*, probably *khlōng* 64, p. 733, verses by Nai Pridārāt. Similar descriptions are found in *khlōng* 25, p. 720, verses by Phra Ong Chao Siriwong, and *khlōng* 56, p. 731, verses by Phra Yānapariyati. It should be further noted that the name of this *rishi* is Alathīpaka in the National Library ms. of 80 poses, but called Vēthīpaka in "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, p. 733.

The penultimate figure with crossed legs (figure 9) is quite similar in configuration to the characterization of Thēpmonthō (figure 4). This is likely to be the *rishi* named Sutthāvāt afflicted with stiff legs. The restored image only gives an impression of the original¹⁶.

The last statue portrays another cure for stiffness. This is probably the *rishi* Sōna (figure 10). His legs are drawn up and bent like another existing sculpture termed Yāka shown stretching out his left arm to the furthest extremity and manipulating his elongated fingers (figure 6). Sitting with raised thighs, Yāka has adopted the cure "called 'The Four Ascetics Blended Together', the name which refers to 'A-Yud-Dha-Yā'"¹⁷. Yet the arms of Sōna differ: his left hand jerks the right elbow which rests on the left knee. The position of the hands would be reversed if the opposite arm had been sprained¹⁸.

Representations of *rishis* seem to have been less important during the Ayutthayan period than the early Ratanakosin era. Other sculptural representations were made for Wat Phra Keo and Wat Suthat in Bangkok, although these relaxing figures do not enact physical exercises. The latter *rishi* statue reclines amidst figurines of monkeys and Chinese courtiers and lovely ladies at the rockery behind the *wihan*¹⁹. Such eccentric sculptures are rather surprising within the monastic environment whose usual statues are uniformly hieratic. Prompted by royal patronage, artisans drew their subject matter from the ever favourite *Rāmakien* and *Jātaka* tales, plus traditional folk cures. At Wat Phra Chetuphon, *Rāmakien rishis* are included in two of the bas-reliefs decorating the *bot* balustrade: one depicts Hanuman meeting

16. *Ibid.*, probably *khlong* 74, p. 737, verses by Kromamun Kraysorawichit.

17. This cure relates to posture exercises recommended by four *rishis* whose names began with the syllables "A", "Yud", "Dha", and "Yā". See Griswold, *op. cit.*, fig. 2, and p. 323. Note "Inscriptions", ed., 1974, *khlong* 14, p. 717, verses by Kromamun Nuchitachinorasa.

18. *Ibid.*, probably *khlong* 83, p. 740, verses by Phra Ong Chao Ninakon.

19. Jean Boisselier, *La Sculpture en Thaïlande*, Paris, 1974, p. 186.

with the *rishi* Nart wearing characteristic beard and headdress²⁰, and the other shows Maiyarap dressed as a hermit with turban as he conducts magic rites²¹.

In addition to the three-dimensional representations at Bangkok *wats*, pictorial depictions of *rishis* exist from the early Ratanakosin era as well. Examples are included amidst the now deteriorating murals of Wat Yai Itatharam in Chon Buri. At Bang Pla Soi within the modern town, this *wat* is said to have been established since the late Ayutthayan era. The *bot* has murals of *rishis* and *gandharvas* near the ceiling. These are thought to have been painted during the early part of the Ratanakosin period. They were repaired in B.E. 2457 (A.D. 1914)²². Such depictions of course do not relate to the medical aims of King Rama III, however.

It should be mentioned that the monarch also directed craftsmen at Wat Phra Chetuphon to compose a series of anatomical drawings which indicated various organs and massage points. By means of these labeled diagrams, both monks and laymen instructed students about traditional medical arts. Several have been meticulously copied, and comprise anatomical and massage guidebooks which are treasured by the National Library²³.

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20. John M. Cadet, *The Rāmakiē: The Thai Epic: Illustrated with Bas-reliefs of Wat Phra Jetubon*, Tokyo, 1971, plate 18 and pp. 66-67, and 246. Representations of the complete series of 152 rubbings are accompanied by narrative explanatory notes rather than art historical comments.
21. *Ibid.*, pl. 106, and pp. 174-176, and 248.
22. Silpa Bhirasri and D. Yupo, *The Origin and Evolution of Thai Murals*, Bangkok, B.E. 2502 (A.D. 1959), p. 38. Other examples occur in the Buddhaisawan Chapel of the National Museum; see Dorothy H. Fickle, *The Life of the Buddha*, Bangkok, B.E. 2515 (A.D. 1972), p. 3. Also note the early nineteenth century murals of Wat Suwannaram in Thon Buri; see Elizabeth Wray *et al.*, *Ten Lives of the Buddha*, New York, 1972, p. 126.
23. Illustrations are prevalent: Georges Coedès, National Library catalogue, 1924, treatise on massage, pl. xx; also reproduced in *The Art of Thailand*, bilingual catalogue, 1961. See also Klaus Wenk, *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, Wiesbaden, 1963, band IX, 1, tafel X, and p. 58.

Thus engraved inscriptions, pharmaceutical plants, *rishi* statues, and massage diagrams all relate to the illustrious medical schools which were an important aspect of educational facilities at Wat Phra Chetuphon. They preserved a comprehensive, encyclopedic knowledge of medicine. A century later all are somewhat neglected, however: inscriptions are partially obliterated; rare herbal plants have not been replaced; statues are cracked and/or broken; massage charts in the medical pavilion are hardly noticed. Few people take stock of the wealth of medical aids offered by the generous monarch of long ago.



Figure 1. Rishi mound near southern wihan.



Figure 2. Natanta



Figure 3. Salēkhakām



Figure 4. Thēpmonthō



Figure 5. Kālasiti



Figure 6. Kralaikōt

*Figure 8. Alathīpaka (manuscript name);
Vētthīpaka (name in "Inscriptions", ed. 1974.)*





Figure 7. Sumēt at top; Yāka at centre; Vyādhīpralaya at right.



Figure 9. Sutthāvāt



Figure 10. Sōna