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PLUS

They may have lost their sight but not their touch

By Smriti Daniel

Two visually handicapped masseuses find gainful employment after mastering the Japanese art of shiatsu or 'finger pressure'

When A.P. Pradeep Thushara moves, he does so carefully. He is blind and must use his hands and feet to 'see' the edges of walls and the beginnings of stairs. All hesitation disappears, however, as soon as he begins to massage his client. He is one of two masseuses working at Thusare in Colombo 7, both of whom have been taught the Japanese art of shiatsu or 'finger pressure'. Pradeep's touch is deft and sure as he picks out specific points throughout the body and applies a gentle pressure.

Thusare is a project of Action for Peace, Capability and Sustainability (APCAS), a non-profit organisation formed by Ishikawa Naohito, a Japanese national who has lived in Sri Lanka close to 10 years now.



The two young masseuses with Yuki and Nivanthi

The organisation obtained NPO status in Japan in 2008 to raise funds for Sri Lankan victims of landslides and in 2009, they opened a local office and began to diversify their activities going into projects related to education, water and sanitation, conservation and employment for the disabled. It is the last which led them to form Thusare this year. APCAS found Pradeep and his colleague Chameera Kithsiri at the Seeduwa Vocational Training Centre, where visually handicapped people can seek training in massage therapy. However, a few have subsequently found paid employment.

26-year-old Pradeep, who is originally from Chilaw, says this is his first job. He's pleased to have found something he's good at and a means to bring some income into his family where before he was always the one who needed help. Pradeep and Chameera have been training with Saburo Sasada, a visiting shiatsu expert with 22 years of experience in the field. Chameera is 21 and hails from Kurunegala. For him this is a chance to build on what he already studied at Seeduwa and he has learnt how to identify and relax hard tissues in the body under Mr. Sasada's guidance. Both men struggled a little initially to learn in English, but with the help of Nivanthi Kalubowila, who works at Thusare as a coordinator and a beauty therapist, they managed and have made rapid strides. Today, they know enough to make sure that they are applying the right amount of pressure and that a client is comfortable.

The word 'shiatsu' means 'finger pressure' in Japanese and reportedly is used to help treat conditions like stress, insomnia, blood pressure and depression. Clients are massaged fully clothed and no oil is applied. Mr. Sasada is visually handicapped himself and brings that knowledge to his training, says Yuki Ishikawa, the manager at Thusare, explaining that the teacher works in several countries including Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. Yuki believes their visually handicapped masseurs are particularly effective because they compensate for their lack of sight by a heightened sensitivity to touch.

Having recently moved from Japan to work for APCAS here, Yuki says she's teaching Chameera and Pradeep Japanese, and they're helping her with her Sinhala. Both men are given accommodation at the APCAS head office in Colombo. Currently, APCAS also has a project in Balapane in the Kandy District, focused on identifying children who have trouble with their vision early enough to make a successful intervention. Yuki says their focus is on empowering people by imparting skills and employment opportunities, a motto that is reflected in the other meaning of the word APCAS. According to Yuki, APCAS is also a sound in an aboriginal language known as Ainu which means 'walking together'.