

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings and Discussion

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part provides description of the demographic characteristics of participants. The second part describes the participants' perspectives concerning maintaining elderly health with Central Thai local wisdom. The final part discusses findings of this study.

#### Findings

##### Part 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Informants

This section addresses the demographic characteristics of the informants of this study. There were 20 key informants and 19 general informants (5 family members, 6 community leaders, 3 healthcare providers, and 5 village health volunteers). All of the informants were Buddhists and resided in the Makhamlom subdistrict, Bang Pla Ma district, in Suphanburi province of Thailand.

Of the key informants, they were 11 males and 9 females. The marital status of the majority was married couples (n=11), followed by widowed (n=7), and divorced (n=1), while the remaining informant was single (n=1).

For general informants, they were family members, community leaders, healthcare providers, or village health volunteers with 10 females and 9 males. The marital status of the majority was couples (n=12) followed by single (n=7). Three of them were government officials, three of them were the monks, three of them were sellers, and the rest of them were farmers. A summary of the demographic characteristics of informants is presented in Table 4-1

Table 4-1

*Summary of the Demographic Characteristics of Informants*

Characteristics	Key informants (n=20)	General informants (n=19)
Gender		
Male	11	9
Female	9	10
Marital status		
Married	11	12
Windowed	7	-
Divorced	1	-
Single	1	7
Religion		
Buddhist	20	19

## **Part 2: Elderly's perspectives concerning maintaining their health with central Thai local wisdom**

**Central Thai Region and people: Suphanburi village (Makhamlom sub district).** Central Thai is a region of Thailand; it is a lowland area drained by the Chao Praya and its tributary rivers. This study was conducted in the Suphanburi province of central Thailand. People are bonded to the central basin (Chao Praya River), they practice their beliefs following Buddhist teachings, and carry their traditional culture knowledge as heritage. The central Thai region has a long history. Three topics related to people's life in Suphanburi village were founded as described:

**Central basin.** Suphanburi village is located in the Chao Praya River basin, which provides the area with plenty of water. The village was reported in history as having “*plenty of rice in the field and fish in the river*”, and with villagers living with abundant land. All of them are doing agriculture which could be practiced all year. This area is fruitful to growth a variety plants, thus the villagers planted vegetables and herbs for use in their households. Most of the villagers had their own vegetable gardens with many plants, such as lemons, galangal, bergamot, ginger, krachai, onions, cucumbers, corn, katury trees, bananas, and noni trees. In the village, almost every house grows

bananas and noni trees, which they eat to promote life and for their various benefits. The others local herbs that are commonly used in maintaining the elderly health are thao wan prieng, wormwood, and ginger. Moreover, people live near the river which enabled them to easily catch fish from the river or swamp; they had fishes enough for them to eat all year. Local fish were those such snakehead (Pla chon), cat fish, ruby, gourami, and black tilapia.

Flooding occurred almost every year from September to December, thus the house were built high with the first floor higher than usual to deal with the flooding. The house were built in a group near the river basin. The older people lived their lives close to nature, also their lifestyle bonded to nature.

**Buddhist land.** People in central Thai region practice their belief following Buddhist teaching. The Buddhist religion is the dominant faith of people in central Thai since the Sukhothai reign. All of elderly in this study identify themselves as Buddhist. They were applying the Buddhist doctrine through lifestyle in daily life, undertake the doctrine as “*think good, do good, and talk good*”. Also, people believed in law of Karma which the natural aspects of human life happen by cause and effect of actions. By doing right you will get good things, in contrast while doing wrong, bad effects will happened. Noteworthy of central Thai people, “*benevolence or metta*”, the benevolence in Thai culture is the fundamental virtue as quality of older people. Thus elderly people have characteristic of offering/devoting, which shows in acts of making merits, helping others with local knowledge that carry on from their ancestors, giving fruit or things that have at hand, and donating money or assets. Those behaviors happened in everyday life of elderly people. They were happy to contribute rather than receive. The good deeds and activities that they did, counted as gaining merit. They believe that merit making could help to be peaceful and happy at the present moment, help to face death in a peaceful way, and have a good life in the next life. The elderly believe that in later age, the greater dimension of health that could develop is their mind, if their mind was good it could lead to a well-functioning body, raising up their health.

The Buddhist doctrine influences people’s lives in terms of traditional practice since they were born, ordained as monks, wedding, got old and weak, got sick, and died. Thus the practice of belief following the Buddhist teaches was passed on to the next

generation, their children also using the Buddhist as a doctrinal guideline. This lead them think good and do good, and helped to reduce gap between the generations. Such evidence shows the villager's beliefs that gratitude to parents and ancestors is a good deed (ความกตัญญู). They supported and took care of their parents by providing food, clothes, information, material, emotional support, financial support, and taking them for medical care. Moreover the villagers helping each other in living, such as when some elderly people live alone and have illness, villagers or volunteers come to take care of them and stay with them.

Other beliefs that influence to their lives, are beliefs in ghosts as supernatural power. Thus they worship to ghosts through practice of traditional ceremonies. This belief came from traditional culture in which they believed in several kinds of ghosts from their ancestors, such as the ghost of Phoo Ya (grandparents); the spirits who protected the rice fields, and moral or Kwan. The villagers sought to follow their ancestor's way of life which was a localization of the central Thai province.

There were five Buddhist temples in the Suphanburi village, all of them were set up when the village was established (more than 170 years ago). They are the heritage of community. The temple is using as a community center, and a variety of activities are performed there. The people in Suphanburi village, seem happy, and they were generous, kind, and helpful to each other. The elderly are happy to live with others, and live close with people of other ages. People pay respect to older people as a senior who already had performed good deeds for the village. The elderly themselves continue being a good role model for their children who paid respect to their parents by taking care of them.

The villager here is using the Buddhist doctrine as a doctrinal guide. This practice strongly influences elderly lifestyles, both their beliefs and practices to maintain health. The Buddhist doctrine also influences their children help to make them think good and do good, reducing the gap between generations, in which everyone keeps belief and behaves properly following the Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist doctrine helps to cultivate the community environment to be a good resource for the elderly to maintain health.

***The old village.*** In the long history of the central Thai region, Suphanburi village is an old village (170 years) since the Sukhothai reign, that resident traditionally for over 170 years, there was an evident recorded in the reign of the third period of Rattanakosin. Sukhothai period was the most flourishing period in Thai history about Thai traditional medicine, and there is evidence of herbal gardens (สวนอโรกยา) which supported by the king. Suphanburi village carries on the traditional knowledge as their heritage, using it in daily life. Since Sukhothai reign to nowadays, the traditional knowledge about health which people use in daily living includes consuming herbs/or foods as traditional medicine; hermit exercise which has been modified as local exercise; and Thai massage. People in the village apply this knowledge to maintain health, especially the elderly who practice their belief about local or traditional knowledge with faith. They believe that practice traditional ways following their ancestors is a good way to maintain their health (mind and body) and to live happily with others in later years. Nowadays, the health care system has improved, and the village has one local health care center. People can access healthcare services easily, and they get the healthcare service there. However, the elderly people prefer to use traditional practices to heal common health problems in daily life, which by using them, promotes health, healing, and recovery.

The villagers sought to follow their ancestor's way of life – that of the central Thai local people. They have traditional healers, and practice traditional healing, such performing chanting ceremonies for parents' loving kindness (ทำวัณนาค), performing duties in Thai blessing ceremonies (สู่ขวัญ), 'blowing healing' for burn treatment (เป่าค้ำพืชไฟ), traditional throat paint (ป้ายชากวาดคอ), traditional massage or jub sen, and calculate auspicious times for weddings and ceremonies.

At the present, the environment is changing rapidly in society, which effects people's lifestyle. Some central Thai culture is different between age groups. The elderly people grew up in a period with no electricity access, and when travel was not convenient, therefore most of older villagers are far less mobile and travel less. Therefore their lives have strong relation to the field and local cultural ceremonies. Participating in cultural ceremonies let people get close to each other. On the other

hand, for village youth were born with more conveniences, and easy access to technology and media. Some of village youth don't want an agricultural life and want a more lively life in towns or cities. Their eagerness to leave village life is equivalent to leaving a life of living close to the soil and the natural world. The changing environment influences their life in choices about food, cloths, and lifestyle.

Nowadays elderly people understand and accept about social change; they adapt themselves and adjust their lifestyle by keeping practice follow the traditional ways while also accepting to the new social environment. The villagers were transformed from being producers only to be sellers as well. Thus the new farmer needed to change to integrated farming, mango plantations, and managing fish ponds. However, the elderly still have lifestyle close to nature and adapt well with the society change. The evidence from the participant observer shows that the elderly have a close relationship with other age groups in the community. The elderly have their space in the community; the traditional ceremonies allow elderly to get involved and engaged. In addition, elderly apply the Buddhist teaches as doctrinal guidelines in their life, which helps them accept and understand about change, both of the individual (mind and body), and the other (environment), to develop in harmony.

Suphanburi village was selected as the site for this study because the elderly who live there have maintained good health in later age; also the evidence shows that elderly there have good longevity. They considered themselves healthy in later age by following the accumulated knowledge and beliefs which had been integrated and absorbed from generation to generation. Their beliefs promote psychological and spiritual health.

### Part 3: Findings

In this study, three themes emerged as follows: Strengthen healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways, self-devotion to gain merit, and recognize facing death according to Buddhist doctrine. The details of each theme are described as shown in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2

*Summary of Themes and Categories of Maintaining Elderly Health with Central Thai Local Wisdom*

Themes and Categories	
Theme 1:	Strengthen healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways 1.1 Strengthening healthy mind following Buddhist doctrine 1.2 Strengthening healthy body following central Thai traditional practices
Theme 2:	Self-devotion to gain merit 2.1 Volunteering for public benefits 2.2 Gaining merit through donation
Theme 3:	Recognize facing death according to Buddhist doctrine 3.1 Having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine 3.2 Preparing for peaceful death based on Buddhist doctrine

**Theme 1: Strengthen healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways.** In this study, informants explained strengthening healthy mind and body in later age as retaining their health by keeping their minds healthy and strengthening their physical bodies.

Elderly in this study viewed health in aging as two parts: mind and body. The body declining as one age is natural, while the mind varies based upon individual and others factors. In later age, the mind could be in the state of developing or decreasing. According to informant's beliefs, mind is greater than body; such beliefs are based on

Buddhist teachings as *-A sound mind in a sound body-* (จิตเป็นนาย กายเป็นบ่าว). They also confirmed that to retain health in later age, one should strengthen both mind and body.

Strengthening healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways was derived from two categories: strengthening healthy mind following Buddhist doctrine and strengthening healthy body following traditional practices.

***Strengthening healthy mind following Buddhist doctrine.*** In this study, informants described strengthening healthy minds following Buddhist doctrine as sustaining their health by preserving a strong mental condition in their later age following the Buddhist beliefs and practices including chanting and meditation practices.

***Practicing chanting.*** In this study, practicing chanting meant that elderly practiced saying the mantra or words of Buddha out loud or silently to oneself following the way of Buddha's teaching. They claimed that during chanting, the pronunciation with sacred words was vibration sound. The vibrated sounds enabled their mind to be at the present moment and helping to protect from disturbed thoughts, fear, and loneliness. These experiences led them to have peace and strong minds.

An 84-year old informant stated that saying the mantra or words of Buddha out loud or silently to herself following the ways of Buddha teaching enabled her mind to be along with the words at that moment. She said that the word of Buddha are sacred words that bless people, during chanting, the vibration sound led her mind to be strong and peaceful. She stated as follows:

*"I (aunty) practice chanting which is saying sacred words out loud to myself or saying the sacred words of Buddha teaching in my mind silently. It is about a mantra following the teaching of Luang Por Jaran (A monk who teaches chanting),... during chanting, the vibration sound of saying the sacred words of Buddha set my mind to be with the words of Buddha at the present moment... Chanting is a doctrinal guideline for my life which led my mind to be strong and peaceful in everyday life."* (an 84- year old female: F6)



One female informant was 68 years old. She was one of the elderly leaders in the Dharma group of the temple. Practices following Buddha's teaching in everyday life helped her to believe that chanting or saying the sacred words out loud or silent could protect her from disturbed thoughts such as fear of evils or ghost. Chanting also set her mind to stay with herself without depending on anyone and to free from loneliness. She stated as follows:

*“Chanting in daily living by saying the sacred words out loud or even saying silently helps me not to fear any disturbed thoughts like the feeling of fear about ghost, evils or haunted spirits... The chanting helps me to protect such evil... Before chanting I used to dream and feel fear of ghosts or evil in my dream... by chanting I feel free from such fear... chanting seems to be my company which set my mind to be with myself... no need to depend on others... These feelings set my mind free from loneliness..and have strong mind when I have to stay alone sometimes.”* (an 68- year old female: F1)

The informants in this study also explained the practice chanting as, saying the sacred words of Buddha under the *Itipiso*” (บทสวดอิติปิโส) which comprised three chapters as; qualities of the Buddha, qualities of the Dhamma (teachings) and qualities of the Sangha (noble disciples) enabled to strengthen mind. They believed that chanting *Itipiso* helped them be conscious during chanting, thus they feel peaceful in daily living.

One informant is 84- year old female. She chants “*Itipiso*” (บทสวดอิติปิโส) everyday. She believes in the power of chanting which benefits to mind and body functions. She explained “*Itipiso*” (บทสวดอิติปิโส) as three chapters: the Buddha’s qualities (บทบูชาพระพุทธคุณ), virtues of Dhamma (บทบูชาพระธรรมคุณ), virtues of noble disciples (บทบูชาพระสังฆคุณ). She said that during chanting she became more conscious; having peaceful mind at that moment and in her daily life as a result. She stated as follows:

*“I chant Itipiso since it is a way to pay respect to the Buddha first (บทสวดน้อมนมัสการบูชาพระพุทธเจ้า), then chanting to respect the Buddha’s qualities (บทบูชาพระพุทธคุณ), virtues of Dhamma (บทบูชาพระธรรมคุณ), and virtues of noble disciples (บทบูชาพระสังฆคุณ),... During chanting I become more conscious,... After chanting an hour*

*I feel calm and peaceful in my mind by that time and in my everyday life.” (an 84- year old female: F6)*

*Practicing meditation.* Informants described practice meditation as practice of focusing on breathing in and out with concentration on the sacred Buddha’s word “(Bud-Dho)”, to help develop consciousness and being aware of thought of a present moment which led the mind to the state of peace. The peaceful experience strengthened their mind to be calm in any situations.

Informants stated that practicing meditation following breathing or Anapanasati meditation (อานาปานสติ) helped the elderly to develop their peace of mind through the consciousness and the experience of being aware of thought at the present moment. This could help strengthen their mind to be calm in their lives.

Following Anapanasati practice (อานาปานสติ), one informant who practices meditation regularly described the procedure of meditation with step by step including washing the body, crossed- leg sitting (นั่งขัดสมาธิ), focusing on breathing, and setting the mind to be aware of thought at the present moment. As one informant stated that

*“I do meditation twice a day in the morning and before bed time, ...starting with washing the body and dressing with new clothes. I sit with crossed legs (นั่งขัดสมาธิ) in front of the Buddha image, ...light the candle, ... take 30 minutes or an hour ..., I focus on breathing, inhale..exhale, concentrate on the word Bhud-Dho, keep my focus on breathing in and out, ... set my mind to be aware of any thoughts coming up at present moment.” (an 68- year old female: F1)*

One informant was a 68- year old female. She practices mediation every night following Anapanasati meditation (อานาปานสติ) by focusing on breathing while saying sacred words to develop peaceful mind. She told that focusing on the air during breathing in and out helped her to be aware of thought at present moment. The peaceful experience helps strengthening her mind to be face any situations with calmness. She stated as follows:

*“Meditation practice is one method to make a peaceful mind with consciousness, I focused on breathing in and out with concentration on the word – Bud-Dho, ... focusing on air passing through the nostril in and out, ... be aware of my thought at present moment, this is called Anapanasati meditation (อานาปานสติ)... I could be aware of thought at present moment. My mind is calm and peaceful. The experiences of this practice make my mind to be strong....and even strong enough to deal with any problematic situations calmly.” (an 68- year old female: F1)*

One informant, a 68- year old female who was recognized by other members of Buddhist religion as an healthy elderly with a strong mind by practicing meditation in everyday life. This could help strengthening her mind to be peaceful and calm in her daily living. She stated as follows:

*“Mediation practice is the way to develop consciousness in everyday life by keeping my mind focused on the breathing in and out slowly...in and out repeatedly...focusing on present moment, being aware of my thought, being conscious and mindful... Meditation practice is one method to make a peaceful mind,...I feel peaceful ...healthy and calm in my older days.” (an 68- year old female: F1)*

***Strengthening healthy body following central Thai traditional practices.*** In this study, strengthening healthy body following central Thai traditional practices refers to the way that the elderly preserve their health during aging following central Thai traditional practices used in their family and their community including using central Thai local foods / herbs and practicing central Thai physical activity as follows:

*Using central Thai local foods/herbs.* Using Central Thai local foods /herbs refers to using foods /herbs available locally in the central Thai region in daily life as an elixir of life, to promote eternal youth, prevent some symptoms, heal illness and avoid local food.

It is worth to note that one kind of local foods/ herbs might have various benefits for health.

*Consuming local herbs to promote eternal youth:*

Consuming local herbs to promote eternal youth is that the elderly consume local herbs grown in the central Thai region to help them healthy and more energetic by enhancing their four elements. The mentioned herbs enhanced their immune system function and provoke them to look young and live longer as an elixir of life. Local herbs in central Thai that informants use as an elixir of life to promote eternal youth including noni fruit, thao wan priang (jewel vine), and banana.

Local herbs in central Thai that informants often use to promote eternal youth is Noni fruit, a plant commonly found in Central Thailand. Almost every family plants Noni tree. Villagers also believe that it is a good thing for the home and is used as an herbal elixir. One informant described that

*“My house resides in Central Thailand,... and I have a Noni tree in my backyard,... It is good thing to have one at home... I can use it as herbal elixir”*

Ripe Noni fruit has bitter taste and strong smell. Sometimes it is called Cheese fruit / Vomit fruit. As one informant described characteristics of Noni tree that:

*“Around 18 months Noni tree is fully grown up and bloom all year long... Its fruit starts with green color, then yellow and white when it ripens... It tastes bitter with strong smell.... I called it as Cheese fruit / Vomit fruit because of its taste and smell”*

People in Central Thailand usually used Noni fruits as elixir of life in folk medicines two informants said:

*“I selected the Noni fruit with yellow and white color to make Noni elixir beverage (ชาอายุวัฒนะ) in folk medicine (an 80 year-old male: T2M10) and “I ferment white Noni fruit with salt, and eat it as traditional medicine to make my body strong.” (an 84 year- old male: M1)*

Informants explained how to make a Noni beverage that they selected nearly ripe fruit with a yellow color and ripest fruit with white color to grill until they turn yellow

and then boiled for 2-3 hours until they get light brown elixer. One informant explained as follows:

*“Select 5-10 yellow ripe or yellow green Noni fruit. Rinse with water... Put on the rack to grill with low heat and turn back and forth over the Noni fruit till it turns light yellow... Then fill up with water up to half of the pot (approximately 250 cc.). Boil with low heat for 2-3 hours.”* (an 80- year old male: T2M10)

An 80-year old male informant was a traditional healer. He is healthy, feels strong (physically) as a young man. His health secret was consuming Noni to maintain his health. He claimed that drinking a Noni beverage in everyday life helps to promote eternal youth and keeps physical wellbeing in aging by enhancing immune system. He drinks it about 2 or 3 glasses every day instead of water. He stated as follows:

*“I (uncle) can keep healthy in aging,... I drink 2-3 glasses of Noni beverage (approximately 750 cc.) per day. Replace drinking water with Noni beverage. Noni beverage can be drunk in the morning, noon and evening before or after each meal,... I drink it as an elixer... It helps me sustain health in aging,... I feel strong and more energetic as when I was young,...and look younger than my real age ..eternal youth... I think the drinks (Noni) help booster my immune.”*  
(an 80 year -old male: T2M10)

Another healthy informant, an 84- year old male, told about being a healthy longlife resulting from eating salt-fermented Noni. It was his family’s recipe that helps in maintaining health and enhance immune system, and live longer. He described that eating a half of fermented Noni fruit each time to enhance immunity, maintain health, and live longer. He stated as follows:

*“I eat a half fruit of Noni each time. Another half I put it back in the jar with salt. Take 1-2 times per week or 2-3 times per month. Taking Noni as an elixer of life, make me more energetic, enhance my immune by taking before meal...and unbelievable I think I could live longer with this energy and good immune.”* (an 84 year- old male: M1)

*Thao Wan Priang* also mentions its use for strengthening the bodies of elderly in this study. Informants described this herb as an elixir of life. *Thao Wan Priang (Jewel Vine)* is easily grown everywhere in central Thai region especially nearby a big tree. One informant stated that “A stalk called *Thao Wan Priang* has been used as an elixir for a long time. *Thao Wan Priang* is a creeper plant and it’s easily found nearby a big tree.” People in Central Thailand, usually select part of the stalk grown for two years and apply as an herbal elixir in folk medicine. One informant said: “I selected the stalk of *Thao Wan Priang* grown for two years because it is mature enough to make the beverage in folk medicine...I use it as an elixir.” (an 80 year-old male: T2M10)

Informants also described how often to drink *Thao Wan Priang* beverage. One informant drank *Thao Wan Priang* beverage for 2 or 3 glasses every day instead of water.

*“I drink 2-3 glasses of the beverage per day. I drink in the morning, noon and evening before or after each meal... It helps me sustain healthy in aging.”* (an 80 year –old male: T2M10)

Informants said that they used *Thao Wan Priang* as the elixir of life; it helps them to be more energetic, enhances their immune function, and helps to promote a balance of body elements (the earth, water, air, and fire components to form human body). It is believed that a balance of four elements can maintain health . Two informants, who were the traditional healers, stated as follows:

*“Thao Wan Priang (Jewel Vine) is a herbal material,... my mother shared with me that it is an elixir of life because the Thao Wan Priang beverage promotes a balance of the four elements in the body,...it helps me more energetic to work like adulthood...it helps me and my wife have a strong physical health...my wife and I never catch a cold or fever when faced with seasonal change,...I believe it helps to enhance the immune system.”* (an 80 year –old male: T2M10)

*“I believe Thao Wan Priang beverage make my health in later age strong,... I feel more energetic in everyday life...I feel younger than my real age,... I never*

*catch a fever when season changes from rainy season to winter season,... my immune system is good because of eating it.” (an 88 year- old female: F5)*

Local food in central Thai that an informant recommended was Banana fruit as life elixir since it makes them more energetic and healthy. Most people in central Thai especially in the rural areas grow banana trees everywhere. One informant stated that: *“Banana fruit is an elixir helping them live long and healthy;... my parents suggested that I eat it for good health. It can grow easily especially near river basin.” (an 86 year-old female: F4)*

One healthy informant was an 86- year old female, she lived alone. She went to work in the field every day. She told that she ate banana fruit every day and it helps her be more energetic with strong health. She believed to live long without any illness because of eating banana fruit. She stated as follows:

*“Banana fruit is an elixir for life,... I eat 2 pieces of the yellow banana fruit in the morning every day,... it makes me have strong health as an 86 year old,... Yellow bananas give me more energy from sweet sugar and more vitamins in it,... it makes my body work well. I gained more energy with strong health. Banana could save my life to live longer without illness... I believed that.” (an 86 year-old female: F4)*

*Consuming local foods/herbs to prevent some symptoms:*

Consuming local foods/herbs to prevent some symptoms refer to the elderly consuming local foods/herbs in daily life to prevent some symptoms such as flatulence from gastric disturbance, diabetes mellitus, constipation, sleep disturbances, fever and cold from seasonal change, colon cancer, tooth carries, gumboil and tooth aches.

Local foods in central Thai that informants consume to prevent flatulence and gastric disturbance such as *Noni fruit*. An 84- year old male stated that ate fermented Noni to prevent flatulence from gastric disturbance. He stated as follows:

*“I used to eat a half fruit of Noni fruit each time. Another half put back in the jar with salt. Take 1-2 times per week or 2-3 times per month. Take before or*

*after meal to reduce acid, to prevent flatulence from gastric disturbance.” (an 84 -year old male: M1)*

To prevent diabetes mellitus, Wormwood (Boraped) was used by the informants. Wormwood is an herb that helps maintaining health. It is easily grown everywhere and popular among Thai people in Central region. Traditional doctors use fresh wormwood in folk medicine with the belief that wormwood can prevent and treat diabetes mellitus.

One informant stated as follows:

*“I eat fresh Wormwood every day. It is a magic herb for maintaining my health and my life and it can grow everywhere,... eating pure bitter pieces before a meal can prevent some illnesses especially diabetes mellitus (D.M)... Almost all elderly in my family had D.M but not me,... The reason that I am lucky is that I ate Wormwood every day.” (a 61 year- old male: M8)*

To prevent constipation, sleep disturbances or insomnia; Banana fruit was used by the informants.

One informant, a 77- year old female, ate banana fruit every day and it helped her be healthy with especially good elimination. She believes that if the elderly could eliminate regularly, it would reduce toxicity in body. She said that banana fruit is good for health since it helps to prevent some common symptoms in later age such constipation. She stated as follows:

*“I am 77 years old,... I eat 2 pieces of ripe bananas in every day morning,... it helps elimination of waste... for someone who have constipation I suggest they eat ripe bananas 2 to 3 pieces, three times per day,... they would feel better with elimination.” (a 77 year-old female: F3)*

Another 61- year old informant was a health volunteer caring for the elderly. She told that common symptom in later age was sleep disturbance or insomnia. Eating banana fruit helps her to sleep well, and prevents sleep disturbance. She stated as follows:



*“When I cannot sleep at night,. I eat one piece of yellow banana,... the sweet taste and smell from the banana skin makes me sleep well... all night”* (village health volunteer Moo 6)

Seasonal change from rainy season to winter season can cause fever, at that time Sesban (Dok Khae) is blooming. To prevent illness especially fever during seasonal change, *Sour curry* local foods in central Thai is often consumed by healthy elderly. Informants also explained how to cook sour curry with vegetables; begin with preparing ingredients of sour curry paste and vegetables such as the Kuturi flower.

An 75- year old informant who love cooking home recipes, told that the core ingredients of sour curry including dried chili peppers, shallots or onions, garlic, salt, shrimp paste, fresh ginger, turmeric water. Then all ingredients were blended together. Removing the pollen from the Kuturi flower makes it taste better because inside it makes taste bitter. However some informants did not take the pollens out because bitter taste was good for healing.

*“I cook the curry paste by pounding dried chilies with salt with a mortar and pestle until it gets fine. Then I add shallots and garlic, and continue to pound until smooth paste... Add shrimp paste, boiled fish until well blended together to make the harmony taste... heat the water in the pot,... add sour curry paste and wait until boiling...add fish and Kuturi flower,... wait until nearly done,... season with coconut sugar, fish sauce and turmeric water. Remove from heat.”* (an 75 year-old female: F7).”

The sour curry with fish and Kuturi flower (Dok Khae) could prevent fever and cold during seasonal change. One informant who is 83 years old explained benefit of sour curry with vegetables that it helps to prevent fever and seasonal cold. She stated as follows:

*“For our family,... and the people in this community, the recommended dish for restoring health is Kaeng Som with fish and Kuturi flower,... before the winter time I used to eat Kaeng Som to prevent fever (Kai Hua Lom) and cold caused by seasonal change.”* (an 83 -yearold female: F2)

One informant who was 80 yearsold explained that *Kaeng Som with fish and Kuturi flower (Dok Khae)* could prevent fever from seasonal change as well.

*“I (aunty) eat Kaeng Som Dok-Khae during the season changes, it helps me to free from fever and heals me when I catch a cold,... Kuturi flower or Dok Khae can heal the body and restore the balance of health,...and the curry paste enhance physical energy.”* (an 80 year-old female: T3F8)

To prevent colon cancer, local herbs used from central Thai include *Ginger*. One informant, a 77- year old male, was diagnosed as and treated for colon cancer. After being cured, he ate ginger with the belief that it helps reducing toxin from colon, and monitoring colon cancer. He stated as follows:

*“I drink one glass of ginger juice (mixed with honey) before go to bed every night... The mixture gives me more power and delight,... my ancestor told me that it helps preventing cancer,...it can help to monitoring colon cancer for me as well.”* (a 77 year- old male: M2)

Another local herbs used in central Thai that people consumes to help prevent symptoms such as tooth carries, gumboil, and tooth ache were also presented. *Khoi* is used to prevent carries, gumboil and tooth ache. Some informants told that they used *Khoi* toothpaste powder daily. It improved oral hygiene, prevented carries, gumboil and tooth aches. They stated as follows:

*“I used Khoi toothpaste powder in daily,... since five year ago... It makes me have healthy gums as well as strong and clean teeth,... prevents a carries, gumboil or tooth ache... I feel lucky to have my good oral hygiene in later age.”* (a 75 year-old female: F7)

In this study, informants applied *Khoi* as an ingredient of toothpaste powder. (Toothpaste powder was mixed using dry clovers, white clay, camphor and alum, salt tablets). They slice *khoi* bark and stick to small pieces. Then they grilled and pound until smooth before blending *khoi* with all ingredients. A 73 -year old informant who was a member of tradition knowledge group in the village made *Khoi* toothpaste powder. She told that:

*“I am the one that made Khoi toothpaste powder, I select Khoi bark with gray color and stick it to become 2- inch size. I slice it to become small pieces, ...easy to grill, grilled until dark and good smell, then blended with other ingredients such dry clovers, white clay, camphor and alum, salt tablets, pound until powder smooth. The smooth powder is easy to use.”* (a 73 year-old female: T4F9).

*Consuming local foods/herbs to heal from illnesses:*

Consuming local foods for healing illnesses refers to elderly’s consumption of local foods in daily life to treat or cure muscle inflammation, pain, and cold.

Informants explained that one common central Thai local food is *sour curry with fish and Kuturi flower (Dok Khae)* which they consumed for healing muscle inflammation and muscle pain. An informant who is 83 years old explained how sour curry with fish and Kuturi flower (Dok Khae) helps in the recovery of muscle inflammation and pain. She stated that:

*“When I (auntie) am feeling sick like muscle inflammation or pain, my body tells me that I have to eat Kaeng Som with fish and Kuturi flower, after eating it, ... The muscle inflammation and pain returns to normal state... I believe that turmeric is a major ingredient in curry paste which helps relieving inflammation in my body, ... and the garlic in curry paste, fish, and Kuturi flower in the sour soup could help me to enhance the immune system function, ... that reduce inflammation and lead to pain relief.”* (83 year-old female: F2)

Informants also mentioned using *Thao wan priang* for healing muscle inflammation and pain, which often occurs later in life. One informant stated as follows:

*“Thao Wan Priang is a magic plant, ... it is good treatment for me and my wife when I have muscle pain or body pain, or when I work hard and have inflammation of muscles, I drink it during having muscle pain and inflammation 1-2 glasses.”* (an 80 year -old male: T2M10).”

Chili paste and vegetables were other foods to treat a colds. Informants were also mentioned that Chili paste and vegetables with the beliefs that it could help people feel better when getting colds in winter time. Vegetables had rich in vitamins and helped

enhancing body immune. Thus when they had fever chili paste and vegetables was recommended. One informant who is 75 year-old explained that chili paste with vegetables helps reducing fever by increasing the immune system. She states as follows:

*“In my family, ... and villagers in this community, chili paste is a main dish, ... It helps recovery from cold, ... because you had to eat it with various vegetables..cucumbers, beans, Thai eggplants and many herbs grown in your backyard... These veggies had high vitamins and enhanced my body immune system.”* (an 75 year -old female: F7)

An informant told that eating *banana fruit* helps recovery from fatigue. She stated that:

*“Once I get sick, ... I have got fatigue, ... I eat banana fruit (yellow or black banana) with rice, ... for healing, ... make me have energy, ... and it is easy to eat because it's smooth, ... yellow or black banana are more sweet and have more vitamins that enhance muscle power and gain more energy to move on.”* (an 80 year-old female: T3F8)

*Turmeric* (ขมิ้นชัน) was another food used to help heal wound in gastrointestinal system. Informants mentioned that *Turmeric* could relieve gastrointestinal disturbance such as stomach ache or flatulence. He stated as follows:

*“Turmeric is useful for gastrointestinal balance. ... Eat fresh turmeric when you have a stomach ache or flatulence, ... it also helps healing when you have gastrointestinal wound.”* (an 80 year-old male: T2M10)

*Avoiding local foods which prone to cause some illnesses:*

Informants described local foods they could not eat that it might result in some illness (*Ar Han Slang* [อาหารแสลง]). They described “*Ar Han Slang*” as some local vegetables and fermented foods that affect some illnesses or physical symptoms in elderly such as gout, joint pain, or knee pain.

A 63-year informant was diagnosed with gout. His health was worsened after eating fermented bamboo, and the tops of vegetables including bamboo shoot, spinach, climbing wattle, lead tree, and morning glory. He stated as follows:

*“I have been diagnosed with gout... I must not eat fermented bamboo, and the tops of vegetables including bamboo shoot, spinach, climbing wattle, lead tree, and morning glory. My body get worse, after I ate them, ... my knee was painful and became inflamed... I think it is harmful to my health... and I should avoid them to maintain health.”* (a 63 year- old male:M6)

Another informant also mentioned about *Ar Han Slang* as follows:

*“My mother taught me about Ar Han Slang especially fermented foods or top of vegetables,... They were foods that make my body especially my knee that might get worse after having them,... they enable my disease such as joint paint, or knee pain to get worse... So to keep healthy I should avoid them.”* (an 84 year-old female: F6)

The reason for avoiding certain fermented foods and tops of vegetables was that these foods were high salt and sugar. This harmed human body function and led to food poisoning. In some cases, there was fungus which was toxic to human body; elderly may have allergies and poor health as a result. Informants claimed that they have been worn by their ancestors to avoid eating them as one informant stated:

*“In the past,... my parent told me to avoid the tops of vegetables and fermented foods, it is not good for health,... One kind of fermented food was sour cabbage... I see black color of sour cabbage and it is fungus,... I also tasted them and found that they were too much salt and sugar... I ate them one time and got indigestion and food poisoning... I think the fermented food is more harmful to my health... after that I never ate it again.”* (an 69 year- old male: T1M9)

The informants had been warned that the tops of vegetables contain more purine substances, which increase acidity as well as knee and joint pain. They said that purine is dangerous for their health, resulting in knee pain, joint pain and gout. The local

vegetables that the elderly diagnosed with gout avoided include bamboo shoot, spinach, climbing wattle, lead tree, and morning glory as one informant stated that:

*“My ancestor told me that some local vegetables cause illness in aging especially knee pain and gout. Purine in these food is dangerous substance for my health... It increases acidity and could result in knee or joints pain in later year... For the last 10 years I was diagnosed with gout... The gout get worse whenever I ate them... Now I do not eat the tops of vegetables because whenever I eat the bamboo shoot, spinach, climbing wattle, lead tree, and morning glory, I have high level of purine...”* (a 83 year-old female: F2).”

*Practicing central Thai physical activities.* Practicing central Thai physical activities was another practices of the elderly to strengthen the body. This practice refers to informants’ physical activities that they learned from their ancestors with the beliefs that physical movement can keep their life moving on. Without physical activity, their bodies could not function well or declined; and their lives might get down.

One informant said that *“doing physical activity helps body function well; doing chores or field work makes life keep going on Without doing exercise or having physical activity, the body become paralytic and probably die in finally”*.

In this study informant practiced central Thai physical activities including practicing *Yead Kran*, practicing *acupressure with coconut shells*, and practicing *Sen Pratan Sib massage*.

*Practicing Yead Kran:*

*Yead Kran* or Bared Hands exercise was developed from the hermit exercise that rooted in the Sukhothai reign of their ancestor’s community.

Informants described practicing *Yead Kran* as physical movement practice that use most of the body parts as a tool for doing exercise. It involved keeping moving slowly while smoothly monitoring muscles, stretching the body as much as possible. There are also bouncing movements to extend the range of motion and flexibility including physical movement with breathing training. Informants started that practicing

Yead Kran enabled them function physically better later in life , leading to being healthy.

A 87-year old male informant who was a leader of exercise group in the community and regularly does Bared Hands exercise. He explained about *Yead Kran* as follows:

*“I (uncle) am 87 years old; I am healthy. I do Bared Hands exercise, ... it was developed by ancestor followed the hermit exercise that rooted in the Sukhothai reign, ... it was modified to fit the elderly body, ... It is flexible to accommodate physical limitations such as tenderness in the shoulder, ... I keep going slowly to monitore my muscles smoothly, and to also stretch my body as much as much I can... I would do stretch my arms and neck repeatedly until it got better... breathing in-out following the body movement. This practices enhance my physical function and health.”* (a 87 year -old male: M7)

Another informant was a 73- year old healthy female who does all housework by herself, she said Yead- Kran exercise helped keeping body healthy at her age. She states as follows:

*“I (aunty) am 73 yearsold; I did Yead- Kran, ... stretching, pulling, and bouncing my body... I notice that exercises help me to remain fit during physical changes, ... My physical tells me what happened and I find the way to solve those problems... I learnt exercises from my parents and my group exercise in the village.”* (a 73 year-old female:T4F9)

Informants told that Yead- Kran also help reducing low back pain as a 73-year old informant told that she recovered from low back pain because she regularly did Yead- Kran exercise. She stated as follows:

*“I am healthy and recovered from low back pain with a miracle and without surgery, as consequence of doing Yead- Kran exercise regularly.”* (a 73 year-old female: T4F9)

One healthy informant who was 87 years old told that he was free from knee pain, joint pains, and pain from bone degeneration because of regularly doing Bared Hands exercise. The exercise also enhanced bone and muscle strength that make him healthy by this age; he stated as follows:

*“I am healthy with smart walking and standing in my age, ... I do Bared Hands exercises in my everyday life... this exercise is the best way to prevent physical pain, ... I am free from knee pain, joint pains, or pain from bone degeneration, ... doing exercises regularly makes my bones strong and muscles function better in aging...”* (a 87 year -old male: M7)

One informant said that the result of regular doing Bared Hands exercises every morning helped him to be free from faintness or dizziness that may be associated with aging. He said that:

*“I am 87 years old, ... doing Bared Hands exercises in the early morning before I get out of bed, ... it helps me to be sunny, bright, not feel faint, not have dizziness all day long.”* (a 87 year -old male: M7)

*Practicing acupressure with coconut shells:*

Informants described acupressure, as a way of massage that stimulate the trigger points (massage points) on foot reflexology zones to promote blood circulation, energy flow and pain healing.

Thai massage was established along times with Thai people since the Sukhothai reign; people learn from their family. Since the villages were located on a river basin, there were plenty of coconut trees. Thus it is common for the elders to apply the coconut shells as a tool for exercise to keep up their health during aging.

One informant was an 84-year old female, she said that acupressure with coconut shells comes from knowledge of Thai massage. It focuses on deep pressure on the foot reflexology zone to help stimulating blood circulation flow, leading to health balance. She learned about Thai massage and how to apply coconut shells from her parents and the traditional healer from the community. She stated as follows:



*“I am 84 years old,... I learned for my parents about this exercise... in my village, it is easy to find the coconut shell,...I have learned about Thai massage,... I know the trigger points that make my whole body be balance or hurt,... acupressure with coconut shells can put pressure deeply into the trigger points of the body... it helps stimulating blood circulation,... energy flow.”* (a 84 year-old female: F6)

Two informants explained the benefits of acupressure with coconut shells that deep pressure putting on the male side of shells,gave more deep pressure on foets. This could help stimulating blood circulation, leading to reduction in pain in later age.

*“To reduce muscle pain... I do acupressure with coconut shell every evening,... I select two similar coconut shell pieces,... take that side called the male side of coconut. I hold on to the table with my hands to prevent falls,... I drag my foot around on the coconut shells, and stand longer on some points that have pain,... I can feel my blood circulation flow all over my body,... I am painless in my age of 84 years old.”* (a 84 year-old female: F6)

*“I am 80 years of age; at my age other friends might face with pains, such as joint pain, knee pain or leg pain... I am free from all of that pain,... I do acupressure with coconut shells every morning and evening,... it helps reducing pain, especially in my legs,... and stimulating blood circulation.”* (a 80 year-old female: T3F9)

#### *Practicing Sen Pratan Sib massage:*

Informants believed that Sen Pratan Sib massage could heal body functioning both normal health and illness conditions. Informants told that they learned about Sen Pratan Sib massage from their ancestors. Thai massage was recognized as one of Thai traditional medicine since the Sukhothai period, and continued growing through the Ayutthaya period. During the reign of King Narai, La lubaire’s dispatch indicated that the Siamese used Thai massage to cure some illness. Most of their ancestors applied massage as treatment when they got sick, also applied when they felt discomfort or had unwanted symptoms.

Informants described *Sen Pratan Sib* massage as the act of putting pressure on the sen pratan sib (meridian line), stretching, and bending the body. They said that they did self-massage that related to folk massage (Nuad Babb Chaowban: นวดแบบชาวบ้าน), which they use elbow, feet, hands for massaging. Massage could stimulate blood circulation, lymph nodes, and energy field. The elderly did self-massage to heal their own health.

One informant was 84 years old, applied massage to heal health. She used her entire body, including elbows, feet, hands and legs as the tools for self-massage. She told that after self-massage, she felt relaxed with good blood circulation, lymph node function as well as had more energy.

*“I (auntie) do massage, ... I learned about Thai massage from my mother... I practice massage followed my parents, ... if I have dizziness or a headache, I do head massage with thumb fingers by putting my fingers on my eyebrows, ... I use my elbows, feet, hands, and legs as tools for self-massage, ... after massage I feel relaxed, skin gets red (good circulation), fresh, and more energetic, ... it relieves all discomfort.”* (an 84 year-old female: F6)

Informants explained that massage could promote blood circulation throughout the body and reduce pain. She stated as follows:

*“I do self-massage after exercise, because my muscles are stressed from working out, then massage can relieve discomfort, ... It helps the blood circulation, ... reduces muscle pain.”* (an 80 year-old female: T3F9)

**Theme 2: Self-devotion to gain merit.** In later age, most of informants believed they should give or offer to others rather than receiving. The informants who can offer or give things including material or non-material, such giving makes them feel joyful/peaceful and valuable. This activity leads them to sustained good health in later age.

Self-devotion to gain merit was described by informants as the elderly retaining their health in later age by engaging in activities which contribute to others.

In this study, self-devotion to gain merit was derived from two categories; volunteering for public benefits and gaining merit through donation.

***Volunteering for public benefits.*** Volunteering for public benefits refers to elderly's engaging in society by offering or giving their time, knowledge, voluntary work in elderly clubs, helping others in the community, and providing central Thai traditional healing / rites. Such volunteering activities not only makes them feel joyful and peaceful in mind, but also helps them to engage in community activities. In addition, these activities help the elderly feel valuable as a person. Such activities assist them in maintaining good health into older age.

Volunteering for public benefits was derived from three sub-categories; offering oneself to work in elderly clubs; helping others in the community; and providing central Thai traditional healing / rites to benefits others.

***Offering oneself to work in elderly clubs.*** Offering oneself to work in elderly clubs was described by informants as activities where the elderly engaged in society by giving their time and knowledge, which comprised of spending time to manage the club, teaching other members some recreational activities, and joining club activities. Such activities made them feel joyful, peaceful and valuable.

One informant who is a chair of the elderly club in the community stated as followed:

*“I am very happy and joyful to work as a chair for elderly club. I join exercise of club and this exercise make me healthy... I spend a lot time trying to join and manage the club,... I teach the member about activities such as game to promote cognitive function. This volunteering gives me joyful, peaceful mind, and valuable, lead my healthy in aging.”* (an 87- year old male: M7)

Informants also confirm that spending time and knowledge to manage the club as setting up an elderly-exercise group and teaching exercise for the elderly as part of volunteering in community. This led to them feel joyful and peaceful which helped them to keep their health. One informant, who is healthy and regularly does exercise, described volunteer work as the offering of their time and knowledge as follows:

*“In elderly club... I have offer my time and my knowledge about exercise to help establish the elderly-exercise group... I teach them about exercise such as*

*Stretching exercise, Thai Chi, which I have learn from the city to teach the elderly in community,... and trained the villagers to be a leader of exercise to continue the exercise group in the community,... I feel happy and my mind peacefully every time when offering and engaging in such activities. This is one way to keep me healthy in my age.” (an 87 -year old male: M7)*

Another informant, a 75 year old who is an active member of the elderly club, also mentioned that volunteer work is the way that the elderly get a chance to offer time and knowledge. She enjoyed being involved in club activities such as Ramwong Puen Ban or local dances and felt joy and peace when giving. This led her and others to maintain good health into older age. She stated as follows:

*“Volunteer work in elderly club is giving time and knowledge according to my ability contribute benefit to the club... I have enough time to sacrifice in helping to others in elderly club,... I lead the Ramwong Puen Ban (local dance) with music for the elderly at club aims to make the member enjoy and physical workout... When I can give something to others... you know, I feel joyful and peaceful mind... And when I dance... There were beautiful and fun rhythm... many people danced together... We danced for 45 minutes and got sweating... I feel that my body gain some energy and this dance... I believed it could help to keep my health in later age.” (an 87-year old male: M7)*

#### *Helping others in the community:*

Helping others as volunteer in this study also involved giving time, knowledge, and energy to benefit others for free (or gratuitous). Volunteering keeps elderly people peaceful, joyful and feeling valuable. This helped maintain their health by assisting in things or events that were related to their capability.

One informant an 84 year old, healthy, active carpenter volunteers to do work in miscellaneous things that assist the community. Activities such as repairing the temple's roof, cleaning the pavilion, or assisting in community activities.

*“I (grandfather-๑) am a carpenter... I know how to repair things and was accepted as a good carpenter in community. I went to repair the old rope at*

*temple I clamp up to the top of roof with other guys... I do it as I can do follow my career ability... When I go to help at the temple with my carpenter skill,... it was a great fun... this volunteer work help to make me feel free of mind, and joyful and lead to make my physical health in aging well.” (an 84-year old male: M1)*

Another informant also confirmed that she helps others with her self-capability including giving her time, knowledge and energy.

As with one informant, a 68 year old woman, it was noted that she was recommend from people in community to prepare trays of gifts or foods recipes. She said that she helps the host when they call for help. She feels joy, peacefulness, and valuable by being able to offer her help.

*“When has a traditional ceremony in community such wedding, ordinate, or blessing... Villagers call me (aunty) to help them about tray of gifts for the groom, foods recipe or desert for give away in religious ceremony. My friend and I come to help at the host in any time,... I am happy to help them with activity that I can help people in my community according to my knowledge.” (an 68-year old female: F1)*

*Providing central Thai traditional healing/rites.* Providing central Thai traditional healing/ rites was described by the elderly as retaining their health by engaging in activities regarding traditional practices of heritage from their ancestors that existed in the central Thai region. The activities provided to help the community include central Thai traditional healing, and central Thai traditional rites.

*Providing central Thai traditional healing:*

In this study the elderly had traditional knowledge that had been passed from their ancestors that happened in the central Thai region, and were providing their knowledge, time, and energy to perform healing such as *blow healing and spell* (tradition of performing healing by gusting wind from healers with magic spell to relive burn pain) and *traditional throat paint* (tradition of performing healing by painting the herbal mixtures inside the throat to relieve pain or symptoms) for others suffering from

illnesses and health problems. Such help enabled informants to feel happy and valuable in the community which led them to be healthy later in life.

One informant, a 73 year old, was a traditional healer who gained great respect from people in the community. She said that helping others with her knowledge and time kept her mind feeling of happy which attributed to her good health in later age. She used the traditional knowledge as *blow healing* which was passed from her ancestors. She stated that performing effective treatment that helped people heal, made her mind happy. She even feels like a valuable person in the community for doing such things for people. She stated as follows:

*“I (aunty) helped people who suffered from burn pain and make them get better with pain relief and wound healing... with **blow healing** with spell... my blowing and spell make people recovery from the burn. When the ill person get better which pain reliefs and fever gone, I feel happy and feel to be such a valuable person with my giving such knowledge, time and energy.”* (an 73- year old female: T4F9)

Other informants, who were traditional healers in the community and had been working as healers for more than 50 years, performed *Traditional throat paint* for children and other adults with fever, coughs, and bleb inside the mouth or eyes. She stated as follows:

*“I used knowledge that I carry on from grandparents to help others... **Traditional throat paint** for children and other adults, children got fever, cough, bleb inside the mouth or eyes... When that child feel comfort and smile I was very happy to help them... I feel as valuable person in the society to do those.”* (an 80-year old female: T3F8)

#### *Providing central Thai traditional rites:*

In this study rites is a formal act or procedure prescribed or customary in local ceremonies. In the central Thai region, local ceremonies such as funeral and “*Soo Kwuan*” or blessing rites are very meaningful for people since this ceremony could

preserve good things for people's life. By helping others in the community, they feel happy with a sense of value, which ultimately leads them to be healthy.

*Providing central Thai traditional rites* refers to practices of elderly who learned the act or procedure in local ceremonies from ancestors as *funeral rites* and “*Soo Kwuan*” or *blessing rites*, which aim to preserve good things for others in the community. Such activities of offering empowered the elderly to feel happy and appreciated in the community which led them to be healthy in later in life.

Providing central Thai traditional rites as funeral rites such as *calculating of an auspicious time for cremation* and performing funeral rites as *master of ceremony for the funeral*.

One informant, a 79 year old religious and ritual practices leader of the community. He volunteered to help *calculate an auspicious time for weddings and cremation* for people of the community following the community's belief in good and bad day of the month. He stated as follows:

*“Since people believe of good day and bad day of the month to perform special activity, I help **calculating an auspicious time for cremation**, by observe auspicious timing, like cremation followed the ritual textbook to check the auspicious timing called “Koa Kong date”,... from doing such activity,...I happy to use my time and knowledge to contribute for others. It make me feel valuable (วันเก้าทอง, - the day that could not burn the death body)...”* (an 79- year old male: T5M11)

One informant also described performing funeral rites. This 63 year old man learned about ritual healing from the oldest ritual master in the community and acted as a lay temple officiator (มรรคนาชก), volunteered to perform funeral rites as a master of ceremony for the funeral. When someone in the village passed away, he would act as a consultant, working with the dead body under traditional beliefs such as binding the body, dressing the body with beautiful clothes, and arranging for activities regarding cremation. Giving help to others led him to be happy and valued in the community.

*“I (uncle) do the duty of “master of ceremony for the funeral”,... when someone in the village passed away, they will come to consult about binding the body, dresses for the death body, arranging for cremation activities... I come to help and happy to perform rites follow the traditional beliefs. Giving help to others like this made me feel happy and valued in community.” (an 63 - year old male: M6)*

Providing central Thai traditional rites as blessing rites or Soo Kwaun to preserve good things for others was one way to offer one’s self using central Thai traditional practices to benefit others. Blessing rites were performed when people got sick.

*Kwaun* means spirit or soul. In the central Thai region, people believe that this *Kwaun* brings happiness when it is with them. If the *Kwaun* leaves the body the body will have problems or become sick. One needs to get the *Kwaun* back. It is a ritual ceremony passed through generations. Performing Soo Kwaun on others by the elderly in this study helps to preserve good things for the sick person. In the central Thai region, they are called *blessing rites* or *Soo Kwaun* which are performed for sick people as *ThamBoon Thaisangkan* (ทำบุญถ่ายสังขาร). Such performances could help to speed recovery for the one who was sick. Offering one’s self to perform “Soo Kwaun” led the elderly to be pleased and valued in community.

One informant, an 80 year old female, is a traditional healer who volunteers to help people when they suffer from illness or have been discharged from the hospital after a long term stay. Her parents were traditional healers in the community and taught her to perform *Soo Kwaun* as *ThamBoon Thaisangkan* (ทำบุญถ่ายสังขาร) to help people to recover from illness. *Soo Kwaun* as *ThamBoon Thaisangkan* (ทำบุญถ่ายสังขาร) is performed by calling *Kwuan* as a spirit or soul to return to the body of sick person. The rites also include making offerings, blessings, and spreading rice on the ground for worshipping spirits. Every time she performed the rites she observed the speedy recovery from suffering people. This made her joyful, happy, and gave her a feeling of being valuable in the community. She stated as follows:



*“I (auntie) perform blessing rites or Soo Kwuan to help the ill,... when someone in the village got sick, they will come to ask me to perform rites called ThamBoon Thaisangkan (ทำบุญถวายสังฆาร): I had to call Kwuan as spirit or soul to get back to the sick person, make offerings foods to the monk, and spreaded 3 cups of cooked rices to the ground for worshipping spirits. ... Finally, I blessed for the ill and their families to live happily. You know for helping them, with my knowledge, time and energy, I was very joyful, happy, and feel as a valuable people in the community.” (an 80-year old male: FM6)*

***Gaining merit through donation.*** An Informant described an activity where the elderly give food or objects to monks, or money and objects (goods) to help others. Such practices make them feel happy and gain merit. In this study, gaining merit through donation was derived from making an offering to monks, and giving money/goods to help others.

***Making offerings to the monk.*** Making offerings to the monk, is a way of making merit in Buddhism. It is a way that informants in this study intentionally offer food and materials to monks in order to gain merit and dedication to their ancestors. They believed that the gained merit could help strengthen their minds to be happy and healthy not only in this life but also in life after death. Making offerings build a kind of happiness, an inner happiness in their spirit through doing things that are good and by helping others. There is also the contented feeling that this merit would have good effects on their next life.

One informant was a 75 year old woman. She wakes up early in the morning to prepare food for offering alms to the monk. She makes merit with hoping to gain happiness in the present life and next life as follows:

*“Every day in the early morning, I prepare foods intentionally with consciousness and happiness,... I cook rice, curry or fried dishes, local fruit,... I have the best thing for giving the monks... I believe, foods offered to the monks should always be the best thing that I have,... I believe I gain merit by making offerings to the monks... The merit from offering alms is also sent to my ancestors in another world to be happy too in order to devotion to my dad and mom who passed*

*away... Such making offerings strengthen my mind to be happy at present life... and when I die and have rebirth for the next life the merit would make good effect to my life.” (an 75- year old female: F7)*

Informants in this study described that when they heard the sacred words of Buddha that the monk give blessing after alms offering is finished, they also experience delight.

One informant was a 75 year old female. She said that every time she hears the monk give blessing after the making of offerings, she feels delightful inside her mind which make her mind strong. She stated as follows:

*“In early morning every day, ... I walk to the village pavilion for offering foods to the monk, ... It is a good time for me in daily, ... I feel delight and happy when the monk give blessings to me with the sacred words of Buddha. Sound of sacred words is more meaning to my mind, ... help to make my mind strong.” (an 75 - year old female: F7)*

In order to dedicate merit to the ancestors, informants in this study perform the Kruad Nam which is the act of pouring water on to the earth as a way to transfer their merit to their ancestors through the Earth deity or Mae Thorani-(แม่ธรณี).

One informant who regularly offers alms to the monks stated as follows:

*“I Kruad Nam while the monks give blessing words, ... I poured the water from the container (ที่กรวบน้ำ) to the earth which transfers happy feeling or devotion merits to my ancestors or departed relative, ... the Earth deity (แม่ธรณี) helps transfer the merit to the right ancestor... and the Earth deity helps to recode the merit that I done.” (an 75- year old: F7)*

*Giving money/goods to help others.* Giving money/goods to help others, informants described the way of gaining merit following Buddhist teaches as giving away the goods or money that they have to support others. These activities make them happy.

One informant, a 68 year old woman, grows pumpkin and corn in her garden. She stated that she plants the food for her household and to give to the neighborhood. Such giving makes her feel happy and this counted as merit.

*“I have enough pumpkin and corn to eat,... the rest of that I give its to my neighborhood,... They were happy and say thank you,... I feel happy for sharing the goods that I have..., I believe this is merit making.”* (an 68 - year old female: F1)

Another informant said that helping others by donating or giving some money when they are broke or face unwanted situations was the way of making merit. One informant said as follow:

*“When flooding occur in community, the poor villagers falling in the difficulty because they not have enough money to spend for daily living... I (uncle) donate some money and raise the fund to help them... I think helping the suffering people,... is way of merit making.”* (an 77- year ole male: M2)

**Theme 3: Recognize facing death according to Buddhist doctrine.** All of the informants identified themselves as Buddhist, and believed that life’s circumstances of birth, aging, illness, and dying were natural processes. They understood and accepted that human beings naturally change, and they understood that life is impermanent. They also agreed that suffering loss and change can be an unbearable feeling to live with; and understood the insubstantiality of self, or non-self (Anatta). As consistent with popular Buddhism ideas in Thailand, most of informants believed in life after death. They believed all humans have to die and can die anytime without any foresight, and therefore they should be prepared to die in part by doing good deeds. In Buddhism, this is called “contemplation of death” (มรณานุสติ), as informants explained:

*“Contemplation of death is a significant Dharma principle that the elderly should consider at all times. Suffering was caused by birth as a human being, if a person takes account of the truth of suffering they can steer away from it. They can then be content; as birth and death occurs with all humans. We must be ready to die by being aware that we will die. Also, we need to prepare to be*

*ready for any unforeseen event, and then one will not feel anxious. What we have to do is accumulate good deeds while we are alive.” (79 year-old male: M3)*

*“Contemplation of death as unsteady volition or impermanence of the body (สังขารไม่เที่ยง), monks have said that humans experience birth, aging, illness, and death. Death is an issue that humans should be aware of, people who have no illness have a halo. This depends on the laws of Karma, if one does good deeds, merit will protect them from evil or hell. To be ready to die in peace you must make merit in this world at this time.” (77 year- old male: M2)*

Most informants went to temple often, where they learned and practiced the Buddha’s teachings. Most of them believed that facing death is an integral part of life. Social gatherings at funeral ceremonies allowed for villagers to participate in this activity with the community at large. It enables older people to learn and share their thoughts and feelings about death and dying through customs within the community.

In this study, informants described recognize facing death according to Buddhist doctrine. As the elderly sustain their mental health while aging, they also gained understanding about death. The recognition of facing death according to Buddhist doctrine was derived from two sources: having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine and preparing for peaceful death based on Buddhist doctrine.

***Having deep awareness about death through Buddhist doctrine.*** According to informants, understanding that the elderly maintain their health in later age while understanding impending death is a natural process that they accept according to Buddhist doctrine. The deep awareness about death is derived from three sub-categories; death is unescapable; death is a transition from one form to another; and death is the universal truth.

***Death is unescapable.*** Informants explained meaning of death is unescapable as: the elderly keeping mentally healthy while aging by having their thoughts, understanding, and perception of the truth of death as a natural process that cannot be escaped. They also reflected that the meaning of death is unescapable as follows:

One informant is an elder who has faith and follows Buddha teaching. He told that all beings was born and will die and that death a fate couldn't not avoid. He stated as follows:

*“Practicing the Dharma doctrine can guide the knowledge of birth, aging, suffering, and death, which are unavoidable... If we truly understand this we will see that we cannot escape death. If you accept this, you will not worry when death comes... this practice leads me to have a peaceful mind in later age and keeps me healthy without worrying about when death will come.”* (79 year-old male: M3)

Next, one informant defines that the meaning of ‘death is unescapable is to support having deep awareness about death through Buddhist doctrine category. He is a monk in the local temple (Wat Bost) who teaches the people about the way of human life by following Buddhist teaching is that everyone will face death without the possibility of avoiding it. He stated the following:

“Buddhist principles taught about death as to keep in mind that whoever is born is bound to die; tomorrow I must die for it... (death) is something that we all must face (Monk Wat Bost).”

*Death is a transition.* In this study, informants also described the meaning of having deep awareness about death through Buddhist doctrine as the idea that death is a transition.

Informants explained the meaning of ‘death is a transition’ refers to the elderly keeping healthy through aging while dealing with their beliefs about death and transition after death. This belief is based upon the Buddhist principle which promotes life and reincarnation. Learning about reincarnation can lead to a greater understanding and deeper awareness about death. With this belief the elderly can lead their life in aging with a healthy outlook on death.

As one 79 year old informant said that for 20 years ago until now, he has been a spiritual guide or lay leader of a congregation for the community. He stated that he

applies the Buddhist doctrine as a guide line in his life for example of death as a journey. He stated as follows:

*“Death in Buddhist principles refers to a journey from one life to another. Any positive, virtuous actions (profitable state) we make in this life will be the a provision for the next life... I move my life to death without worrying about death... This is happy living in later age.” (79 year- old male: T5M11)*

*Death is the universal truth.* Lastly, the meaning of having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine in this study is described by informants as ‘death is the universal truth’. This refers to elderly retaining their healthy mental state with their belief about the truth of death within all living beings. As one informant describes, he is an old man who regularly follows the Buddha teaching and often joins the Dharma chat group at the temple. He stated that he has been interested about Buddha teaching regarding death before he was 60 years old. Now he is 77 year old and to him death is the reality or truth for all human beings. He stated as follows:

*“Why do I need to be worried when death comes... Instead of concerns about death I keep my mind healthy when facing it... For the death of my wife, I realized that it was her time to leave. Indeed, when my time comes, I will have to go. I realize that death is the truth.... When the end of life comes, we all have to leave all beloved ones - parents die, children pass away- it is called separation by death. It is the universal truth of life.” (77 year-old male: M2)*

Also, in this study informants explained that the meaning of having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine was coming from their life’s experiences. According to the informants’ point of view, their life experiences about death stem from their practice and understanding of the Buddhist doctrine. They give two sub-categories: Directed learning of near death experience and indirect learning by experiencing the deaths of other persons, in support of having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine.

*Directed learning about near death experience:*

Directed learning is a skill that informants learn by practical strategy according to Buddhist teaching. In order to understand this principal, a person observes living and death in daily life. In this study, informants described directed learning of near death experience as the lessons learned from their life circumstances that humans are born, grow old, get sick, and die. When facing degeneration in advanced age, changes in health status occur which can lead them to see these changes as being due to their awareness of death and near death that are reflected as the informants learning through self-experience. In addition, some informants had their own near death experience (NDE). Informants described NDE in the following way:

One informant is a monk who gives sermons to the elderly about awareness of death. He told that the elderly easily learn about facing death from their real life experiences as they are aging and faced with disease or sickness. Thus the elderly should be awareness about facing death. He explained as follows:

*“First, all human beings are born with disease, no one never gets sick. Therefore if we consider every day that we have to get sick, this will make us conscious to find a solution, and not to be careless, that is, not abandon maintaining our health. Second, when we get ill we think about death. Therefore, when we consider that we have to die, we will not fear death, but we will get a heightened consciousness and know what we have to do by undertaking good deed, (Monk Wat Bost).”*

Some informants had faced a near-death experience. One recounted an experience of a home robbery: she was hit on the head with a piece of wood and was unconscious for one night, and subsequently called herself “resurrected”.

*“When I was unconscious, I saw a beautiful place like paradise. God or goodness allowed me to select which place I would like to stay. At that time I decided to go back to the earth. I think I was dead, but I was resurrected as the result of accumulated good deed. Every day for over 50 years I prepared myself for death and dying by always practicing the dharma, mindfulness, and being a folk healer, and by doing good deeds by helping others. Auntie [I] felt when he*

*was hurting me, when I was attacked I believed he would hit me until I died. But I did not die. I am still alive, I will do good deeds by healing other people and chanting and meditation. After my recovery, my memory recalled details about the robber, I knew him well, he was a money borrower. I forgive him for the assault, I think of Laws of Karma. He was given a garland to apologize.” (80 year-old female: T3F8)*

*Indirect learning by experiencing the deaths of other persons:*

Indirect learning by experiencing the deaths of other persons is another way that elderly can learn about having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine in order to understand facing death. Indirect learning is a life skill that the informants possess about facing death through others, or events of the learning environment that provide opportunity for them to understand better.

In this study, informants explained their indirect learning by experiencing the deaths of other person as lessons learned from the loss and grieving of loved ones, and lessons learned through a sermon, for example at funeral ceremonies.

*“When uncle died, auntie’s [my] mind took a long time to recover... auntie [I] overcame the feelings of loss and stopped thinking about it or put it out of mind. I thought that he went to meet his precepts, his merit. While I am still alive, I have to pay attention and perform good deeds to live and earn merit. I practice consciousness so when I die I will have mindfulness and not be careless in life and earn merit.” (73 year-old female: T4F9)*

Other informants passionately shared what they have indirectly learned from the loss by attending a funeral ceremony and contemplating the funeral prayers.

*“Attending the funeral. The Buddhist metaphysics prayers (Abhidhamma-pitaka/extra doctrine: บทสวดพระอภิธรรม) for funeral, Buddhist metaphysics (พระอภิธรรม 7 คัมภีร์) taught that Kusala-dhamma (Skillful), A kusala-dhamma (Unskillful), Abyakata-dhamma (The indeterminate; neither good-nor-bad thing), means any righteousness or unrighteousness, or things that is a merit and not merit, or any things that is neither merit nor demerit. These things can exist and end.*



*Whatever exists will deteriorate or end. We should not depend on it. Our life and body deteriorates by day and time passing. Sometimes, it ends before deterioration. Attending funerals reminds people that the body exists and ends. We will also die. Therefore, we should not be careless in doing merit-making good deeds.” (79 year-old male: M3)*

Besides having deep awareness about death according to Buddhist doctrine, the informants also reported on the preparation for peaceful death based on Buddhist doctrine in order to support the theme of the recognition of facing death.

***Preparing for peaceful death based on Buddhist doctrine.*** The second category describes the essence of recognizing facing death. The informants felt they needed to understand death as peaceful, and this needs mental preparation. Most informants perceived the meaning of preparing for a peaceful death based on their respective Buddhist beliefs as this process that was a consequence of their deep awareness about death. If the informant has an awareness of death and reflects on their understanding of life and death, then he has begun preparation for death.

In this study, the informants maintained their health especially their mental health in later age by respecting the Buddhist principles and their beliefs can lead their consciousness to an end peacefully. They thought about death deliberately, were preparing to let themselves give up their self or ego, and were purposefully doing good deeds while aging. Informants were described as follows:

One informant, who practices meditation in everyday life has followed Buddhist teaching since she was 30 year old. Now as an 80 year old, other people in the community give respect to her as a kindness, and welcome her as an older person who applies Buddhist teaching into her way of life. She told that in aging, preparing to face death with peace is necessary. She stated as follows:

*“We have to practice preparing to deal with death consciously and regularly, until we are accustomed to it. If we are not well prepared, when the time of death comes we cannot control our consciousness...this is the way to have a peaceful mind and health in aging.” (80 year - old female: T3F8)*

Another informant also confirms that preparing to face death by accumulating merit in later age leads her to having a peaceful mind. She is a joyful elderly woman in later age and especially mindful. She applies the Buddhist doctrine into everyday life by giving traditional treatment to help the ill people with burn care. She told that helping people is the way of doing merit for her which she thinks this is the way of preparing to face death in aging. She stated as follows:

*“Do not be careless in the moment of life and do things to accumulate merit, is the way of preparing consciously for death... While doing this my mind is calm.”*

(73 year-old female: T4F9)

Moreover, in this study informants explained the preparing for a peaceful death based on Buddhist doctrine in practical ways is derived from two paths including preparing for a peaceful death in the empirical world and preparing for a peaceful death in the Dharma world.

*Practice of preparing for a peaceful death in the empirical world:*

Informants explained that preparing for a peaceful death in the empirical world are the responsibilities that the elderly should undertake before they die so as not burden their family after they pass away. This is the one of social tasks they should tend to before death.

*“The problem nowadays is the elderly die suddenly without any preparations. How do their descendants then live? The big issues are always about dividing the property such as farmland and other assets, this can sometimes lead to legal battles. Therefore, to prevent this problem, the elderly should plan for the life after death by disclosing their wishes to their descendants and making inheritance arrangements.”* (87 year - old male: M7)

*Practice of preparing for a peaceful death in a Dharma world:*

Informants explained the preparing for a peaceful death in a Dharma world as the practices that help one recognize facing death as a natural part of life. This can be a conscious action, by performing good deeds, and a precautionary action, by releasing

oneself from attachments to others and the empirical world. To accumulate goodness is a treasure that will remain with oneself even after death.

*“Death is inevitable... Uncle is [I am] building good deeds by being the leader of all ceremonies in the village and passing on his knowledge to the next generations. Being a temple officiator or merit leader at the temple makes him [me] feel happy --merit is happiness and pleasure.” (79 year-old male: T5M11)*

Some informants reported undertaking good deeds or merit making. This refers to informants' thoughts or behaviors that should be beneficial to others in the community. Somewhat ironically, they believed that “selfless actions” will prepare them for a peaceful death by gaining merit for their journey to the next life.

*“Preparation without doing merit means dying without any merit or virtue with you. Therefore you will not have anything to support you when you die or transfer from one life to the next life (called Tay La Ka Mai Me: ตายหล้าข้าไม่มี).” (80 year –old traditional female: T3F8)*

Some informants reported releasing themselves from attachments. Specifically, releasing and relaxing their minds meant to be free from external binding factors and unexpected external factors. Death is certain; however when we die is uncertain. Everything in our body and other people can be transformed all the time.

*“I (auntie) prepare for death by releasing her [my]need for things. Not creating demerit is not creating attachments. [For instance] feeling that it is alright if my descendants do or don't pay attention to me, take it easy, let it be.” (an 86 year -old female: F4)*

*“Releasing is a death preparation doctrine...everyone will feel comfortable if they can comfortably let things go. Knowing that oneself is old, being satisfied with everything, such as not being envious, puts one's mind at peace. Let things go, just let things go when anyone says anything. We are already at this age, just let it go (ชำระหนี้).” (an 80 year -old female traditional healer: T3F8)*

## Discussions

This study discusses central Thai villagers' belief about health as an integral part of both mind and body. Mind over matter is the Buddhist teaching that mind is chief, and can lead to success while living, thus lay Buddhist should strengthen their mind by practicing and following the Buddhist doctrine. The body's change during one's life is natural, but people should focus on preserving healthy body. Mind and body don't make individually but rather they functioning together (Payutto, 2006; Seneha, 2008). Therefore, the health of elderly is a result of a healthy mind and body. Also the Buddhist doctrine has a major influence over the beliefs and behavior of central Thai villagers. More than 90 percent of Thai people are Buddhist (The Government's National Statistic Office, 2000), villagers in central Thai, using Buddhism as a doctrinal guideline, especially the elderly villagers in these rural areas (Pincharoen & Congdon, 2003). The villagers learn and absorb the teaching of Buddhism throughout their entire life through their traditional culture (Channgam, 2013). Therefore the Buddhist doctrine is a local wisdom in central Thailand that elderly use to maintain mind and body health. In addition, the villagers practice central Thai tradition as their ancestors did. The centenarians of each given village are proof that the habits they follow have helped them in maintaining their health. These lifestyle practices include: having good relationships with others, living close to nature, eating local foods/herbs, and using Buddhism to develop their minds (Phunsiri, 2014). Therefore, the traditions of the elderly in central of Thailand have a positive impact on one's health.

In this study, three themes will be discussed namely; strengthen healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways; self-devotion to gain merit; and recognize facing death according to Buddhist doctrine.

### **Strengthen Healthy Mind and Body Following Central Thai Traditional Ways**

Strengthen healthy mind and body following central Thai traditional ways way refers to how the elderly maintain their health in later age through applying Buddhist doctrine and practice following central Thai traditional ways.

**Strengthening healthy mind following Buddhist doctrine.** Strengthening healthy mind following Buddhist doctrine, is an essential part of health. “*A sound mind in a sound body*”--*healthy mind in a healthy body*--, this reflects the belief that a healthy mind is a significant part of aging, and that the mind and the body act on each other (Tongjareon, 2011; Siramput, 2010). Buddhist teaching describes humans as being compassed of mind and body. The body will grow and decline during life but the mind can grow all through one’s life. In later age, the mind can be developed to be strong by training with Buddhist doctrine. If the mind so strong and healthy, that could help the body to be healthy too. In this study, all elderly were Buddhist, they believed that the mind is a crucial part, as the Buddha teaches as “*Mind is chief, mind mad are thing*” (สิ่งทั้งหลาย มีใจเป็นใหญ่ มีใจเป็นประธาน ทุกอย่างสำเร็จได้ด้วยใจ) Payutto (2006). Thus, in later age, a healthy mind is a dominant aspect of health among the elderly. Therefore, the application of the Buddhist doctrine helps to develop their mind and achieve state of good health. They practice chanting and meditation in their daily life.

Similarly, in previous research studies, the findings show that mind is a greater aspect of elderly health and that the mind could create a healthy body. Two studies reported that in later age the mind is a crucial part of elderly. A healthy mind could help lead to a healthy balance or well-being among the elderly (Tongjareon, 2011; Siramput, 2010). According to a study by Thanakwang, it was reported that the best way to develop or grow the mind in the elderly is by having faith and practicing Buddhist doctrine every day (Thanakwang et al., 2014; Siramput; 2010). Bhikkhu Prayude Payutto, who authored Buddha Dhamma, stated that the elderly mind could be developed by practicing and following Buddhist teaching. This lead the elderly to be healthy at a later age (Payutto, 2006). Sanaha (2008), also confirmed that when people understand and practice the principles of Buddha’s Dhamma regarding “*a sound mind in a sound body*” (จิตตต สงฺกิลิฏฺฐ), it helps them to feel good and helps calm both mind and body. According to Othaganont et al. (2002), health can be maintained by practicing and following religious teachings regularly (Othaganont et al., 2002).

Elderly who practice their beliefs follow Buddhist doctrine to help strengthen minds, those practices were chanting, and meditation. Two studies, report that practicing Buddhist doctrine by chanting and meditation are good ways to strengthen

minds. *Practicing chanting* regularly helps to preserve mental conditions at a later age. Also effective spiritual practice for enhancing emotional and spiritual well-being aids in training the mind to develop mental stability, and can lead to overall health (Rattanapun, 2008; Wiriyasombat, Pothiban, Panuthai, Sucamvang, & Saengthong, 2011). The practice of chanting also elicits a peaceful mind and a sense of happiness in life. One other result of chanting could be to help one to become contemplative and not wander and engage in negative thought enabling those who chant to find a sense of peacefulness and achieve spiritual well-being (Kunsongkiet, 2004). *Practicing meditation* is the Buddhist practice that helps to strengthen minds in later age. Wiriyasombat (2011), posted that the benefits of practicing meditation lead to better spiritual well-being and coping skills in later age. Also, it aids mental development and can help a person develop self-understanding through mindfulness training (Wiriyasombat et al., 2011). Two studies also confirmed that practicing meditation can help rural Thai elderly adult's to develop a peaceful or cheerful mind in later age, and help guide them to accept the natural truth of one's life (Rattanapun, 2008; Tongprateep, 2006).

***Strengthening the body following central Thai traditional practices.*** Strengthening the body following central Thai traditional practices according to the quotation posted above, could describes that “*if the body is strong and healthy, the mind will also be healthy*”, given meaning that mind and body interact with each other. Preserving or delaying deterioration of the body was a challenge. In this study, using central Thai local foods/herbs and practicing central Thai physical activities on a daily basis attributed to the strengthening and creating a healthy body. Those practices are effective in maintaining health while aging. Applying those activities in their daily lives in congruence to their cultural beliefs helps to promote eternal youth and preserve their functional ability in later age.

Two studies supported that the adjustment of lifestyle following the traditional or cultural belief (which is influence by religious or social context), is a significant factor that helps maintain health in later age. It helps the elderly understand and accept the deterioration of function, and adapt through change in daily living. The same studies also proposed that the traditional knowledge which they called “*local wisdom*” helps to delay the aging process. This knowledge influenced the elderly to adjust to a healthy lifestyle (Danyuthasilpe et al., 2009; Rattanapun, 2008). In this study, the lifestyle

adjustment involved consuming local foods/herbs, and practicing physical activities. *Consuming local foods/herbs*, one study reported that consuming local foods helps to delay degeneration of aging (Siriamonpun & Meesai, 2009). Two studies posted that lifestyle adjustment regarding the use of local herbs in daily life helps to alleviate or maintain physical health in later age (Sukonthasan, 2004; Suwan, 2000). Moreover, reported across the study was that practicing exercise (physical activities) regularly is a better way to maintain health of both body and mind. Exercise can be an enjoyable activity in daily life, help keep the body free of disease and disability, and lead to overall good health (Pincharoen & Gongdon, 2003). According to the findings across studies, it was reported that elderly people who exercise regularly are more likely to have greater functional capacity and better memory than those who do not participate in exercise regularly (Apirukworakul, 2009; Jullmusi, 2008; Khangsarikit, 2009). Applying the local wisdom regarding exercise practice has more benefits attributing to health in later age. Results across the studies recommended integrating elderly activities known as local wisdom such as “Fawn Jerng (ฟ้อนเจิง): Lanna dance” into exercise programs. It was found that this exercise program could motivate the elderly in doing daily practice with enjoyment, thus contributing towards a good health outcome (Apirukworakul, 2009; Jullmusi, 2008; Khangsarikit, 2009; Ratanasiri, 2008; Saengrut, 2009; Sobong, 2008).

In summary, elderly health comprises both mind and body, and the practices to maintain elderly health take account for mind as well as body and aim to develop peace of mind and a strong mind while preserving a well-functioning body. Strengthening the mind and body following central Thai traditional ways is the practice of maintaining healthy among the elderly. Practices follow Buddhist doctrine and traditional ways, maintaining congruence with their beliefs and natural environment. Therefore, applying this concept helps to maintain a healthy mind and body in daily living.

### **Self-Devotion to Gain Merit**

Self-devotion to gain merit was derived from volunteering for public benefits, and gaining merit through donation. Self-devotion to gain merit was described by the elderly as the activities of engaging in society to benefit the public. The elderly in rural

communities are concerned and giving to the public. Such activities help to promote elderly health in both mind and body which lead to fulfilling their beliefs about gaining merit by doing good deeds.

**Volunteering for public benefits.** The elderly described the volunteer as engaging with society by giving their time, knowledge, and self –capacity to contribute benefits for the community. The benefits of engaging oneself in social activities include maintaining a joyful mind and having good relations with others in later age. Also, volunteering or offering oneself as a traditional healer or traditional rites to help others were the value task. When informants could do this social activity they felt satisfied, joyful, and felt an increase in self –esteem or self-value in later age.

Two similar studies proposed that following traditional culture helped in maintaining psychological health later in life. By engaging in social activities that benefit others; such as volunteering helps make them view their self as being useful and helpful (Tongjareon, 2011; Siramput, 2010). According to three studies in Thailand, one distinction of healthy elderly was the common offering or volunteering for public benefit. Such activities included joining an elderly club or community activity, were meaningful and caused a positive perception of health among the elderly, also leading to a better state of health in later age. The same studies also stated that volunteering lead to a greater feeling of satisfaction and better life in later age (Danyuthasilpe et al., 2009; Thanakwang, 2009; Thanakwang et al., 2014).

The concordance of a global study focused on the practice of offering oneself to benefit the public. Seppala (2013) reported that giving to others and connecting with others in a meaningful way helps the elderly enjoy better mental and physical health and increases recovery from disease or deviation in the body. A study by Burr, Tavares, and Mutchler, (2011), also confirmed that volunteer work in the elderly is an important activity which enhances both psychological and physical function. For example, a modest amount of volunteer activity could lower the risk of hypertension in later life (Burr et al., 2011).

Note, that in this study, volunteering involved offering their self-ability learned from their life experiences. This activity is more meaningful for the rural villagers as



this is the reason that people pay respect to the elderly and as are viewed as a pillar in the community. Offering to help others is a very positive traditional activity, and can also come from others that value the tradition. The two resources of positivity encourage the elderly to have healthy minds. When the elderly offer themselves as volunteer workers, they use the ability of adjusting and managing their lives. This allowed them to gain cognitive function and emotional control and to have good relationships with others which ultimately could help to delay degeneration or prevent some psychological problem that could occur in later age such as depression. Besides this volunteer work, increase in self-esteem were recognized from those who paid respect to them for the things that they had/done.

Similarly, one study reported that the elderly have better cognitive function as a result of volunteer work. Their mental health improved by planning and coordinating various activities while volunteering. This helped to slow the degeneration of their mental health. Volunteer work in the elderly helps in reducing depression symptoms, it leads to positive psychological feelings, and makes the elderly feel that they have played an important role in society. Moreover, it improves their sense of self-esteem and personal control (Population Reference Bureau: Today's Research on Aging, 2011). Taft (1985), posted about "self-esteem in later life". The report stated that, the relationship of aging to self-esteem has two points, (1) outer self-esteem associates with status in society or elderly self-esteem based on a reflection of the perception of others; (2) inner self-esteem associates the power of elderly (which includes knowledge, skills, income, status) and the capability of elderly managing their environment.

Similarly, other studies reported about engaging in social activities such as joining an elderly club. Such activity not only increases the sense of self-esteem but could increase life span. For example, a study among very older Australians in over ten years survival, the researcher indicates that it is important to engage in social activity or have better social networks with friends as this could protect against mortality or lengthen survival. Participating with others especially friends gives more benefit in maintaining elderly health. (Giles, Glonek, Luszcz, & Andrews, 2005). A study by Piliavin and Siegl (2007) reported the same result. Volunteer work increase life span. For example,

older volunteers in a California country had 44 percent lower mortality than others who not volunteer (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007).

**Gaining merit through donation.** The elderly described the donation as an activity of giving objects or goods, and money or assets to benefit the community. Following this practice of their beliefs to gain merit helps to make them feel happy in later age. In this study, gaining merit through donation was derived from making offerings to monks and by giving money or goods to help others.

The elderly in central Thai are Buddhist; Buddhists adhere to the notion that by giving or offering, contributing, or helping others, helps one's self to gain merit. They believe donation is a practical way to accumulate merit which ensures a better next life. Making merit by offering alms to the monks is regularly done in daily living in the rural villages. Also, offering goods or objects to benefits was a way to provide Thai elder's a way to achieve spiritual growth, which it claim as a key indicator of health in later age (Saneha, 2008; Siramput, 2010).

Thanakwang et al. (2014), also posted that the elderly living in rural areas, make merit by offering alms to the monks. This is a tradition in their culture. That they follow on a regular basis. Their belief in making merit is the way persons doing good deeds help them to feel happy, peaceful and helps them to attain meaning in their life (Thanakwang et al., 2014). One study mentions that the way to maintain health in Thai elderly people that want to gain merit and get rid of karma by contributing to their community in a varieties of ways. These include fundraising for the homeless and hungry, caring for children and grandchildren, offering alms to the monks, helping with administrative work in maintaining a religious community. This activity (volunteer work) led them to feel happy, valued, and useful to society, thereby enriching their life. Contributing to others or community was important to these elderly Thai persons (Pincharoan & Congdon, 2003).

In summary, self-devotion to gain merit which included volunteering for public benefits and gaining making donation through the activity of giving or offering reflect the value tasks in aging. The activities help to develop a peaceful and joyful mind, and

keep their bodies healthy. They also practiced their beliefs about gaining merit following the Buddhist doctrine.

### **Recognize Facing Death According to Buddhist Doctrine**

An elderly health is comprised of the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health all in holistic balance. Individual elders may perceive their health differently, based upon personal and cultural norms and values. A Thai elderly health status includes both positive health as well as health problems. Although physical health in the elderly often declines, psychological health can be promoted and strengthened. Positive psychological health can be a protective barrier in later life, especially when faced with death and dying.

Buddhism offers Thai elders the local wisdom to maintain holistic health in line with cultural context. This is grounded in the Three Universal Characteristics (Trilakkana); Anicca, which refers to things both living and non-living having the ability to change. Second, Dukkha, which can be seen among those elderly who don't understand natural rules, and believe that all things have permanence. When they experience loss or a change in social position, they might become depressed and suffer as a result. If the elderly are able to understand impermanence, they can understand suffering as they are similar. Thirdly, Anatta or selflessness means that all things have no permanent entity. Everything exists under the cause and effect law, nothing belongs to anyone. Human beings misunderstand that things belong to them and become attached to them. When there is attachment, suffering will follow (Channgam, 2013; Payutto, 1993). These Buddhist doctrine influences elders' beliefs, knowledge, and behavior, all of which can influence elders' health.

When elderly in Central Thailand recognize and face death according to Buddhist doctrine, they are using local wisdom to help maintain their health in accordance with cultural beliefs. Buddhist principles are dominant factors in their beliefs, behavior, lifestyle, and their readiness for the end of life are regarded as the basics that Buddhists should know and understand. If the elderly apprehend the Three Universal Characteristics, they understand that Buddha teachings regarding the natural law and change in later life. If they accept deterioration as part of later life, they may be

prepared to face death peacefully. Older people must cope with losses in their health and independence. Preparing for peaceful death is a significant task and requires a deep understanding of life and death. Practice through Buddhist principles has guided older people to be mindful while facing death peacefully.

From the Thai Buddhist perspective, peaceful death is promoted by family members. They are co-providers in attainment of peaceful death. Researchers recommend that family members should try and accept death, be at peace, and participate in a family member's dying process. Consequently, if a person is intimately engaged in the process of death and dying, they then might be able to help a person to accept death as a natural process (Kongsuwan & Touhy, 2009). Buddhist principles that actively support preparation to encounter death include meditation and contemplation of death while attending others' funerals. This enables participants to learn and understand about the process of death and dying, be aware and not to fear death nor be careless in life. In addition, they should be living in the present time, have a strong mind, be generous, kind, tender, and be committed to merit making, and abstain from sinful behaviors (Triyakul, 2012).

One previous study found older people (60-74 years) who had religious beliefs, and practiced Dharma every day by chanting, reflected a high level of behavior for preparing to cope with dying and death. Rongsikosai et al. reported that older people who experienced anxiety surrounding death at high levels, had poor behavior in terms of preparing for death (Rongsikosai et al., 2013).

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