

“Stop the Blood” or “Open the Gates” ?

By Tim Holt CMT, RTT

Most experienced therapists and instructors of Traditional Thai Massage include the inguinal and axillary circulatory restriction in their treatments. This clears stagnation of energy (*lom*) in the large gates of the pelvis and the small gates of the shoulder / neck area. From a western perspective, it helps the body to clear toxins and bring nutrient rich blood to areas that are receiving bodywork. It is presented in Thailand as “stop the blood”. This use of the English phrase “stop the blood” is really a negative and inaccurate frame for such a positively healing treatment. I have no historical data on when this English phrase was employed, but this is what I originally learned at the Old Medicine Hospital in 1988. Many other teachers in the Chiang Mai area also use this phrase, and it is spreading worldwide. I believe the original Thai intention of this technique would be better served by using a more positive name.



Femoral compression in the “downward dog” position. Provides a good stretch and secure ergonomics for the practitioner. *Photo courtesy Tim Holt.*



Compression in bent-knee position. It’s a bit difficult to keep the practitioner’s back straight, but the pose is good for blood stops of short length when making a transition to standing position.

Photo courtesy Sunshine Massage School.

We are temporarily restricting the flow to the extremities, but the intention and effect is to open the gates, move energy, flush tissues and distribute nutrients and oxygen. In essence we are increasing the blood flow to those areas. We are not really “stopping” blood flow. We are encouraging it to go deeper and find new pathways. We are also slowing the heart rate and providing a deep relaxation for the client. It is similar to the use of ice on injuries in western sports massage. Ice creates retrostasis. Blood retreats from the cold stimulus. Once the cold stimulus is removed, there is a surge of circulation back into the affected area, flushing metabolic debris and bringing nutrition to the area. Blood flow is restricted, but healing occurs when the tissues are engorged by fresh blood.

When I present the “stop the blood “ technique in my classes, I normally get a few raised eyebrows and encounter some mild fear about this treatment. I sense that the fear is a reaction to the words themselves, not the technique. If you stop the blood flow to healthy tissue, it will die! This is the mental image students often have when this is initially presented, so I no longer use this phrase. I teach the Old Medicine style as well as Pichest’s techniques, but I introduce them as opening the energetic large gates of the pelvis and the small gates of the shoulders. I present this as a circulatory flush from a western perspective.



Femoral compression in “lunge” position. Body weight is shifted forward while half kneeling, and practitioner’s back can remain straight.
Courtesy Bob Haddad

This is an open request to the international community of Thai therapists and instructors to reframe these valuable traditional techniques with a more positive and accurate introduction and title. Om Namo !



Tim Holt directs the East West Massage School in Sebastopol, California, and teaches courses in traditional Thai massage and western massage therapy.

Left: Blood stop in the “plank” or “push-up” position. Note that the arms descend directly from the shoulders in a straight line. *Photo courtesy Tanya Boigenzahn.*