

The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand

By Pierce C. Salguero

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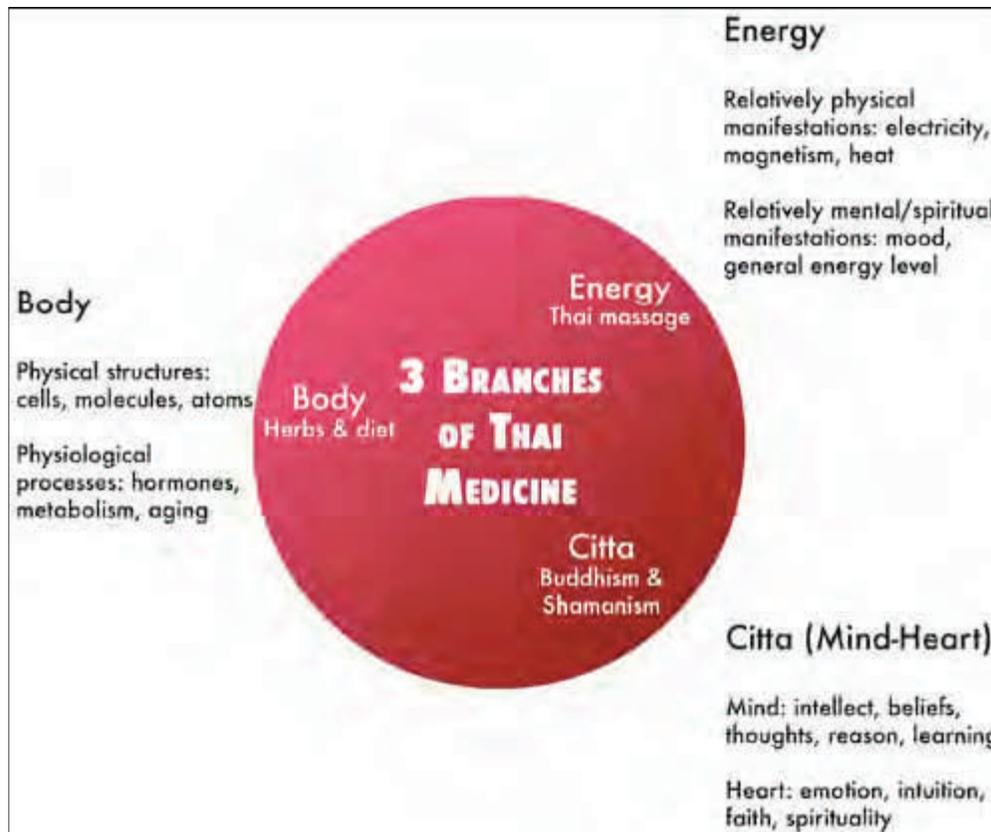
Introduction

The Circle of Life

One of the primary teachings of traditional Thai medicine, and one of its most important insights, is the Circle of Life*. This description of life says that three essences are always present: body, citta, and energy. In this formula, body means the physical structure, the atoms and molecules that make up the material self. *Citta*, often translated as mind-heart, is a word used to refer to the internal self, the inner processes which are not visible or directly measurable from the outside but which are real to each of us in our own subjective experience. Energy, in this system, is the force that animates both the body and the citta, linking them together.

In traditional Thai medicine, each of these essences is given equal weight, and it is said that all three must be present, balanced, and healthy in order for life to continue optimally. As the three are interconnected, injury, disease, or imbalance in one area naturally leads to problems in the others. For example, if one is subjected to bodily injury, this theory says that mental imbalance (such as depression or fear) and lowered energy levels will result. Likewise, if one's mind and heart are not balanced, this will lead to energetic imbalance and disease in the body. Finally, if one's energy levels falter, this will lead to both mental and physical lethargy. Because disease originating in any of the three essences soon leads to imbalance in the others, traditional Thai medicine addresses these three essences equally and simultaneously.

** The Circle of Life philosophy presented here is one of the primary teachings in the courses of the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. This facility is one of the foremost schools of traditional Thai medicine in the country, and a healthcare facility which preserves the traditional model in the heart of a modern city.*



The three branches of Thai medicine include therapies for the body, energy, and citta. As all diseases affect all three essences, so medicine must address all holistically.

In traditional Thai medicine hospitals, the Circle of Life is addressed within the same facility, under the same roof. At the Shivagakomarpaj Traditional Medicine Hospital, for example, there is a main building that houses all of the massage and herbal activity. To the right, you have the educational facilities where students learn traditional medicine. To the left are the herbal saunas, which provide herbal inhalation therapy. In the center of it all is the altar (see photos in Chapters 3 and 4).

The patient who is sick and comes for healing will first stop at the altar for meditation and offerings, and then go for their massage. After the massage they will go to the sauna to detoxify and sweat out impurities, and then to the herbalist for a consultation. They will finish once again at the altar before leaving. Thus, the whole Circle of Life is located all in one place, and all the medical specialists work together with the same holistic mindset.

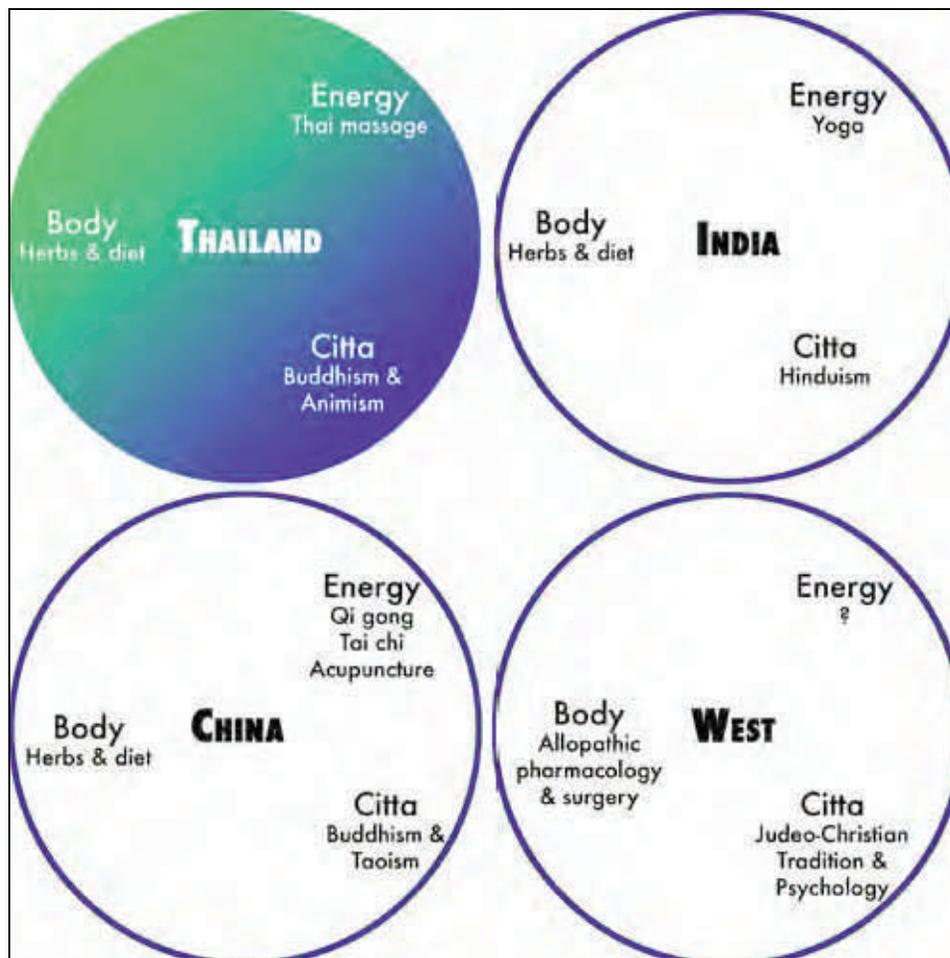
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This book is the third in a three-part series on traditional Thai medicine that explores these three essences. The first title, *A Thai Herbal*, discussed therapies of the body: herbal and dietary medicine affecting the human organism at the physiological level. The second book, *The Encyclopedia of Thai Massage*, detailed the practices of Thai bodywork (called *nuad boran* in Thai), a system of massage which deals primarily with energy lines, yoga stretches, and pressure points designed to stimulate the body's energy flow. This current book is about the citta, the mind and the heart. In traditional Buddhist language, this one word, citta, is used to mean both intellect and emotions at the same time. Unlike our own Western philosophy that has emphasized the difference between the mind and heart (or left-brain and right-brain, or thought and intuition), Buddhist philosophy sees these two as part of the same process, an inner self or consciousness that is not separated into different functions.

An over-used but helpful word to describe the practices of the citta is “spirituality,” and the techniques which work on the citta “spiritual healing.” In the Thai model, because body, energy, and citta are interlinked, working with the citta is important to overall health and well-being both before and after illness strikes—both for practitioners and therapy. Thus, this book will discuss Thai ideas for both recovering from and preventing imbalance of the citta. Thai spiritual healing is a fascinating multi-cultural heritage with many influences, and is part of what makes Thailand such a colorful and exciting place. In Thailand, because of its unique history, spiritual practices revolve mostly around Buddhist and indigenous animist traditions. However, at the end of the day, the message of the Circle of Life is not dependent on the practice of any one religious tradition. Many cultures have developed similar theories to fit their own cultural needs, and we can as well. In this book, I wish to introduce the reader to a wide gamut of Thai spiritual life, from Buddhist meditation to beliefs in spirits to magical tattoos and more. This book is intended, however, to be much more than just a review of a few techniques. In the process, I hope to spark an interest in you to want to read more—and perhaps even to experience some of these practices for yourself. With this in mind, I have provided additional resources and reading at the end of each chapter for future follow-up.

A Comparison with Other Cultures

The chart on the next page draws parallels between the traditional healing practices of Thailand, India, and China, as well as with the modern West. I believe there are common threads in all four of these medical traditions, and we can see the Circle of Life at work in all. In India, yoga is the energy discipline. The traditional reason for practicing yoga is to energize certain chakras (energy centers) in the body and to increase energy flow. In India there is also the body component, Ayurvedic herbs and diet. There is also the citta, or mental-spiritual component, which for India comes mostly from Hinduism, and includes practices such as meditation and chanting. In China, acupuncture is an energy practice, as are qi gong and taichi. The body practice in China is the discipline of herbal medicine and dietary theory. China's citta practice comes from the spiritual traditions of both Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism.



A comparison of the medical systems of four cultures.

In the West, most of the standard allopathic practices—such as surgery, physical therapy, and pharmaceutical medicine concentrate predominantly on the body. Even while treating mental disorders, modern pharmaceutical medicine likes to prescribe drugs which act on the physical body. However, not all Western medicine is focused on the chemical structure of the organism. There is also a well-developed science devoted to the citta, namely psychology. A therapist may encourage a patient to talk through problems effectively without ever resorting to treating the body on the chemical level. There is also a strong presence in the West of Judeo-Christian tradition, and religious practice (in whatever form it takes) helps many people to heal the citta.

The field of energy, however, is the one area that Western medicine typically leaves out. Perhaps we seek our energetic stimulation at the gym, and this is why we tend to enjoy working out so much. Perhaps this can also explain the popularity of yoga, tai chi, qi gong, reiki, martial arts, and even Thai massage in our culture. Even though we have yet to develop a Western medical science focused on energy, researchers have begun to look at electromagnetism as a useful healing technology. I believe that this field of medicine will continue to grow, filling the current void in our scientific understanding of energetic medicine.

Unlike in the Asian traditions, however, in the West, even when we find the three branches of medicine, these are normally quite antagonistic towards each other. It is true that you can find hospitals which include both a chapel and psychological services under the same roof and a more accepting approach to alternative techniques like acupuncture, but these practices have yet to be fully integrated. We are still a long way from MDs prescribing a visit to the herbalist or the priest!



A hot herbal bath combines herbal inhalation therapy, medicinal teas, and a soothing environment. This treatment—or an herbal sauna—usually follows a Thai massage to provide treatment for all three essences.

The so-called holistic health movement has not historically been part of the solution either. Up until the present, allopathic doctors and holistic practitioners seldom have worked together to understand each other's perspectives. In the best case scenario, these communities have tolerated each other. In the worst cases, the two camps have been at war, the holistic community arguing that allopathic medicine is too aggressive and the allopathic medical community arguing that complementary medicine is bogus. Neither values the other's contribution to healthcare, so the stand-off continues.

While this situation has seen some notable improvement in recent years as Asian medical techniques gain popularity in some medical circles, there still is much work to do. Only through dialogue between Western medical professionals and holistic practitioners and through mutual understanding of the importance each plays in the field can this important work be done.

The important message of Thai medicine is that these three fields of healing—the physical, the energetic, and the spiritual—must be given equal weight and equal attention. All diseases or disorders affect all three essences, and thus all diseases require all three types of healing. All three types of healing must therefore be considered central to the field of medicine. This is the radical message of the Circle of Life: mental and emotional wellbeing are not incidental to physical health, but are an integral and necessary part of it. Or, to put it slightly differently: spirituality *is* medicine, and any medicine is not truly medicine unless it includes the spiritual.