

An Overview of Traditional Thai Massage

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Traditional Thai massage is an ancient healing system that combines broad and targeted acupressure, stimulation and manipulation of energy lines called *sen*, and assisted yoga postures. Treatment effects are enhanced when the patient is fully relaxed and breathing deeply. This traditional healing practice, called *nuad* or *nuad boran* in the Thai language, stands in sharp contrast to western massage therapies.

Traditional Thai massage rarely uses oils or lotions, and the receiver wears light clothing during a treatment. There is constant body contact between the practitioner and client, but rather than rubbing on muscles, the body is compressed, pulled, stretched and rocked in order to clear energy blockages and relieve tension. The practitioner uses thumbs, palms, fore-arms, elbows, knees and feet to create a dance of movement on the body of the receiver. In this process, joints are opened, muscles and tendons are stretched, internal organs are toned, nerves are calmed, energy is balanced. The overall effect is one of deep relaxation, rejuvenation, and physical and mental well being.



a typical assisted cobra stretch



epigraphs of energy lines

Nuad Boran (known in various forms as Thai massage, Thai Yoga Massage, and other terms) probably began to evolve in Thailand over 1,000 years ago. Based on healing principles similar to those of other Eastern healing arts, the Thai system focuses on circulation of vital energy in major pathways called *sen*. These energy lines are manipulated, and important pressure points along these pathways are stimulated to help break down blockages, stimulate energy flow and restore balance and harmony.

The result of a full-body Thai treatment is often an exciting and powerful mind/body healing experience, bringing both the receiver and the practitioner to heightened states of physical and spiritual well-being.

For many, traditional Thai massage is also a spiritual discipline in that it incorporates the Buddhist practices of mindfulness (breath awareness) and loving kindness (focused compassion). These techniques, when shared by practitioner and client, help bring the treatment session to a focused and deep level.



a deep side stretch using feet

Origin and evolution of traditional Thai massage

The Thai healing art known as nuad boran (ancient massage) probably began to evolve well over two thousand years ago in present day Thailand. Many uninformed sources falsely claim that it is 2,500 years old, or that it was invented by an Indian physician named Jivaka. The ancestor spirit of traditional Thai medicine (including massage) is indeed an Ayurvedic doctor named Jivaka Kumarabhacca, who is revered to this day throughout Thailand as the Father of Medicine. He is considered as such by virtue of the fact that he personally knew the Buddha, cared for him as a physician, and donated land to him in order to build the first monastery for the first order of Buddhist monks; the original followers of the Buddha. Jivaka is mentioned in a variety of ancient documents for his extraordinary medical skills, for his knowledge of herbal medicine, and for having treated important people of his day, including the Buddha.

Among the common people, traditions were passed down orally, but the royal court kept ancient reference texts on the subject of traditional Thai medicine. Sadly, most of these were lost when Burmese invaders destroyed the old capital of Ayutthaya in 1767. After the war, the remaining fragments were commissioned to be re-drawn as stone etchings by King Rama III in 1832, and today, over sixty such epigraphs displaying treatment points, herbal remedies and energy lines are on public display at the famous Wat Po temple medicine complex in Bangkok.



working foot points with elbows



stone sculpture of a Thai massage stretch

Traditional massage in ancient Siam was carried out in village society and also in the royal court. During its evolution, some styles focused on using only certain parts of the body to achieve the desired effect. The Royal style of Thai massage (*nuad ratchasamnak*) was developed in order to treat the King and members of the royal family and as such, only hands are used, and an appropriate and respectful distance must be kept from the receiver. Today in Thailand however, most massage practitioners use hands, feet, elbows, knees and forearms to manipulate the bodies of their clients. The Southern style, which evolved mostly from a program of studies set up at Wat Po in Bangkok, emphasizes point pressure along energy lines, acupressure protocols, and some stretching. Sometimes a cross-fiber “plucking” with the thumbs and fingers called “*jap sen*” is used to stimulate energy

flow. Northern style Thai massage is practiced in and around Chiang Mai, the therapist often applies pressure along the energy lines with hands, thumbs and feet; compresses larger areas of the body with palms, and uses deep stretching postures to achieve the desired effect. In modern times however, different techniques and styles of practice have blended together, so it is more difficult to distinguish northern from southern variations.

The theoretical basis for traditional Thai healing is rooted in the belief that all forms of life are sustained by a vital force (*lom*) that is carried along invisible pathways (*sen*) that run through our bodies. This force is extracted from air, water and food, and it is believed that disease and dysfunction come about when blockages occur along these pathways. Accordingly, Thai Massage’s intent is to free this trapped energy, stimulate the natural flow of life-force, and maintain a general balance of wellness.

Focused acupressure targets specific blocked areas on the body, and stimulates energy to flow along the lines. Broad pressure relaxes muscles and allows the body to unwind. Through assisted yoga, the body is able to be moved in ways that are difficult to attain through normal exercise and individual yoga practice. Relaxed, deep breathing helps to bring about proper balance and a peaceful state of mind. Finally, the practice of Thai massage is also a spiritual discipline since it incorporates the Buddhist principles of mindfulness (breath awareness) and loving kindness (focused compassion). The benefits of all these techniques, when shared by practitioner and client, help to bring the treatment session to a focused and profound level. The result of a full-body Thai session is often an exciting and powerful mind/body experience, bringing both the receiver and the giver to greater states of physical and mental well-being.



an area of Wat Po, Bangkok



freshly made herbal compresses

In many areas throughout Thailand, additional relief is achieved through the use of hot herbal compresses which are applied to the body prior to, or during the course of a treatment session. The compresses are made from a variety of fresh and dried herbs such as lemongrass, eucalyptus, galangal, ginger, kaffir lime, tamarind leaves, turmeric and other medicinal herbs. Other herbs and roots may be used to address the specific condition of each patient. The compresses are made by combining the materials into a bundle of cloth or a small canvass packet. Then they are steamed above a pot of boiling water until the desired temperature is attained, and applied with varying pressure to the body, generally tracing the paths of major energy lines, muscles and internal organs.

Especially since the 1990s, traditional Thai massage has begun to spread outside of Thailand and into the West. In many cases it has been represented based on Thai tradition, with intention and techniques carried out within a traditional Thai healing context. In other cases, and especially in recent years, it has been hybridized and fused with other types of Western and Eastern therapies, and also with modern creations and techniques. While there is value in adapting traditional techniques to modern therapies in order to gain wider recognition, the strength of Thai massage lies in its time-honored history and evolution, and there is no need to dilute it in order to reach the masses. When performed within traditional Thai parameters, a properly-administered Thai massage session can be a powerful tool for personal, physical and spiritual maintenance and transformation.

