

# Arterial Compression in Yoga and Thai Massage

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While attending a Bikram yoga class and performing the wind releasing pose (*pavana mukta-asana*) the instructor encouraged the class to hug their knees and bring them as close to the shoulders as possible while compressing the thigh against the chest. He explained that we were trying to stop blood flow into the leg, known in Bikram yoga as the tourniquet effect. Why do we want to do that? After all, isn't yoga about increasing blood flow, warming the body with increased circulation and hyper-oxygenating our tissues? And, by the way, what kind of wind are we trying to release here anyway?

Stopping the blood flow into the limbs is a yogic practice that dates back over 2,500 years. As practitioners of traditional Thai Massage, we routinely stop the blood flow into the limbs by compressing the major arteries that feed the legs and arms. Nuad boran (traditional Thai massage) has its roots in the Ayurvedic medicine of ancient India, and the practice of stopping the blood may have once been performed on monks in ancient times who sat for many hours in meditation. As you may have experienced, legs tend to "fall asleep" in meditation, and this is due to a slowing of blood flow into the limbs. The physicians who tended to the Buddha and the *sangha* probably utilized a method to help restore and enhance blood flow to the legs of these marathon meditators. This technique, called "stopping the blood," is still practiced today by practitioners of traditional Thai massage and some forms of yoga.

During a Thai massage session, a skilled practitioner may apply direct pressure with their palms, feet, elbows or knees to the femoral artery, located in the groin, or to the axillary artery, located at the armpit, to slow the blood flow into the legs and arms respectively. The length of compression varies, usually 15-45 seconds, and should be done only on healthy individuals and never on anyone with heart disease, high blood pressure or varicose veins. In yoga, many poses offer some degree of compression of these vital arteries. Bikram includes in his series *pavana mukta-asana* as well as *shalabha asana* (locust posture), which is a strong compressor of the axillary artery.



*Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme performs a seated femoral compression, with client in side position.  
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Detail of a "plank" style blood stop.  
Photo courtesy Tanya Boigenzahn

Stopping the blood is a misnomer; it is really the practice of slowing the blood flow through the limb's primary artery and routing it to deeper, less frequently used arteries. The benefits of stopping the blood, whether done as part of a Thai massage treatment or a yoga practice, are numerous. By encouraging the body to build strength in secondary arteries, the body builds a stronger circulatory system. We can liken this to taking a back road when driving home on the freeway and meeting with heavy traffic. There are many ways to reach our final destination; we just have to learn alternate routes in case one of them is blocked. Can we strengthen an artery in this manner? Absolutely! Blood vessels contain muscles that help to pump and move the blood. The muscular layer of an artery is the second of three layers that make up an artery known as the media layer.

next page...

Another benefit to stopping the blood is one of detoxification and re-circulation of stagnant blood. Although arterial blood flow decreases during a blood stop, venous return continues unimpeded. The suction of venous blood back towards the heart increases in the vessels of the limbs which are affected by the blood stop. Stagnant blood, which would ordinarily pool at the far ends of the limbs, is returned back into circulation. When the pressure on the artery is released, a rush of fresh oxygenated blood courses through the arteries, capillaries and veins, further removing stagnant blood and toxins that accumulate on the walls of the blood vessels.

In the Thai language, stopping the blood is translated as "opening the wind". The concept of wind here is likened to the *vata dosha* in Ayurvedic medicine which is responsible for the physical movement of the body. Stopping the blood, and other aspects of Thai massage such as assisted stretching, focus on releasing the stagnant "wind" in the body.



Detail of brachial (axillary) hand positioning.  
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