

Three Essential Parts of Thai Bodywork

Robert Wootton, PhD, LMBT

Nuat Boran [noo-aht bo-rah-n] is the name of an ancient bodywork practiced in Thailand. In America it is variously called "Thai Massage," "Thai Yoga Massage," and "Thai Bodywork." The Thai people call it *Nuat Boran*. *Boran* means "ancient," in the sense of "classic," not just "old," and *Nuat* is often unfortunately translated as "massage". But *Nuat Boran* is so different from what we think of as "massage" that I prefer to call it "bodywork" or by its real name *Nuat Boran*.

The physical part is done on the floor on a mat with the client fully clothed. It combines stretches with work on meridians called *sen*. Practitioners use their whole body in leverage and interactive work as they move and rock the client into various positions and apply rhythmic pressure up and down the meridians.

The Thais interpret stiffness in muscles and joints as stagnation or blockage which leads to disease. So they have developed some very "persuasive" techniques to loosen one up, which includes stretching every part of the body and taking all joints through their full range of motion. Other techniques are also strategically employed, especially compression, cross-fiber, plucking, and pressure point and may be applied with the practitioner's hands, knuckles, elbows, knees, and feet.

People sometimes say Thai Massage is harsh and painful because of these aggressive techniques. Indeed it can be harsh, if one is not mindful and combining all the other elements that make a real *Nuat Boran* treatment. The practitioner's body mechanics on the floor can give powerful leverage, but it can also give one the control to adjust the amount of pressure and movement to fit the client's condition and needs: from very gentle to vigorous.

Beside the physical movements, the complete *Nuat Boran* combines what we would call "energy work" on meridians which Thais call *sen*. Thais think of these *sen* as wind channels. In many ways they are similar to the meridians used in Chinese medicine and Shiatsu, but the origin of *Nuat Boran* goes back to ancient India in the Ayurvedic tradition rather than to Chinese tradition. Accordingly Thais speak of replacing "bad air" with "good air" in these channels, and there are specific ways the practitioner can breath while treating the *sen* that facilitate this exchange. Working the *sen* gives as much therapeutic benefit as the stretches. The two techniques go together.

This combination of extensive stretching and movement with meridian work is unique among modalities of bodywork: the best of yoga and energy work in one treatment! Also unique is the protocol that the treatment be done in four positions: supine, side-lying, prone, and sitting and that a session takes around two hours. The combination of stretching and meridian work and the treatment in all four positions gives the client an experience of a complete workout. I often hear comments from clients about how they feel their whole being has been treated and they feel taller, expanded, balanced, and looser and the treatment put them in a new and different place.

Besides being therapeutic for most common complaints of muscular pain in low back, shoulders, and legs, receiving *Nuat Boran* is (re-)educational for the client. Experiencing most of one's joints and muscles being mobilized makes one more aware of one's whole body, especially where one is tense or holding. Then it teaches one about letting go, which one must do to fully allow passive movement of one's limbs. Letting go sounds easy, but most people have a natural tendency to hold, protect, resist, tense, and assist. Clients often discover that the pain they are used to lessens or doesn't happen when they fully let go.

On the practitioner's side, working on the floor with the client clothed, using one's whole body in leverage feels more interactive and intimate. The client feels the close contact as supportive. Furthermore, the practitioner's thumbs get a relief with the Thai techniques using elbows, knees, feet, stretching and range of motion.

In the villages in Thailand, the *maw nuat*, the "bodywork doctor," was the main healer: the medical doctor, chiropractor, and herbalist all in one, functioning more like a doctor of acupuncture or osteopath - doing much more than we massage therapists are licensed to do here. The complete *Nuat Boran* treatment would include herbal compresses during the bodywork session and herbal concoctions to ingest afterward and possibly an herbal sauna.

The attitude or spirit in which *Nuat Boran* is done is all important, and elevates it from being a mechanical, technical treatment. This spiritual aspect which underlies or permeates true *Nuat Boran* developed during the centuries it was practiced in the Buddhist monasteries and temples. This aspect is also evident in the Thai cultural virtues of generosity, compassion, and respect. Giving *Nuat Boran* is considered an act of compassion, not just a business, or technical exercise. So before each session practitioners pause and make a gesture of respect (called *wai*) to teachers and client.

There are specific meditation practices that develop the attitudes of generosity and compassion called *Metta*. One does not have to be a Buddhist or even religious to do this practice, but it does help to open one's heart. It simply involves wishing that others be well and happy and does not require or conflict with any other religious beliefs. But *Metta* meditation is not just used for training; it is actually practiced during the entire time of giving *Nuat Boran*. Thus the giving of *Nuat Boran* is truly a meditation for the practitioner.

The whole is an art form. The Thais are graceful people, and their art forms are flowing. I consider *Nuat Boran* an art form – a graceful, smooth-flowing interactive dance. I noticed how the elders I was privileged to live and work with have an economy and efficiency of movement in whatever they do. This too is at work in *Nuat Boran* as each movement does several things at once – more than one gets at first. In fact, after 20 years of practice I still discover new aspects of the genius of the form.

As with any true art, the effect of the whole is greater than its parts. Thus *Nuat Boran* always treats the entire body in all positions, never just the one place that may hurt, though of course adjustments are made in emphasis and the specific movements chosen to address the specific needs of the client. But the full effect comes from the whole process, the whole choreography. Americans are naturally attracted to the stretching and range of motion movements and see that as defining Thai Massage. But to me that is only part of it. There must also be the treatment of *sen*, the treatment of the whole body, and the attitude of *Metta*. Then the whole is noticeably a different and more beneficial experience.

Treating the whole body in four positions allows one to treat the same area several times from different angles. On the other hand, if for some reason a client is restricted and is only comfortable in one position then a whole treatment can be given in that one position. For example, a pregnant woman can be given a whole treatment in side-lying position. Likewise, all the treatments for sitting position can be given to someone sitting in a chair. So once one learns the whole *Nuat Boran* treatment in all positions – and is also used to working through clothing - one is better able to adapt to many situations.