

preserving an Ancient Art

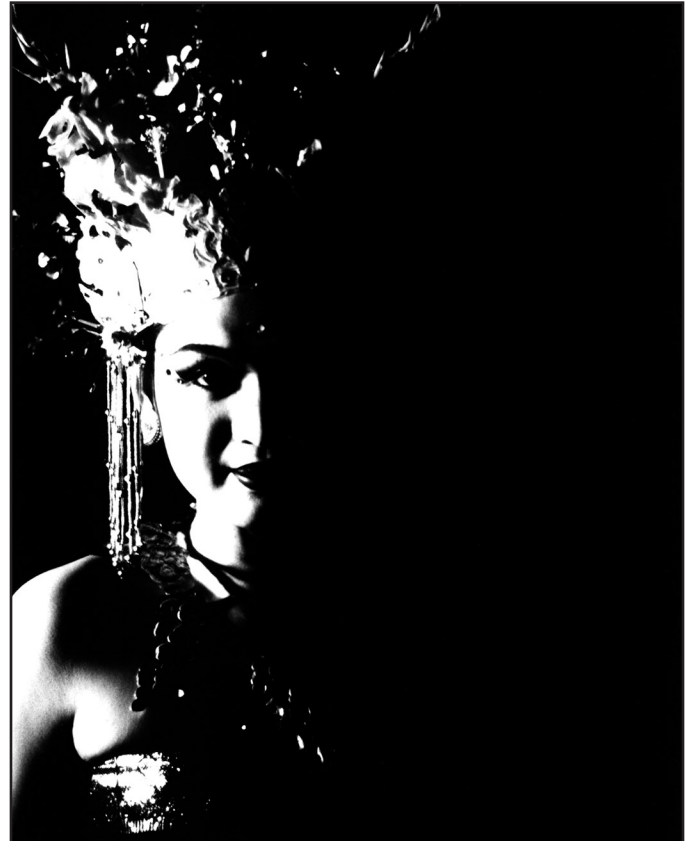
BY KRISTIN NUTTALL



what is thai massage? Within Thai Traditional Medicine (TTM) there exists the practice of assisted yoga-inspired stretching, combined with acupressure along the sib sen system of energy lines. Yet some Westerners have taken it upon themselves to create fusion blends such as Thai-Yoga or “Thai” table or chair massage. How is it possible to preserve and maintain the original practice of a sacred art that is sometimes stripped of its identity?

At the crossroads between India and China, Thailand collected great wisdom through the ages. Over two thousand years ago, Buddhist philosophy and healing practices began to appear in Southeast Asia. Based to some degree on knowledge transmitted by Indian Ayurvedic doctors, traditional Thai Medicine began to evolve.

In Thailand, ancient wisdom of health and wellness has survived for centuries as a powerful method to sustain the people. Their concept of the body is not limited to the physical plane, but also includes a model for etheric energy. TTM encompasses the four elements (Earth, Water, Fire and Wind) that are associated with the energetic and physical bodies. Supported by the spirituality of Theravada Buddhism, treatment has developed in many forms, ranging from spiritual counseling and nutrition, to herbal remedies and iridology. Various ailments are also addressed through therapeutic massage. Sen line therapy is applied using point pressure and yoga-based stretching. Also for self-renewal is Ruesri Dut Ton; traditional Thai self-stretching exercises, much like a blend of gentle Yoga & Qi Gong. These methods keep the winds of the body blowing free and unblocked. In Thai they say “Bpert pratu lom”, meaning to open the wind gate.



A Thai woman in traditional ceremonial dress.

Photo by Kristin Nuttall

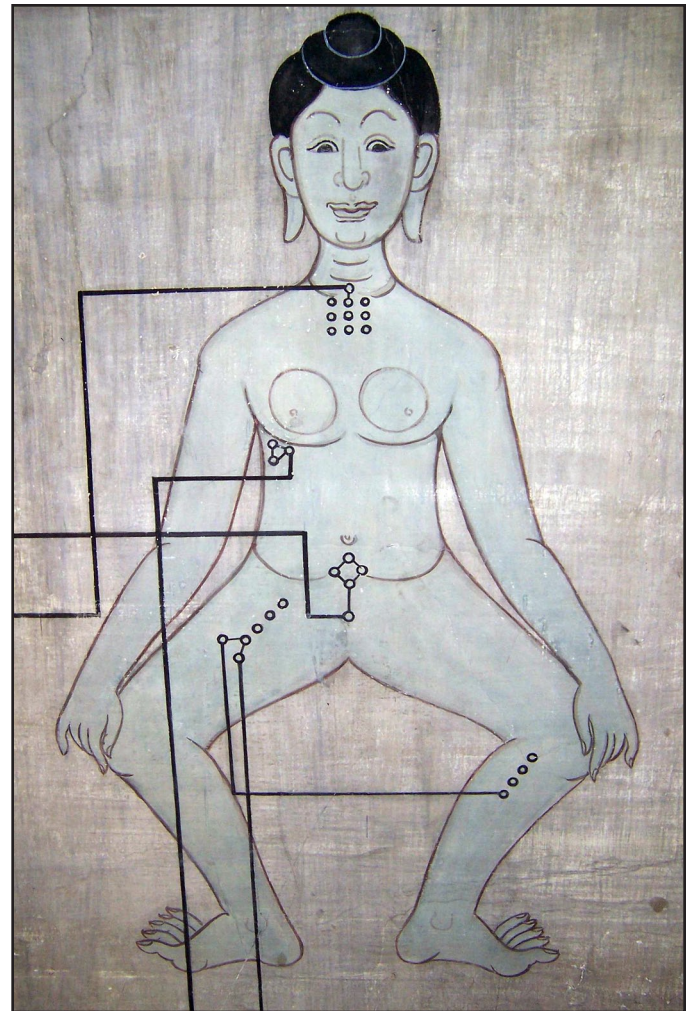
The scientific mind cannot credit what it cannot see. Caged within the gates of suppression, Traditional Thai Medicine suffered a great decline among Thai people when pharmaceuticals began to replace natural healing methods. During the 1950s, The Rockefeller Foundation, a US enterprise, infiltrated the Thai Education system. Disguised as a charitable donation of Western technology, it imposed the condition that, in exchange for bringing this new information, existing methods would be replaced. Formerly, the knowledge of con-

ceptual anatomy and opening up the body for surgery was unknown. Traditional Thai Medicine was no longer taught conventionally in the universities. To a certain extent, it was devalued and shamed.

Modern allopathic drugs began to change an entire belief system, throwing Thai society out of its finely tuned balance. Now that the glory of pharmaceuticals is wearing off, people are beginning to realize the potency of its side effects. Natural methods never had such repercussions. Integrity was stolen again at the time of the Vietnam war. During a stage of suppression and weakness of the old ways, opportunities arose to abuse therapeutic massage and Bangkok's prostitution ring grew. Their services quickly became known as "Thai Massage." Stripped of their dignity, Thais were quick to lay the blame on refugees from surrounding countries. While in the cities traditional healing modalities were discredited and suppressed, the traditional sen line therapy continued to have a stronger presence in rural areas.

Great changes are being made within the structure of Traditional Thai Medicine and therapeutic Thai massage. In 1993, the Thai Ministry of Health established The Institute of Traditional Thai Medicine for the restoration and preservation of ancient wisdom. In 2002, the Institute was granted departmental status, appointing Dr Pennapa Subcharoen as Deputy General. "We stopped developing Thai massage in the past century", said Dr. Subcharoen in an educational documentary by Asian Spa Therapies Inc. "Traditional Thai massage was mixed with the Western Swedish massage." She stated with an air of disappointment.

The Institute has begun to implement an 800-hour program as the new standard for public health and therapeutic massage. Regulation is a tricky thing in a culture where knowledge has been handed down for more than a millennium. On one hand, there is a need to somehow regulate all the "Mom & Pop" massage schools that can now be found in every neighborhood of Chiang Mai and Bangkok. But if everything is regulated, what will happen to traditional healers who have had their knowledge passed down from generation to generation?



Detail of an epigraph from the medicine pavilion at Wat Pho, Bangkok, showing various therapeutic treatment points. Photo by Bob Haddad

The path to the heart of Thai massage is through the people who are passionate about bringing it forth with authenticity. When looking for a school or a mentor, if you view your work as more than a mechanical routine or a source of revenue, then you will find integrity. In recognizing the associations we make, we support a movement for the credible existence of Thai massage. Through continued education, understanding and promotion, we make great strides toward this goal.

Kristin Nuttall lived in northern Thailand for two years, and has studied with P'Sinuan, Poo and at TMC. She practices and teaches Thai massage in British Columbia, Canada.