

TRADITIONAL THAI MASSAGE

*With
more
and more
people
requesting
this modality,
it's important
to be well informed.
This article will
get you started.*

BY RICHARD M. GOLD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER CHEUNG





Opposite Page: In Traditional Thai massage sessions, the client remains dressed in comfortable clothing.

Left: The therapist's knees rest gently on the low back of the client. The client is then slowly pulled back into the knees, creating a deep compression into the low back.

Since 1988, when I received my first session of authentic Thai massage in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I have witnessed and participated in an astounding growth in this style of therapeutic bodywork in the Western world

and throughout Asia. Today, Thai massage is being practiced in clinics and spas all over the world, and consumer demand for this service has never been higher.

How It Started

In Thailand, what is known in the Western world as Thai massage is known as Nuad Bo'Rarn. Nuad is a Thai word that translates as, "to touch with the intention of imparting healing." Bo'Rarn is a word derived from ancient Sanskrit; it translates as, "something which is ancient and revered." The same word, Bo'Rarn, is applied to the revered sutras (texts) of Buddhism. Also, in Thailand, Thai massage is recognized as a core component of an entire system of traditional medicine. There are four aspects of traditional Thai medicine:

- 1) Herbal medicine;
- 2) Nutrition and food cures;

- 3) Spiritual practices, including mantras, prayer, incantations and mindfulness meditation;
- 4) Nuad Bo'Rarn (Thai massage).

Historically, Thai massage was not specifically what Westerners consider massage. It was thought of as and utilized as the hands-on practice of traditional medicine. Thai massage techniques were applied to the treatment of the varied ailments that afflict humanity, including mental and emotional illness. The historical founder of Thai medicine is known as Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha (the father doctor). He is identified by scholars as a close personal associate of the historical Buddha, and was the head physician of the original Sangha, the community of followers that gathered around the Buddha. This would place him as living in India approximately 2,500 years ago.

Buddhist monks and followers brought their traditional medicine with them as they made their way



Left: The hands, wrists and arms receive extensive, focused attention during the session.

Center: Multiple procedures are happening here at once. The client's hand is resting on her own neck and gently held in place by the therapist's elbow. From the client's bent elbow, the therapist is slowly pulling the arm back and slightly across the client's body. Simultaneously, the m. triceps is being kneaded.

Opposite Page: Thai massage developed within a cultural context that emphasized the importance of meditation and mindfulness. Both practitioner and recipient seek deep mental quiet during the session.



from India to what is now modern Thailand, in approximately the second century B.C. For centuries, the traditional medical knowledge was transmitted orally from teacher to student. Over the centuries, a distinct tradition evolved that was primarily influenced by the Ayurvedic traditions from India, but also began to incorporate theories and practices from ancient China. In addition, healing practices of the indigenous tribal peoples of the area also became part of the local medical practices. By the time Theravada Buddhism was declared the official religion of the kingdom in approximately 1292 A.D., the traditional medicine was well established in the Buddhist monasteries, known as Wats. Traditionally, the Buddhist monks—and to a lesser extent Buddhist nuns—administered the healing work to the people in their villages.

Besides the specific hands-on techniques, herbs and foods were utilized in healing; Buddhist philosophy

pervades the practice of medicine in Thailand. Healing work is understood to be the practical application of metta, or loving kindness. Metta is understood to be a core component of daily life for each individual seeking awareness and fulfillment on the path taught by the Buddha. Teachers describe metta as the “foundation of the world,” essential for the peace and happiness of oneself and others.

In Thai Theravada Buddhism, significant emphasis is placed on the practical application of spiritual philosophy: that higher ideals be brought into everyday life and decisions. Accordingly, the practice of Thai massage demonstrates the practical application of the four divine states of mind: 1) metta, 2) compassion, 3) vicarious joy and 4) mental equanimity (brought to fruition through meditative practice).







The Issue Of Wind

Thai massage is a core aspect of a complete traditional medical system that includes specific theories of physiology, pathology and treatment. This excerpt discusses one key component of traditional Thai medical theory.

The concept of Wind is a vital theoretical component of the traditional medicines of Thailand, India and China. For the student and practitioner of Thai massage, a firm grasp of the qualities and issues that are ascribed to Wind is essential for effective practice and clear intention. Wind is an integral constituent of the body and a foundation element in the universe. Wind is the only aspect that is both considered as an element and also one of the three Doshas. Wind is considered the most important of the three Doshas, because it sets the other two in motion, and assists in the regulation of the functions of the Pitta and Kapha. When the Wind (Vata, Lom, Feng) is functioning normally, the individual has a proper regulation of all the body's activities. There will be a normalcy in the functions of digestion, assimilation and elimination. Wind provides for the guidance of mental processes and converts everything experienced by the senses into psychosomatic reactions and produces appropriate reactions. Wind initiates the

desire and the will to lead an active life. Wind keeps the breathing regular, reinforces the flow of physiological activities, supports an individual's fitness for conceptions, and promotes longevity.

According to the theories of traditional Chinese medicine, Wind (Feng) is both movement and that which generates movement in what would otherwise be still. Wind produces change and urgency in what would otherwise be slow and even. Wind arises quickly, changes rapidly and moves swiftly, causing things (especially symptoms) to appear and disappear rapidly and abruptly. Wind is considered to be the primary factor in the onset of disease from external causes because the other conditions of cold, damp, dry and heat all depend on the Wind to invade the body. In Chinese medicine, Wind also manifests as an internal factor in disease processes, usually accompanying a chronic disorder of the liver and can contribute to symptoms such as vertigo, convulsions, migraines, hemiplegia and vision distortion.

Many symptomologies are associated with Wind disharmony. Wind is extremely volatile, and is easily influenced both in terms of quantity and quality. Wind may be in excess or be deficient in the body as a whole (leading to hyper- or hypo-functionality) or in a particular aspect or part of the body (e.g., leading to spasms, tremors, or lack of function in a limb.) Wind can ascend in the body, becoming excessive in the head and causing dizziness or headaches. Wind can descend and become excessive in the legs, causing spasms. Wind tends to attack the surface of the body, causing itching, hives and symptoms of flu, such as sneezing, cough and runny nose. Wind can become stuck or trapped in a specific location, causing paralysis. Wind can spread anywhere in the body with the blood. Wind in conjunction with blood and lymph can become toxic and express as antisocial behavior or psychosis.

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Left: In this stretch, the ear is directed at the acromial extremity while the chin moves laterally, and not downward toward the chest.

Visitors to Thailand can get Thai massages in most of the major tourist areas, such as the Phi Phi Islands on the southwestern coast (right). Many are offered right on the beach.

Opposite Page: There are many techniques for working with the client in a lateral recumbent position. This procedure creates an excellent stretch all along the mid-axillary line.

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How Is It Different?

Today, Thai massage is being practiced in clinics and spas all over the world and has experienced remarkable growth and acceptance. In fact, there has even been a dramatic growth of schools for traditional Thai massage in Thailand. It combines elements of yoga, meditation, acupressure and assisted stretching to provide a unique and wonderful bodywork experience.

However, Thai massage does differ in several ways from Western massage. Key distinctions include:

- Thai massage is practiced with the client fully clothed in loose-fitting clothing.
- No oils or lubricants are utilized in Thai massage.
- Thai massage is practiced very slowly.
- Thai massage is a core component of an entire traditional medical practice (traditional Thai medicine).
- The practice emphasizes pressing, compression and stretching techniques. The rubbing techniques of Western massage (effleurage and petrissage) are absent.
- Thai massage practitioners utilize their feet, knees, elbows and forearms, in addition to their hands and fingers extensively during therapy.

- Sessions take place on a cotton pad or mat that is placed on the floor or on a low platform.
- Thai massage therapists are encouraged to work in a concentrated and meditative state of mind, unencumbered by thought or fantasy. They are supposed to “transmit” this quality of mind through their touch to the client.
- Although it is the physical body of the client that is being addressed, the primary focus and intention of the therapy is to bring balance and harmony to the “energetic” body and mind of the recipient.

Primacy Of Abdominal Work

Like Indian Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese medicine, traditional Thai medicine is based on an energetic paradigm of the human body and mind. In the Thai medical model, bio-energy (Ki) travels through the body on what are designated as Sen lines, which are somewhat similar to the meridians of acupuncture/Chinese medicine theory. Ten primary Sen are identified in Thai medicine, which, essentially, originate deep in the abdominal cavity in the vicinity of the navel and connect







Above Left: This procedure creates an effortless deep compression into the client's upper trapezius muscle utilizing the practitioner's elbow. Simultaneously, the m. triceps is being kneaded.

Above Right: The fingers are interlocked and the hands rotated so that the thumbs are pointed downward, creating a strong tool for applying deep thumb compressions along the energy lines (Sen) on the upper leg.

Opposite Page: Traditional Thai massage practitioners learn to use their feet as skilled and sensitive massage tools. All procedures are done very slowly. Therefore, even advanced stretches are accomplished in a safe manner.

the center of the body to the sensory and excretory orifices and the extremities. Because of this energetic understanding, the practical, therapeutic application of Thai massage focuses on the abdomen. The practitioner will work with the client to establish an awareness of breathing deeply into the abdomen. Once the client is breathing deeply, the therapist will proceed with a specific series of deep palm compressions, followed by deep thumb presses. All these procedures are designed to invigorate the functioning of the organs and to eliminate energetic blockages and stagnation of blood and lymph. The improved functioning of the abdominal region has positive implications for the overall health and vitality of the client.

Going Forward

Thai massage offers the practicing massage therapist a wonderful new approach to bodywork and therapeutic touch. In addition, more and

more massage and bodywork establishments are receiving requests from clientele to provide this unique style of therapeutic touch. There are great opportunities to practice Thai massage in spas, clinical settings and resorts around the globe. The learning, practicing and receiving of Thai massage can be a profound, wonderful and joyful life experience. 🙏

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Stupas at the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, Bangkok, Thailand. Buddhist monks have done Thai massage for approximately 2,500 years.