

Understanding Traditional Thai Massage

By Bob Haddad

So what is Thai massage? Well, for one thing, it's not "massage" as we know it in the West. In fact, it is unfortunate that the term "Thai massage" has become so popular because that second word, massage, is misleading and inaccurate. Massage tables or oil aren't used, there is no rubbing on the skin or kneading of the muscles, and the receiver remains clothed. The goal is not to work muscles, fascia, tendons, ligaments, organs, and soft tissue, though these anatomical elements are positively affected by the work. Neither is its purpose to simply stretch and apply passive yoga to another person on a floor mat. At its essence, *nuad boran*, as it is called in Thai language, is a balanced blend of physical, energetic, and spiritual healing techniques and concepts. It is the skilful combination of applying both broad and targeted acupressure, finding and dissolving blockages, stimulating energy lines (*sen*), opening and toning the body with yoga-like stretches, and last but not least, allowing and encouraging the receiver to engage in a process of self healing, deep relaxation, and renewal.

About the modality

Individualized holistic treatment is at the heart of the traditional Thai medicine system, and Thai massage should be administered in this way in order to be fully effective.

Thai massage, at its essence, is a spiritual healing art, not just a physical therapy. In Thailand, massage (*nuad*) belongs to one of the branches of Thai medicine, and it incorporates Buddhist healing principles. Accomplished therapists and teachers understand the power of meditation and stillness while at work, both for the giver and the receiver. They work slowly and in a meditative way, and they always encourage silence.

Good body mechanics and correct breathing play extremely important roles in Thai massage. An experienced Thai therapist works only within his immediate reach, and positions his body directly alongside or above the area where he is working. The *hara*, the core area located slightly below the navel, is where all movement should originate. A therapist's back should be straight, the shoulders relaxed, the chest open, and in most cases, arms should be straight and locked at the elbows when applying pressure. Masterful Thai therapists utilize correct breathing patterns as they work, they remain observant of their client's breathing throughout each session, and they adjust their breathing to work most effectively with that of their client.

Thai massage is most powerful and effective when it is carried out, for the most part, in silence. The therapist needs to focus his energies, observing and listening to the body, hearing the breath, and adapting his techniques to the needs of the individual before him. The receiver should ideally feel at peace, relaxed, spiritually centered, and in a parasympathetic state, since these conditions always encourage good results. Excessive talking during a session can be a distraction, and so can music, especially if it isn't kept at a low volume. It's best to not engage clients in conversation, to comment about their condition, or to offer excessive prompting or coaching.

In my practice and study over the years, I've come to realize that certain perceptions and preconceptions about traditional Thai massage are simply not true. I also believe that extremely important elements of this healing art are missing from many training programs around the world, including in Thailand. Instead, they remain either unspoken or unaddressed. Here are a few of these considerations:

Individualized treatments

Traditional Thai massage isn't a sequence of techniques and movements that can be applied to all people. When students first learn Thai massage, it's important to study and memorize sequences for each of the major body positions: supine, seated, side, and prone. These basic sequences help them to become familiar with techniques, and offer guidelines to transition from one movement to the next. An effective Thai treatment, however, cannot be given by mechanically following a sequence, no matter whose sequence it is, or how long it has been practiced. Teachers and schools that train students to follow proprietary fixed sequences for all clients may be hindering students from growing into deeply sensitive therapists. Along the way, there must be adaptation, exploration, and experience with a wide variety of different people. Generally speaking, only after several years of practice and study can one develop the sensitivity and awareness that is needed to effectively work with each person in an individualized fashion.

Individualized holistic treatment is at the heart of Thai healing arts, and Thai massage should be administered in this way in order to be fully effective. Accomplished Thai therapists should practice and study, preferably with a variety of teachers, throughout their entire career. They "listen" to the body of each client as they works, learn to sense energy flow and blockages, and rely on intuition, sensitivity and stillness to guide them through each treatment .

The importance of self-healing

Much of the healing that takes place during a session results from the combined efforts of both the practitioner and the receiver. The therapist is not always the one to whom all credit is due. In fact, most therapists are not the great healers that their clients, students, and they themselves may think they are. The client is constantly on his or her own path of self-exploration, self-love, spirituality, self-surrender, and self-healing while receiving Thai treatments. Skilled and accomplished Thai therapists are as much witnesses to this self-healing as they are therapists. Masterful Thai massage therapists facilitate and encourage healing in others through their sensitive touch, their application of *metta*

(loving-kindness), and the atmosphere of safety, trust, and confidence that they establish and maintain in their practice.

Body mechanics and breathwork are essential

Though they are not taught in many workshops and training programs, good body mechanics and correct breathing play extremely important roles in Thai massage. An experienced Thai therapist works only within his immediate reach, and positions his body directly ahead of, or on top of, the area where he is working. The hara, the core area located slightly below the navel, is where all movement should originate. A therapist's back should be straight, the shoulders relaxed, the chest open, and in most cases, arms should be straight and locked at the elbows when applying pressure. Masterful Thai therapists utilize correct breathing patterns as they work, they remain observant of their client's breathing throughout each session, and they adjust their breathing to work most effectively with that of their client.

Distractions and ego get in the way

Thai massage is most powerful and effective when it is carried out, for the most part, in silence. The therapist needs to focus his energies, observe the body, hear the breath, and adapt his techniques to the needs of the individual before him. The receiver should ideally feel at peace and spiritually centered, with his nervous system in a parasympathetic (relaxed) state, since these conditions always encourage good results. Excessive talking during a session can be a distraction, and so can music, especially if it's not at a low volume. I've found it's best to not engage clients in conversation, to comment about their condition, or to offer excessive prompting or coaching. It's also extremely important to suppress one's ego during a Thai massage session. Therapists shouldn't execute certain techniques or postures because they think their clients want or expect them. Accomplished therapists should be humble, stay open to subtle energies, work slowly and in a meditative way, and encourage silence.

Balancing energy

One of the main goals of a nuad boran session is to free blocked energy (*lom*) in the sen, and to encourage free flow of that energy throughout the body. Displaced lom, however, can remain trapped in a client after a session if the therapist neglects to balance or forgets to balance the client's energy properly. If a particular line or area of the body seems blocked, one might spend more time there, but must also make sure that other points along that line receive attention. In Thai medicine, lom flows in both directions along the sen, but the most common and respected traditional format is to begin at the feet with the client in supine position, and to end at the head, also in supine position. No matter how many body positions are used during a given treatment, it can be helpful to imagine the client's overall energy as moving from the bottom of the body to the top.

Finding qualified therapists and teachers

Unfortunately, the world is filled with people who teach or practice Thai massage without having adequate knowledge or study experience. Many students lack the discipline, humility, or personal development that is required in order to take a slow and comprehensive approach toward learning. The Western model of learning in “levels” complicates the situation even further. Some teachers and schools in Thailand and around the world respond to this by marketing their courses in levels, and by creating and promoting curricula that claim to certify students as practitioners or teachers in a short period of time. Some new practitioners may study only for a few weeks or months before beginning to charge money for their services. All too often, students who take a hurried approach to learning emerge as unaccomplished and unrefined practitioners. Mixing Thai massage with other established modalities such as western table massage and yoga is also common. These hybrid forms may include elements of nuad boran, but they shouldn’t be confused with, or presented as traditional Thai massage.

For all these reasons, it’s important for students of Thai massage to pursue study only with highly qualified teachers. It’s also important for consumers to thoroughly investigate a prospective therapist before making an appointment for a Thai massage. Whether searching for a teacher or a therapist, check the person’s study and training history. If it’s not listed on their web site or in their promotional information, ask them. How long have they studied Thai massage, and with whom? Have they studied in Thailand? If so, when was the last time they were there? Do the descriptions of their services use western anatomical language or Eastern healing terminology? Do they blend Thai massage with other modalities? Have they met minimum requirements proposed by Thai Healing Alliance? Before you make an appointment for a Thai massage or register for a course in Thai massage, check into each person’s background just as you would for a prospective employee, or a tenant for your rental home. To learn more about suggested world standards for the practice and study of traditional Thai massage, visit the Thai Healing Alliance website.

Summary

Traditional Thai massage is a unique and powerful vehicle of healing, and it is worthy of being practiced, taught, and promoted within the context of traditional Thai medicine, not from a perspective of Western bodywork therapies, Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, or any other body of knowledge.

Clients, try several Thai massage therapists before you find one that you feel is sensitive and effective enough for your needs. Therapists and teachers, be diligent in your approach to study; evolve slowly, patiently, creatively and respectfully as practitioners of this noble healing art; and dignify and elevate traditional Thai massage by studying and practicing it within the framework of the traditional medicine, culture, and spiritual values of Thailand.