

The Art of Tok Sen

JOEL SHEPOSH

The Thai healing technique known as *tok sen* evolved in what is now northern Thailand, though its origins probably lie outside the Thai traditional medicine system. Tok sen has been part of the Lanna Thai healing tradition for centuries, when Burma controlled the present-day provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Lamphun, and Mae Hong Son. Since territorial borders have changed over the years, it is not clear if the tradition began in the Lanna kingdom or in Burma (current-day Myanmar).

Even though tok sen's beginnings are shrouded in mystery, there can be no denying that it is thriving. In recent years, it has become one of the most popular healing arts in Thailand's northern provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, and Lampang, and also in neighboring Myanmar and Laos.

The name tok sen is interesting. Tok (ตอก, pronounced "dtaawk") is a verb that means "to hammer" or "to apply with force." Sen is the Thai word for string, thread, cord, or route, but in Thai medicine it refers to the energy pathways that travel through the human body. There are ten main sen lines in the body (*sib sen*), and it is through these lines that the wind element called *lom* travels. In tok sen, the practitioner uses a wooden hammer (ค้อน, pronounced "khawn") to tap a chiseled wooden stick (ลิ้น, pronounced "lim") along sen lines and pressure points on the body. Although tok sen literally means "to hammer the sen," there are parts of some sen lines that should never be tapped. Conversely, there are areas outside the sen lines that should be tapped.

A variety of sticks
and hammers



Tok sen tools

The hammer and stick used in tok sen are carved from wood. Ideally, the wood should be from a tree that was struck by lightning, because it is believed that this wood contains more power. Any type of wood may be used, but the tamarind tree seems to be preferred. Wood from a home may also be used, as long as the wood is taken from the walls or roof, and not from the floorboards.

The hammer has a rectangular head measuring approximately 10 x 5 centimeters (4 x 2 inches) that is attached to a 15-centimeter (6-inch) handle. The stick measures approximately 15 centimeters long by 5 centimeters wide/round (6 x 2 inches). The hammer and stick are carved by hand, and special incantations and spells are performed before, during, and after the carving process. Most practitioners in Thailand have their tools blessed by a monk or a teacher, and all tools are kept in a safe, respectful place when not in use.

There are many variations in the sizes and shapes of the hammers and sticks. Some hammers have rectangular or cube-shaped heads, others have shorter or longer handles. Some sticks have a round tip, some have a flat tip, and some have a wedged tip; some therapists even attach a crystal to the tip of the stick. And while the traditional material is “thunder wood” (wood from a tree struck by lightning), the stick can also be carved from bone or ivory, but only if the animal died from natural causes.

Ultimately, the tools must be easy and comfortable to use. As a natural extension of human hands, they should allow the therapist to control the weight, placement, and rhythm of his work.

It is common for a tok sen therapist to use several sticks during a session. A round or flat-tipped stick is suitable for tapping on most of the body. The wedge-tip stick, however, is especially useful for tapping between the bones on the back of the hand and on the top of the foot, and for working the five lines on the palms and soles.

Usually a beginner will learn and practice with the style of hammer and stick that his teacher uses. In most cases, the student keeps the hammer and stick that he used in class. Over time, a therapist will add to his collection of tools, and by experience, he will know which tool to use for which client, and on which part of the body.

Tok sen treatment

As with traditional Thai massage, a tok sen treatment can be either relaxing, therapeutic, or both. A typical relaxing session includes tapping along lines and points on the legs, feet, arms, hands, back, and neck. A therapeutic session would add focused tapping in specific problem areas.

The treatment takes place on the floor. The client wears loose, comfortable clothing, and receives treatment in all four basic positions of traditional Thai massage: supine (face up), prone (face down), side-lying, and seated. Many schools and teachers in Thailand prefer the common face-up, side-lying, face-down, and seated sequence, while other teachers encourage variation, as long as the techniques are well executed.

A stand-alone tok sen treatment consists of palm-walking a section of the body, and then tapping with the hammer and stick on sen lines and points. It is possible to tap along a specific sen line from its origin to its end, but it's rare that a therapist would tap along the entire length of any of the ten major sen. Instead, the therapist taps along the familiar lines found in a Thai massage session: outer and inner legs, outer and inner arms, palms and soles, backs of the hands, tops of the feet, and the back of the body.

There is no rule for the direction of the tapping. Just like the "thumb-chasing-thumb" technique in Thai massage, the tapping may be done either proximal to distal, or distal to proximal. A typical pattern might go like this:

- Palm-walk to warm up the area
- Tap along a major sen line
- Tap along the minor (diagonal) sen line
- Tap on selected points along that line
- Palm-walk to cool down the area

Tapping on selected sen points is optional, and to be effective, the therapist must know the exact location and function of each of the pressure points. Unfortunately, general knowledge of Thai sen points is not as widespread in Thailand as it is, for example, in traditional Chinese medicine.

A small amount of herbal oil may be applied to the body. One herbal oil recipe mixes goat and antelope oil, sesame oil, jungle butterfly, peppers, cardamom, python bone, and camphor. My teachers say this mixture helps the effectiveness of a tok sen treatment, but they haven't offered an exact explanation.

After the session, the therapist might brush the body with a leaf dipped in *nam mon* (blessed water). This is done to remove any remaining unseen oil residue and to help cleanse and purify the area.

Before the session begins, the practitioner interviews, evaluates, and observes the client to determine if there are any pre-existing conditions, and if there are any contraindications to receiving tok sen. Contraindications include broken bones, any metal in the body, high blood pressure, certain skin conditions, and pregnancy. Use caution if the client has diabetes, edema, or fever.

While most areas of the body may be treated with tok sen, avoid tapping on specific areas, including:

- The face and scalp
- Directly on bones
- On or around any joint
- At the distal anterior forearm
- On the chest

Ajahn Bundit Sitthiwej works the back of a client in prone position



Tapping on the abdomen and neck may be done, but only very lightly and with great attention.

A tok sen treatment can last anywhere from one to several hours, and it should not be painful to receive. Pain can occur if the therapist is not mindful, or if he taps in any of the forbidden areas.

Spells, mantras, and maintaining a calm mind

Before starting a treatment, or at the beginning and end of their workday, the tok sen therapist pays respect to the Father Doctor by chanting the mantra (*Om Namo Shivago...*) and by offering incense and flowers to a statue or image. There are also spells specific to tok sen that a therapist may use before a session. One such spell is from Ajahn Sompong from Chiang Mai. It is in Pali, and he says he cannot offer a specific translation, but that the prayer asks for help from teachers and the Buddha, and for guidance and protection in order to “release the bad things from the body and have good things and good health for your client.” Ajahn Sompong learned this blessing from his teacher, who learned it from his teacher, and so on. Holding the hammer in one hand and the stick in the other, the therapist sings the short three-line chant, which is not reproduced here because it is not appropriate to do so according to Thai tradition.

Then the therapist blows on the part of the stick that will come in contact with the client, and taps the hammer and stick together three times. This ritual is repeated three times. Once this is done, the hammer and stick are now considered ready to use.

Before beginning the treatment, the therapist must have a calm, clear, and strong mind, and that focus must remain constant throughout the session. The therapist must be very clear at all times how and where to place the stick, and the correct amount of force to apply with the hammer. It is therefore imperative that the therapist develop and cultivate tranquility and insight through a consistent and regular meditation practice. In Theravada Buddhism, this is accomplished through the practice of samatha-vipassana meditation.

The tapping technique

For many years, tok sen was taught in the traditional system of learning based on teacher-apprentice relationships, and as a result, few written materials exist. It is therefore difficult to know for sure if there is any single authentic style of tapping.

Nowadays, one teacher might instruct the student to divide a sen line into segments and then to tap a pattern of 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3 on the first portion of

Working the back
lines in sitting
position



the line. Then the tapping sequence would continue at the next portion of that line, and so on. Other teachers prefer a tapping pattern of 1-2, 1-2, 1-2 on each segment. And yet another teacher might work in single, double, or triple taps from the beginning to the end of an entire line.

Some teachers say tapping is done in only one direction; while others say it is fine to tap in both directions. Regardless of the style taught, there are common rules that the therapist must follow, namely:

- The stick must always be placed one finger width away from any bone.
- The tapping must be constant and steady.
- The therapist must control the stick placement and tapping pressure at all times.

Conditions that can be helped by tok sen

Whenever I have asked my teachers which conditions were traditionally treated with tok sen, they have frequently answered my question with the phrase, “In the old times in Thailand . . .” The consensus of my teachers is that “the old times” is a period in Siam roughly 100–500 years ago. During that time period, they say, tok sen was used to treat sore muscles, joint pain, pinched nerves, diseases associated with specific sen lines, paralysis, and diseases from

supernatural causes. Nowadays, folk healers in northern Thailand still treat these and other conditions, using tok sen combined with other elements of the Thai healing tradition.

How does it work?

The light and rhythmic tapping along sen lines and points may work in a number of ways. The vibration caused by the tapping is believed to clear blocked energy along that line. The tapping's physical effect tends to soften the muscles. Tapping along a sen line may help conditions associated with that particular line, just as tapping on a specific point can produce a certain therapeutic effect. Finally, there is the hypnotic effect from the constant and steady tapping that helps to relax the body and mind of the receiver.

One of my teachers, Bundit "Billy" Sitthiwej, explains it this way: "The body is 70 percent water. The tapping makes waves, and it makes the bad things go away."

Study and practice

The basic techniques of tok sen can be learned in a two- or three-day class, and there are a number of schools and master teachers in northern Thailand that offer courses of study. As stated earlier, since there is no one, single authentic style of tok sen, it's possible for a student to learn different approaches with different schools and teachers. Another good way to learn is to learn by receiving. This is especially easy in Chiang Mai, where one can receive tok sen at street markets, massage shops, schools, and clinics.

While tok sen techniques may be easy to learn in just a few days, it takes years of practice to fully master the essence of this fascinating healing tradition. Controlling weight and pressure, maintaining a steady rhythm, correctly placing the hammer and stick, and developing and maintaining calmness and clarity of mind are all required for advanced practice.

Tok sen can be a wonderful accessory technique for the Thai massage student and therapist. As more schools and teachers offer courses, it will continue to spread in Thailand and around the world. If you have a chance, try a tok sen session. You will probably be glad that you did.