

Common Myths Associated with Thai Massage

C. PIERCE SALGUERO

In the late 1990s I spent several years in Chiang Mai and Isan, Thailand, where I studied with traditional healers and Buddhist teachers. During this time I became fascinated by how traditional medicine and Buddhism interact so much with each other. When I returned to the United States to study this topic in graduate school, however, I was stunned by how much of what I had learned was, in fact, mythological. As Thai massage has become increasingly popular in recent years, these same myths have continued to be spread by teachers, practitioners, and students all around the world. I hope that this article helps to dispel some of these popular misconceptions, so that the true facts become better known to the international Thai massage community.

Myth: Thai massage is an ancient tradition

It's quite common for people to claim that Thai massage is 2,500 years old, and that it is an ancient tradition that has its origin during the Buddha's lifetime. Such statements can be effective marketing pitches, but they don't accurately reflect facts. It is true that Thai massage incorporates ideas that can be traced back to India during the time of the Buddha, and possibly even earlier. The concept that the body contains a type of energy – one that is usually associated with wind and/or light, and which can be manipulated by breath and through mental and physical exercises – dates at least to the Upanishads, which were written in India in the first millennium BC. These ideas were further developed in subsequent centuries, and they came to

characterize several Indian religious and healing systems (such as hatha yoga, for example) that reached their full development between AD 1000 and 1500. What is known today as Thai massage or Thai yoga massage is related to this larger context, but there were no routines, steps, or protocols that were assembled or developed in ancient India and then transmitted to Thailand as a coherent system of healing.

The history of medicine in Thailand has a long and complicated timeline. Since the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean maritime routes were developed around 2,000 years ago, multiple waves of influence have washed up on the shores of Southeast Asia, including various forms of Buddhist, Ayurvedic, Chinese, and Western medicine. The Thai people themselves have only lived in the territory of modern-day Thailand for the last thousand years or so, and when they arrived, they almost certainly brought with them indigenous traditions of spirit-based healing. In this vibrant and dynamic historical context, it is virtually impossible for any one aspect of human culture, let alone something as complex as Thai massage, to remain static and unchanged for millennia.

Traditional Thai massage is the remarkable result of the combination of many historical and cultural influences, and it's a uniquely Thai creation. Although it is often promoted as an ancient healing art, most popular Thai massage routines that are learned and taught by Westerners today were prepared by the Wat Po school and the Old Medicine Hospital school in the last quarter of the twentieth century, with the specific goal of developing formalized protocols to teach tourists.

Myth: Thai massage was invented and spread by Jivaka

Both Thai people and *farang* (foreigners) like to tell stories about Jivaka (also known as Shivago, Chivok, "The Father Doctor," and by other names), and these are a wonderful part of traditional Thai medical culture. Jivaka Kumara-bhacca is a Buddhist hero who is recognized in many traditions throughout Asia as a wonderfully effective healer. In some versions of these tales, he performs procedures that may be characterized as truly medical, such as craniotomies and abdominal surgeries. Other details are more mythological, such as when a magical gemstone or the branch of a magical tree grants him x-ray vision in order to see into his patients' bodies. In the sacred writings of Theravada Buddhism practiced in Thailand and in other parts of Southeast Asia, Jivaka performs several surgeries, uses *ghee* (clarified butter), applies ointments, and even heals the Buddha with a purgative. These were all standard procedures among Indian doctors of the time. What is conspicuously missing from this story, and from accounts of Jivaka's life in any canonical Buddhist text, is the mention of massage.

It is impossible to say to what extent the legends of Jivaka that are retold today are based on a historical doctor who lived during Buddha's life, or on an imaginary, idealized, and archetypal doctor of the day. If Jivaka lived and practiced in India twenty-five centuries ago, there is no chance that he traveled to Thailand to teach Thai massage. Most probably, he is credited as the founder of traditional Thai medicine and worshipped as the patron saint of Thai healing arts because he is the only important figure associated with medicine in the Pali Buddhist texts.

Myth: Thai massage is closely connected to Chinese medicine

On the surface, Thai healing arts appear to share some features with traditional Chinese medicine, and this leads many people to imagine that there is a strong connection between them. Some Thai *sen* line maps feature pathways in the arms, legs, and torso that appear similar to portions of Chinese meridians, and some hand techniques used in Thai massage are similar to those used in Chinese massage styles such as *tuina* and *anmo*. Thailand has a long history of association and economic exchange with China, but the ideas behind Thai massage have far less of a connection with Chinese medicine than they do with Indian traditions.

There is one exception to this generalization, which has led to confusion. In the mid-1990s, a Chinese style of foot massage that uses a carved wooden stick to apply pressure to Chinese reflexology points was introduced from Taiwan to several of the major tourist schools. This became a commercial success, and massage schools all over Thailand soon began adding this technique and other forms of massage to their curricula in order to attract an increasing number of Western tourists. By the early 2000s, many types of Eastern and Western massage techniques in Thailand became available in schools. Today, they are sometimes still promoted as coming from the Thai massage tradition, regardless of their actual points of origin.

In contrast to the wooden stick foot massage, the full-body routines that most people consider as Thai massage share little or no theoretical ground with Chinese medicine. The theories guiding Thai therapy are not those of reflexology, of yin-yang, or of the Chinese Five Elements. To anyone familiar with the theoretical basis of traditional Asian medical systems, it is clear that Thai massage has much more in common with the Indian model of traditional Ayurvedic medicine.

Myth: Thai massage is interchangeable with Ayurveda and yoga

Much of traditional Thai medicine is derived from Buddhist healing and Indian Ayurvedic medicine, while the basis of Thai massage is more closely aligned with yoga. Although Thai massage is largely derived from Indian ideas, there are some important differences. The apparent similarity between Thai massage and yoga often leads practitioners, teachers, and clients to conclude that Thai massage is a form of interactive yoga that can be modified to fit into modern yoga training curricula and other lifestyle industries. Thai massage and yoga do exhibit many similarities because they both belong to a larger family of Tantric traditions of mental, physical, and spiritual cultivation. This family also includes practices such as Tibetan yoga and Thai *reusi dat ton*.

What is most interesting about Thai massage, however, is not what it shares with these other traditions, but rather how it differs. Because Thai massage is a unique variant among healing practices worldwide, these differences are worth exploring. Thai massage deserves to be studied and promoted as a unique cultural heritage, rather than being modified to fit into more familiar and marketable consumer trends.

Myth: There are authentic Thai massage routines and sequences

There is, in fact, no single authentic, traditional, or correct Thai massage routine. Until recently, there were no standardized training curricula and government regulations of Thai massage. Even after the Thai Ministries of Health and Education got involved, free-form improvisation has remained the norm. It is difficult to receive the same massage twice in Thailand unless it's by a teacher or school that uses a specific sequence that is promoted in their place of business. Otherwise, an accomplished Thai massage therapist creatively mixes together many different techniques, following his or her intuition, in response to an individual client's needs.

Before the advent of commercial schools, instruction in Thai massage involved a long-term apprenticeship with an acknowledged master (*ajahn*), who in turn had apprenticed under an acknowledged master. This teacher-student lineage was generally traced back through many generations. Each practitioner, therefore, was part of a lineage, and had to formally commit to carry forward the teachings of their particular line of teachers as a condition of their training.

This teacher-student transmission was never done in a static or robotic way. Practitioners were free to add stylistic twists and techniques, guided by their

own expertise and intuition. When practitioners studied with multiple teachers, they often mixed techniques and practices learned from each of their teachers. Before textbooks and national standardizations arrived on the scene, Thai massage represented a living tradition. It was a body of knowledge that was constantly changing, developing, and evolving. For serious and accomplished modern-day practitioners, the same holds true today, as Thai massage continues to evolve into the future.

A problem for historians, however, is that throughout history, lineages have almost always been based on oral transmission instead of on written texts. Because of this, we have very few texts, artifacts, or other windows into the history of these early practices. There are a few references to massage in texts from the Ayutthaya kingdom (AD 1350–1767), but these are not guidebooks and they do not describe specific techniques in detail. There are also examples of sen line and point charts from the Bangkok period (AD 1782–present), the most famous of which are the epigraphs housed at Wat Po. However, all these artifacts present only snapshots of moments in time during a constantly evolving tradition. They do not provide evidence of one true or original style of Thai massage.

Myth: The Wat Po epigraphs represent a pure and ancient transmission of Thai massage

The medical artifacts at Wat Po include not only the above-mentioned charts, but also herbal medicine tablets, statues depicting *reusi dat ton* postures, and other materials. These were produced during the reigns of the first three Thai kings (AD 1782–1851) in their attempts to reconsolidate the kingdom and showcase achievements in the arts and sciences. A number of medical experts from across the country were brought together to produce these collections, and they no doubt had diverse backgrounds and medical skills. Further standardization of this material took place during the reign of the fifth king (AD 1868–1910), before the Thai medicine texts that are used today were published. Analysis of some texts by the scholar Jean Mulholland has shown that they represent a diverse and mutually contradictory collection of ideas. This is most likely because the project brought together a wide range of opinions from different parts of Thailand rather than accurately representing any one particular tradition. By extension, we cannot consider the Wat Po epigraphs as a pure transmission from the ancient past.

Myth: Massage was an important part of healthcare in ancient Thailand

Though massage always played a role in folk medicine in Thailand, it has only recently emerged as an influential part of the healthcare system. Massage is mentioned in texts from Ayutthaya, but based on records from the kings' courts, it appears that Chinese, Indian, and even Western medicine concepts were more valued and accepted than local healing traditions. Despite the activity at Wat Po, interest in traditional Thai healing arts was sporadic during the Bangkok period. From the mid-1800s through the 1970s, the country as a whole focused on modernizing the healthcare and public health sectors by emulating Western models and by developing an infrastructure for scientific medicine. Of course, traditional healers continued to treat patients, but they operated in legally marginal settings, and they were often the targets of suppression.

This situation changed in the late 1970s, when the World Health Organization and other global agencies began to take an interest in promoting traditional medicine in developing countries around the world. Since that time, there has been a resurrection of interest in traditional healing arts in Thailand that parallels the revivals of traditional Chinese medicine, Indian Ayurveda, and other medical traditions.

In Thailand, more than anywhere else, massage has played a major role in this process. Massage was specifically promoted by the government's Thai Massage Revival Project, beginning in 1985. However, the most dramatic surge in popularity of Thai massage came from Western tourists. Curricula were specifically targeted to this market first at Bangkok's Wat Po, and later at Chiang Mai's Old Medicine Hospital. From there, it rapidly spread outward. As a result of the increased interest in massage, the Thai government soon got involved in regulating and taxing the industry, and eventually in the 2000s, national licensing and training standards were established. Today, the Thai government and business sectors aggressively promote the country as a haven for traditional medicine, alternative healthcare, and the spa industry. In recent years, thousands of massage schools and clinics have emerged. All of this has allowed massage to play a more important role in the Thai economy, and to have a larger presence in Thai cities than ever before.

Myth, history, and authenticity

Much of the above information can be summarized by stating that no teacher or school in Thailand has a historically verifiable claim to a system of Thai massage in use before the 1800s. In fact, the routines that most Westerners study today date only from the past few decades, and all claims of "ancient"

and “traditional” are simply not accurate. Yet these historical myths persist, perhaps because they are excellent marketing tools, and also perhaps because practitioners seek validation of their own training as something that has been handed down by sages over thousands of years.

I encourage all students, practitioners, and teachers to consider authenticity as something that comes from within oneself rather than from a particular style or technique. In my own view, to be authentic is to be clear about one’s own goals and intentions, and to study deeply with knowledgeable people. Authenticity has little to do with the history of the technique being learned.

I realize that the deconstruction of the above myths may be difficult for some practitioners to accept. My intention is not to offend anyone or to challenge the validity of Thai massage as a whole. I simply wish to identify what I see as the misuse or even abuse of history by the Thai massage industry in the West and in Thailand, and to encourage Thai massage professionals to engage in constructive conversations about where true authenticity lies. If Thai massage continues to be marketed based on myths, then factually incorrect information will continue to mislead clients, students, and therapists. Understanding the true history of Thai massage gives all of us the opportunity to deepen our knowledge, and to fully appreciate the healing art that we love so much.