

# Contemplating Thai Massage Regulation

By Nephyr Jacobsen

I've done deep-tissue Swedish massage for 17 years. I mean really deep; no fluff-and-buff stuff here. But it doesn't come close to Thai massage, and nothing I've seen does. It's yoga and Rolfing and acupressure and tapotment and chiropractic and reiki and deep compression work and myofascial release and hydrotherapy with herbs and the power of spirit, all rolled into one.

At the same time, it's none of those things because those aren't Thai and the truth is, Thai massage really is Thai. It's not a new brand of Ayurvedic medicine or a twist on Chinese meridians, it's seriously Thai and it's serious medicine.

And here in the U.S., you can practice it after watching a do-it-yourself video, taking a two-day workshop or reading a book. And you can *teach* it after going to Thailand and taking a five-week course, a two-week course or a one-week course, never having actually had a working practice of it in your life. And people do. So long as you meet the regulatory professional massage laws of your state (which are all written with Swedish massage in mind), you can practice and teach Thai massage without a day of training if you so choose. And in some states, you don't even have to be a licensed massage therapist because you can claim this extremely physically intensive bodywork modality is technically energy work.

There is no regulation of Thai massage outside of the Swedish massage laws in the U.S., and I'm not even sure if there should be. Regulation is a sticky subject and with Thai massage, it gets complicated very quickly. At this time, the majority of states have some sort of regulatory agency that establishes the specific requirements to practice bodywork professionally and governs all massage modalities. A few states have no massage oversight at all and little to no requirements concerning practice. In those states with explicit oversight, all massage modalities are grouped together and have the same requirements. There are no specific laws for specific modalities. At this time, no organization in the U.S. has the authority to specifically regulate, certify, register or accredit Thai massage practitioners, therapists, bodyworkers, instructors or schools.

## A Case for Thai Massage Regulation

Thai massage has the potential to cause injury if not done correctly. This applies both to the therapist and the receiver. Thai massage is a far more dangerous modality than Swedish massage could ever be. With proper training, it's amazingly therapeutic. And knowing effleurage, petrissage, cross-fiber friction and the diaper drape doesn't prepare anyone for practicing Thai massage. That's like saying if you're a highly trained golfer, it follows that you are qualified to play professional basketball. It's apples and oranges.

What this means is that states requiring that Thai massage practitioners be licensed massage therapists have really not done anything to protect the public safety in regard to Thai techniques. Because none of the required massage training (I'm not talking about the sciences

of anatomy/physiology here) has anything to do with what you must know to practice Thai massage. It is left up to the practitioner to voluntarily seek out quality instruction.

This is why the regulation of Thai massage by a body of professional practitioners can be seen as necessary. In this case, oversight must come from within the community of Thai massage practitioners, because these are the individuals who truly understand the techniques and the proper methods of training. Of course, these individuals also would have to be professional licensed massage therapists, in order to comply with state laws.

### **A Case Against Regulation**

And here is where I start to sound a bit inconsistent, because a part of me believes the way one trains should be voluntary. I have always felt that massage, as with herbalism and midwifery, belongs in the layperson's hands, where some of the best teachers are quietly hidden and carry no state-governed credentials. I am deeply suspicious of massage regulation, with its pandering to large corporate schools and its focus on written exams for a field that involves the unmeasurable ability to touch and feel with intuition and competence.

In the world of Thai massage, regulation is nearly impossible. While schools and practitioners have begun to be regulated by the Ministries of Education and Public Health in Thailand, it remains a fact that some of the most proficient therapists in Thailand are unlicensed, unrecognized and unofficial. Some of these practitioners are masters of hereditary methods; some live in the far-out villages where licensure is not possible.

### **Maintaining the Status Quo**

There are some who suggest Thai massage practitioners should not have to be licensed massage therapists at all, meaning they should not have to meet any existing state requirements in order to practice their profession. This position holds that Thai massage is not the same as other bodywork modalities and should have either no requirements or only those of our own regulatory agencies. They propose that we should not even call it Thai massage, suggesting instead names such as Thai Yoga Therapy or Thai Intensive Stretching. It's as if a change in semantics will change the fact we are "manipulating soft tissue," the common definition of massage in most states. While I agree Swedish massage licensure does not qualify one to practice Thai massage, I do not think it hurts.

Another factor in this issue of creating regulatory agencies specifically for Thai massage is the need to be wary of self-absorption - to the point of forgetting the public we serve. So, how do we regulate Thai massage? We set the standards not by creating more regulatory agencies and attempting to separate ourselves from the rest of the massage world, but by creating classes and schools with a high bar and by being practitioners who don't balk at training. What if, instead of using our energies to fight the existing system and create new regulating agencies, we were to work together within the system? This could be the best of both worlds. Thai massage does not become regulated unto itself (hopefully avoiding homogenization), and by following state requirements of licensure, at least in states that have requirements, the people who can practice will by default be those who are willing to put in a little extra work.

I have looked through both lenses and agreed with what I saw. In the end, I have come to a place at which I accept things the way they are. It's not perfect, but I know the things that bother me most about the present and likely future of Thai massage are not actually going to be fixed by less or more regulation. They are not being fixed by the states that don't require Thai massage therapists be licensed in massage and they are not being fixed in Thailand, where there is very specific government regulation of Thai massage. What bothers me are things like gaps in integrity and the need for better understanding. Things like the tendency to call Thai medicine Ayurvedic or Chinese because we don't understand it enough or respect it enough to grant it its own standing. Things like infighting among practitioners and teachers. More importantly, I am bothered by the actual danger of an ancient art becoming watered down and distorted until it no longer exists in its true form.

Luckily, these are things we can change without having to restructure the system. These are things we change through personal commitment. As we teach our students and teach each other, we set the bar higher and encourage quality in the Thai massage community. I believe it's up to us as individuals, not laws, to keep Thai massage safe and authentic. Those who do will shine brightly.