

Where to Find Thai Massage

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Before engaging in a Thai massage, ask your practitioner three questions: Where did you train? How long did your training last? How long have you been in practice? It's a good idea to compare three or four therapists, ask these questions, then use your best judgment. The Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI), an international organization for the study and practice of traditional Thai massage, is working to "standardize levels of study and experience," according to Bob Haddad, a Thai therapy practitioner and the Executive Director of THAI. Currently there is no nationally recognized certification for Thai massage, and practitioner and teacher backgrounds vary widely. Some became acquainted with Thai massage in Western-style massage schools. Some have studied extensively in Thailand, and others may have only taken a weekend course. To be extra safe, it's best to ask the practitioner for a reference before undergoing any treatment.

Feeling the Pull of Thai Massage

By Dana Scarton

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The demands of Tim Prue's combined roles of production engineer and business owner, from booking clients to building a set, can leave him exhausted. But he's found a way to manage the stress.

Twice a month he gets a Thai massage, a form of bodywork that has little to do with a Swedish-style rubdown. In Thai massage, the practitioner's table is replaced by a floor mat, no oils or lotions are used, and clients wear clothing suitable for exercise. The practitioner uses his hands, knees and feet to manipulate the client's body into a series of postures and stretches that resemble yoga positions. In fact, some call Thai massage "lazy man's yoga."

"Thai massage is the one type that really worked for me," said Prue, 41, of Gaithersburg. "I usually feel rejuvenated when I finish. That's why I keep going back." Prue's treatment is provided in-home by Tony Jackson, who also offers the therapy at Studio Infinity in D.C.'s Glover Park and at the YWCA Fitness and Aquatics Center in Chinatown.

Although it's been popular on the West Coast for years and in Asian countries for centuries, Thai massage is in its infancy in the Washington area. By most estimates, the therapy is catching on here.

"In our first six months, we saw eight to 10 [Thai massage] clients a week," said David Roylance, who along with his wife, Tukta, founded Touch of Asia in Sterling 18 months ago. "Now we see 40 people per week. We could see more if we had the capacity."

Steven Brown of D.C. Massage Therapies in Tenleytown estimated that 30 percent of his business is devoted to Thai massage, which he began offering three years ago.

Pierce Salguero says the technique evolved in Thailand as early as the 17th century. Salguero spent five years in Thailand, completed a master's degree in East Asian Studies at the University of Virginia and now operates Tao Mountain, a nonprofit association in Charlottesville that teaches the form of massage Thai physicians learn as part of their formal training.

Essentially the method is acupressure combined with stretches and postures achieved through interaction with the practitioner. In the plow, for example, the practitioner carefully lifts your legs over your head while you rest on your back.

"In most villages in Thailand, every grandmother knows how to do this," said Salguero, author of *The Encyclopedia of Thai Massage* (2004, Findhorn Press). "It is part of family life and is done weekly to promote longevity and flexibility."

The Treatment

I arrived at Touch of Asia in a T-shirt and sweat pants to learn what Thai massage was like from the receiving end.

After completing a two-page health questionnaire, I was escorted to a room furnished with a thin mattress in the middle of the floor. Lights were dim, and relaxing New Age music played as I got comfortable on my back, my head propped on a pillow. The 90-minute treatment began with Tukta Roylance kneeling at my feet and gently kneading each one, from the ankle to the tips of each toe. Nothing new here, I thought.

Moments later, though, Tukta, a Thai who trained at Bangkok's premier massage school, Wat Po, began using her body to stretch mine. In one move she sat facing me, slightly off to one side, while I lay on my back. She pressed the soles of her feet against the hamstrings of my left leg while tugging my left ankle toward her. This gentle push-pull maneuver had the effect of stretching my left quadriceps, a deep, gentle, sustained stretch much more satisfying than any quad stretches I'd done on my own. An identical stretch was performed on my right leg.

Things continued, with Tukta maneuvering me into various poses. The cobra involved my lying on my stomach while Tukta crouched over my rear end and, gripping my forearms, leaned back, causing my head and upper chest to lift off the ground. Between stretches, Tukta used her thumbs to knead muscles.

Without my saying a word, she was able to gauge precisely how far to push or pull to attain a maximum stretch while avoiding injury and pain. My job was simply to inhale prior to a stretch and exhale during it. I didn't have to move a muscle, at least not voluntarily. It felt fabulous.

Energy and Balance

The underlying goal of Thai massage, according to David Roylance, is to balance the body's energy systems.

Thai medicine asserts that the body contains an infinite number of energy channels called "sen" lines. These are similar to the meridians of Chinese medicine, but meridians are said to correlate with specific organs while sen lines correlate with symptoms.

"If there are blockages in the energy systems, you can start to see symptoms in the body -- a cramp in your arm, asthma, skin disease, a psychological illness," said Roylance. "What we do, using acupressure and stretching and compressions, is to free those blockages, open up the body, and restore it back to health."

Thai massage resembles a type of dance. "It's very fluid, very methodical," Brown said. "Each movement flows into the next." The dance improves with each visit, he said, as the practitioner gains a deeper understanding of a client's body and its limitations and the client comes to know the routine.

Because the massage is active -- and interactive -- recipients aren't likely to nod off.

"If someone wants to zone out, I'd tell them to go get a Swedish massage," said Martine Burkel of Bethesda, a client of Brown's for the past two years.

"I'm a terrible self-stretcher, so I sort of feel that I compensate by doing this," said Burkel, 46. "If it's between five more minutes of running [at the end of a workout] or going to stretch, I'll choose the running."

But even if you're a dedicated self-stretcher or yoga regular, you can derive benefits from Thai massage, practitioners and clients say. There seems to be something unique about having stretching done to you.

"If you stretch yourself, you are actively stretching," Roylance said. "Your muscles are actively engaged in stretching. But if someone is stretching you, your muscles are relaxed and passive, which means you can go into a pose much more easily and deeply than if you were to do it on your own."

A relative newcomer to massage therapies, I'd expected to lump Thai massage under a general "feel-good treatment" umbrella along with the Swedish massages I'd thoroughly enjoyed on a few occasions.

It did feel good. I felt so limber and light I worried mid-massage that I'd have to be poured into my car afterward and pumped with caffeine to stay focused for the drive home.

But when the treatment ended and I stood, I felt straight and tall and loose -- in a wide-awake, the-juices-are-flowing way. I gladly accepted the cup of hot peppermint tea -- caffeine-free -- Tukta handed me on the way out. I didn't need the energy boost. I simply wanted to savor the moment. •

Freelance writer Dana Scarton has written about fitness topics for the Health section.