

Table Thai Massage vs. Floor Thai Massage: You're Asking the Wrong Question

by Johanna Vargas, LMT

Thai massage was my introduction to giving bodywork. Since my late teens, I had experienced profound, beneficial results from therapeutic massage: I had become aware of how and where I stored many strong emotions, avoided breech delivery of my second child, and ended up not needing surgery that I was told was necessary due to irreparable nerve damage. Bodywork was my go-to whenever I felt out of sorts as I knew it could help me prevent a minor imbalance from becoming a larger health issue. However, while I knew about and enjoyed its results, it was never a practice I imagined myself doing.

While at a workshop that, unbeknownst to me, incorporated Thai massage, I experienced the wordless “connection” through which both bodywork giver and receiver benefit. As soon as I felt that connection, I knew I wanted to practice this forever. It was with this goal that I found myself immersed in what would become this life’s work.

Students ask me “table Thai or floor Thai: which should I study?” My answer has always been that because the work is typically done on a mat on the floor, students are best served by finding their own center when working on the floor. Once students have learned the principles that guide therapeutic application of the work, then the things that make Thai massage “Thai” can be applied to work done on a table.

One of the first lessons I share with students is the spirit in which Thai medicine is rooted. Thailand is a predominantly orthodox Buddhist country and its medicinal practices are not only grounded in Buddhist philosophy, but also informed by its rich history--the many ideologies and ethnicities that have traveled throughout its land along with its many indigenous, magical practices. To delineate Thai massage “styles”, merely by Southern, Northern, rural, or Royal, oversimplifies all that informs Thailand’s traditional medicinal practices. As I look back at the eye-rolling adolescent who huffed in disinterest as her mother shared the uses of herbs, harvesting times, and how preparations worked for this but not for that, I now suspect that the same is true for the medicinal practices of any culture. Just as fruit is only as nourishing as the soil in which it is grown, the philosophy or spirit in which a medicinal practice is rooted informs, guides, and determines the outcome--just look at our sick-care system today. With this in mind, consider the Three Jewels, Four Gems and Five Precepts of Buddhism.

The Three Jewels

Rooting one’s medicinal practice in the Three Jewels, Four Divine States of Mind and the Five Precepts is how I begin study of the bodywork practices of Thailand. The three jewels refer to the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha and I relate their relevance to students’ future bodywork practice. Let’s begin with the three jewels. A Buddha simply means an awakened one. To awaken and then, by one’s acts, inspire others to awaken, is right and compassionate work. We take refuge in the Buddha not so much as one venerates an image of a saint in the Christian religion, but rather as a symbolic reminder that we can all strive to embody these ideals. To help others is the most surefire way we have to learn- and thus teach- others via our unfolding. The dharma, or teachings, refer to the lessons we receive by walking our path or living our life truthfully. If we are awake enough to see them, lessons unfold as we become ready for them. We keep ourselves ready by diligently developing our awareness, or rather, being aware of where our awareness is--at all times. And patiently, kindly, gently, bringing it back to where we want it when it wanders... it will wander.

Our sangha refers to our group, or gang, to those around us. There is our immediate sangha: our family, teachers, and loved ones. Just as ripples move outward in ever-widening circles, so does our sangha’s reach, until one sees, without any doubt, that our sangha is every being in existence--clients and other practitioners included. If this life and busy-ness is all an illusion, all a mask that we chose to wear to learn whatever we needed to sort out this time around then yes, we are all just walking each other home. Any bodywork practitioner who has been at this for a few years knows that one’s clients tend to bring you precisely the lessons you need to work with.

We do not touch without being touched by that which we touch. This is why I encourage students to “work with” their clients’ bodies rather than “work on” them. Don’t “do yoga to” any body! The connection of touch flows both ways. We may be guiding or facilitating clients’ release of muscular tension but at its most basic, we, the therapist, are being guided by their body and, after weighing and discerning, reacting (hopefully, wisely) to its reactions! That is why what serves us and, ultimately, our clients most: being aware of where your awareness is, by listening, feeling, receiving. When integration and thus facilitation of beneficial change does take place, it is when we work with or walk with others, each on our own path, each gently supporting and guiding what needs to happen next.

The Four Gems

The four divine states of mind: metta, karuna, mudita and uppeka. I define them as per Theravada Buddhism, but I relate these to one's bodywork practice as well. Sometimes we think we are practicing them, when we are actually engaging in their opposites: self-serving, fear-based, or ego-driven pursuits.

For instance, is our wish for this person's peace of mind and wellbeing selfless metta or are we basing our own perceived peace of mind and well-being on our acquired knowing, our rightness and thus them telling all their friends what a great practitioner we are? Not so very selfless.

Karuna, which translates to compassion or, as I prefer to see it, a desire to understand and mercy, is a must for any bodywork practice. We do not know the depth of any one person's experience, but are we always aware when we act and speak from a place of pity? Pity comes from a perceived sense of superiority and treats others as if they are not able to rightly act in their own best interests.

Mudita or sympathetic joy is something we will absolutely experience: when a client comes in thrilled with their increased range of motion or after having overcome fear aversion after a sports-related trauma. We are happy for them, but when we need their rejoicing due to our work in order to fuel our own, that is no longer sympathetic joy but rather attachment to externally-derived affirmation.

Upekkha or equanimity is necessary to receive all kinds of input while working with others: a steadfast, even and quiet mind can observe, listen, hear, smell, feel and discern what course of action will benefit the client without getting swept away by desires to be right or prove accumulation of book knowledge. Once we have succumbed to the ego-driven need to be lauded as an expert (ultimately we can only be expert in our own body) we are no longer acting in equanimity--we are very invested in outcome and the treatment and manner in which it is delivered changes.

The Five Precepts

To refrain from killing can also be stated as doing no harm. With regards to bodywork, that must begin with you. During practical assessments, I ask students, "Are you comfortable?" I constantly ask myself this as well--and I have injury to show for the times when I have not inquired this of myself enough! How can you facilitate your intended objectives in a way that causes your body the least strain? No one was ever "healed" by you hurting yourself.

To abstain from lying simply means to not misrepresent myself or this practice: to be honest when I don't know, and to refer out when it seems that what is most beneficial for my client is outside of my skill set.

To refrain from sexual misconduct in a bodywork context means that I honor the safe space that must be created for my client to do their own self-work and healing. As a massage teacher, it also means to maintain a sacred, safe space in which learning can occur. This means that I don't ever engage in romantic or sexual relationships with clients or students. That I can work at the level of honesty and intimacy that I do is precisely because of my clarity of intention.

To refrain from intoxicants, to me, means to be in possession of my full faculties while working with others, even when I am practicing and trading techniques with other therapists on my own time, and to be firm about not practicing when either party has impaired their awareness. Some would say that since one never knows when one's skills as a health care provider will be needed, once one becomes such, one is never off-duty, though I am not there yet.

The last precept is to refrain from stealing, which to me means crediting teachers, authors, and others whose work has informed our practice. This also means not stealing time from clients or putting them in a care-giving position to me by revealing my personal life concerns during their time. This also means not speaking ill of other practitioners, trusting instead that the effort put into one's work will always speak for itself and that the universe will always bring us exactly the clients that are ours.

Elements, treatment principles, and reconnecting mind-heart and body via breath

Thai massage is but one aspect of the traditional medicinal practices of Thailand. Since the Thais, like many pre-colonial cultures, do not separate thoughts and feelings from the physical body, their medicinal practices consider not only the external physical but the internal, through diet, herbs and prayer (or affirmation or mantra). I have always joked to my classes that “the meat simply manifests what’s going on here” while enthusiastically pointing alternately to my head and heart to emphasize that we cannot extricate one from the other: we have many thoughts about our feelings, and many feelings about those thoughts.

Thai medical theory, which I am still learning, is based on the balanced interplay of elements: Fire, Wind, Water, Earth (and sometimes Space, or Ether). Bodywork techniques are chosen based on elemental constitution, treatment of imbalance, and whether the client’s signs and symptoms are coming from depletion, stagnation, blockage, or excess. The techniques’ objectives are to either tonify or disperse, but I think they work only when we help the client re-inhabit the area of their body on which we are working, via their breath. This is why I was able to treat patients at a chiropractic practice for years, on a table, using oil if the person’s constitution needed it, and it was still Thai massage--because it was based on its principles, and developed their awareness via guided breath. Any spaciousness or release they experienced was their own doing, simply facilitated by our work--the work we did together, the client and I.



I know we have all seen many photos of practitioners doing Thai massage where bodies are tangled up in intricate, multi-faceted positions, doing many things simultaneously. Take a moment and think about that sentence. Is that what most bodies, in our fast-paced, information-coming-at-you-every-second culture need? I learned these too at first, but what struck me about the work was the quiet connection, the stillness; not the acrobatics or multi-joint manipulations. I happened to resonate with being on a floor and barefoot because that is, due to my previous jobs and studies, where I have always been.

When we break it down, Thai massage is not that different from bodywork done in any other part of the world: we assess the superficial by sight, smell, touch, we work and warm, beginning with the broad, physical and general, carefully working with our client to access the specific and subtle; all the while harnessing the power of the breath to help balance any places where something was lost or has over-accumulated. We use breath to integrate the mind/heart and the meat. This is why recipients arise from a treatment in a calm, alert, refreshed, and resourceful state of mind. You, as therapist, have hopefully just guided them on a journey to a resting place within themselves. To return to this article’s first section, do you see now why it is so important that you first know how to do this for yourself and why your ego, your desire to prove your rightness or mastery of bodywork, has no place in a treatment?

Of course, it is responsible to know your anatomy, pathology, and contraindications, and stay up to speed on biomedical developments. If the bodywork that resonates with you comes from another culture, then humbly learn all you can about this culture. This is not only a part of upholding your inherent promise to provide the best possible care for your clients, but with fluency in the language of biomedical science, you can work on a table, treat with Thai principles, think in terms of Thai meridians and wind gates but speak and SOAP in clinical terms. What makes the work Thai is not whether it happens on a mat or table, but a solid foundation rooted in the culture’s medical and philosophical/spiritual practices. A student once asked me if I thought Thai massage was the only modality that provided this integration of mind, heart and body via breath and holding space. No; any bodywork, when done with right heart, can provide this experience for its receiver.