

# Breath and Body Mechanics in Nuad Boran

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My intention in writing this essay is to describe elements of body mechanics, ergonomics, and breathwork that I have found to be essential for a professional Thai massage practice. The concepts are presented as guidelines to help Thai therapists in their work with clients, and to serve as a source of inspiration for deeper work in *nuad boran*.

## **Spiritual and meditative elements of traditional Thai massage**

Before we deal with breath and body mechanics, let's stop for a minute and take into consideration the extraphysical aspects of nuad boran. From the Eastern perspective, the human body not only houses muscles, tissues, bones, and fluids but also contains an invisible energy force. In Thai healing arts (and in most non-Western modalities), the body may be used as a vehicle to the inner self. In a deep, focused Thai massage treatment, healing can take place in a way that is not entirely dependent on physical laws or methods. Change can also take place within our energy bodies. With all this in mind, it's helpful to stay aware of the spiritual manifestations of healing that take place during and after a Thai session.

The practice of *metta* (loving-kindness and compassion toward others) is an important spiritual focal point for the Thai therapist while engaged in his work. It's also helpful for the client to feel at peace during the session, and to engage in mindfulness, awareness of breath, and meditation. During the first few minutes of a Thai session (especially with a new client), the therapist may

check in with the client to see if his pressure is appropriate and if the client is comfortable. Once a flow is established, however, it is often best if both the practitioner and client “go inward” to their spiritual centers, remaining mostly silent, focusing on breath, and being aware of each moment as the session unfolds. Generally speaking, the more “floppy” the receiver is (in both a physical and a metaphysical sense), the deeper the effect of a traditional Thai healing session will be.

Those who have experienced any form of meditation may think of *nua* *boran* as a type of meditation in movement. As stray thoughts enter your consciousness, note them, but try to not dwell on them. Allow them to drift freely in and out of your mind without significantly affecting your focus on breath and presence. Maintain awareness, do your work, but also surrender to the client’s process of self-healing, to which you are merely a witness.

## Breathwork

Breathing is an involuntary process, but in order to perform Thai massage to maximum efficiency, especially when using techniques that require body movement, you should maintain breath awareness. Your clients will achieve optimal response from compressions, stretches, and *sen line* work when they are breathing calmly and deeply. The Thai therapist should also breathe calmly and deeply in accordance with all movements.

Whenever you begin a session, take some time to focus on your client’s breathing patterns, and regulate your own breathing so that you are in tune with her body. From time to time during the session, look at the rise and fall of your client’s abdomen, so that you know when to apply your movements.

*Synchronized breathing* is when both you and your client inhale or exhale at the same time. *Oppositional breathing* is when one person inhales and the other person exhales. Both types of breathing may be employed in a typical Thai session. It’s important, however, to learn which moves require synchronized breathing and which ones work best with oppositional breathing. This knowledge comes with a lot of practice, and by being fully aware from one moment to the next during a session.

Under no circumstances should you ever hold your breath when exerting pressure, lifting, pulling, or executing any other Thai techniques. In general, your clients should be exhaling as you apply pressure to them or when you dramatically move their bodies from one position to another, and they should inhale when you release the pressure or return them to the starting position. Whether or not you are breathing with, or in opposition to the client depends on a number of factors.

## Synchronized breathing

Use synchronized breathing when you work the abdomen, perform palm presses to the legs or back, work *sen* lines on the back, and do compressions on the chest. In general, techniques that are mostly carried out with both parties in close proximity to each other work best with synchronized breathing.

If you and your client have similar breathing rates, they can be synchronized easily. If your client takes quicker breaths than you, you can time your moves to every second breath your client takes. If you get lost, or if you find it hard to establish the breathing rhythm that you need, take a moment to relax, take note of your client's breathing rate, and adjust your breath in a way that will allow both of you to be as comfortable as possible as you proceed through the session.

Let's apply this information, combined with good body mechanics, in order to execute a plow using synchronized breathing, as illustrated in the photo.

The photo demonstrates a simple assisted plow. But to an experienced Thai therapist, there is much more going on beneath the surface of the technique. To begin, the therapist should inhale as he lifts the client's legs into a straight position of approximately 90 degrees with one graceful movement. (If the extended legs don't reach 90 degrees, stop where you feel they have reached their maximum point of comfort.) Now the therapist places his feet and legs in a position with good body mechanics, with his outside lower leg guiding one side of the client's waist, so the client doesn't wiggle from left to right in the pose. The therapist takes note of the client's breath and establishes synchronized breathing – when the client inhales, so does the therapist. Then on a mutual exhale, the therapist lunges forward slowly, with elbows locked and arms straight, to the first point of resistance.

The client's body energy will tell you where to stop. Be sensitive and try to not go beyond the client's first point of resistance. Stop there, allow for a mutual inhale, and then push forward one or two more times until you reach the maximum depth that is comfortable for your client. With each movement forward, make sure you are both exhaling. With each movement backward, even slight ones, make sure you are both inhaling. Then, when you are ready to end the pose and release into supine or starting position, do so on a mutual inhale.



An example of synchronized breathing



An example of  
oppositional breathing

## Oppositional breathing

Oppositional breathing is when the client and therapist are breathing in opposition to each other. This type of breathing pattern is beneficial for certain movements and techniques that require strength and focus on the part of the therapist, and relaxation (openness) on the part of the client.

For example, when the therapist executes cobras, suspensions, and other lifting postures on another person, the receiver should exhale as she is being brought into position. The therapist, however, should inhale as he lifts her into position, because the increased oxygen to his body will give him more strength as he engages his core muscles and moves his own body.

In addition to assisted cobras, other Thai yoga techniques that can benefit from oppositional breathing are arm lifts in supine and side position, back lifts, cross-leg crunches (the Thai technique that is often used to bring a client into sitting position), and most types of suspensions and inversions.

The concept of oppositional breathing is simple enough to understand, but there is something else to consider. Many techniques that benefit from oppositional breathing while getting into a pose often work best with synchronized breathing as you get out of the pose.

Let's take a simple assisted cobra as an example. As the client is being pulled back into position, the therapist is inhaling and the client is exhaling. But once in position, and after a few breaths, the therapist should synchronize his breathing with the client's breath, so that they are both exhaling when it's time to release the client to the mat. So whether performing a cobra or a suspended spinal twist as in the photo, the client is pulled into position using oppositional breathing (client exhales while therapist inhales), but she is lowered back to the mat using synchronized breathing (both people exhale).

It's not as complicated as it seems, and once you practice this method of breathing, it will make your work easier and more enjoyable. Take some time to consider using oppositional breathing in your practice for certain poses and techniques. And remember to synchronize on a mutual exhale when you release or return to starting position.

## Be aware of your client's breath

Occasionally you may wish to remind your client to take a deep breath, and then wait for their exhale to begin or continue the next technique. For the most part, your role as Thai therapist is to coordinate your movements in

accordance with your client's breathing patterns. Sometimes this means waiting for your client to inhale or exhale before you begin a new move. Do not repeatedly ask the client to control her breathing, as this will distract her, and take away from her ability to fully relax during the session. Be patient, allow your client to feel comfortable, and remember to direct metta toward your client as you work.

## Body mechanics

Proper body mechanics are of utmost importance in a Thai yoga therapy session. The practitioner should maintain awareness of his own body alignment and also that of his client. If a client becomes sprawled in an anatomically incorrect position, take the time to realign the client's body before continuing the session.

Most importantly, be aware of the way in which you apply pressure to your client's body. When you use your bodyweight (and not your muscle strength) to compress, pull, and stretch, you give the client a more relaxing massage, and you save wear and tear on your own body.

### Some ergonomic guidelines for your Thai practice

- Always ground yourself from your *hara*, the area slightly below your navel, and let that area be the very center of all your movements.
- Keep your movement confined to what is within your reach, and take care to not hyperextend your body (or your client's body) while executing postures and techniques.
- Always keep your spine straight and your head in straight-ahead alignment. Avoid curving your back forward while lifting. Keep your arms straight when pulling and compressing.
- Remember to inhale when exerting pressure or lifting. Never hold your breath. Always be aware of the receiver's breath patterns, and encourage deep and relaxed breathing when necessary. Try to time your moves in accordance with the receiver's inhalations and exhalations.
- Allow for short moments of rest when appropriate, and allow the client time to transition from one position to the next, especially after deeper postures.

### Use your bodyweight whenever possible

Nuad boran is a healing modality that allows therapists to work at an appropriate level for each client. A Thai session can be relatively effortless once the therapist learns to use bodyweight and gravity efficiently.

Let's take a traditional Thai shoulder press as an example. The client is in sitting position, and the therapist lightly supports the client's back with his legs, as he presses downward onto the client's shoulders with his palms. To use body weight effectively in this technique, the therapist's elbows should be locked, his arms and back straight, and the fleshy part of his palms should make contact with the receiver's shoulder muscles. The therapist's energy originates in his hara, runs through his entire body, and exits at his hands as he sinks his weight downward toward the mat.

Whether making contact with your hands, feet, elbows, or knees, use gravity, not muscles. Never rely on muscle power or arm strength. If at any point during a session you find yourself using your muscles, immediately stop and try it a different way. Remember to always keep your shoulders relaxed, and to exhale as you apply pressure.

### **Work from your center**

As you work in nuad boran, try to initiate all body movements from your core, or center. Your center is in your lower abdomen, approximately two finger widths below your navel. To find the center point of your energy and grounding, engage your core muscles, and move your upper torso from left to right and front and back. This balance point is where all your movements should originate.

When you work, keep your arms straight but not rigid, and keep your shoulders relaxed. When you execute movements, allow your hands and feet to become extensions of your hara. Every small movement in your hara should transfer energy to the parts of your body that you are using at that moment. For the most part, whenever you bend your elbows or work from your shoulders downward, you are breaking the connection with your hara. This almost always results in inferior work for you and for your client, and it causes your shoulders and arms to work harder than necessary. Over time, this lack of ergonomic awareness can lead to long-term bodily stress and even injury.

Try to always tune in to your clients' bodies and work in accordance with their breathing patterns. Try to bypass your brain when working with clients. Too much thinking almost always lessens sensitivity and intuition. When you are tuned in to the energy and the body of your client, you can better gauge what type of pressure is best, how to pace your work, and when and where to give more attention.

With straight arms and relaxed shoulders, your arms, hands, legs, feet, and entire body can move as extensions of your hara. Allow yourself to be drawn in to your clients' bodies, to the exact depth that is needed, so you can work *with* them rather than performing Thai massage *on* them.

## Maintain rocking or alternating movements whenever possible

To ensure a Thai massage session that is less strenuous for the practitioner and more meditative for both parties, you should rock as you work. By rocking, the practitioner's bodyweight is transferred to the client in a uniform and comforting way. Your rhythm should be repetitive but not mechanical, and there should be periods of stasis (rest), when you are applying pressure. Instead of using your muscles, rocking movements allow your energy to pass from your core and sacral area onto the body of your client, and help to keep you anchored and focused as you work. There are three general ways to rock during the course of a Thai therapy session, and variations of each one of these movements may be explored during the course of a Thai healing session.

### Side-to-side movements

With side-to-side rocking, the practitioner is usually kneeling or semi-kneeling. In some cases you can also be in Thai sitting position, with one leg folded inward and the other bent outward.

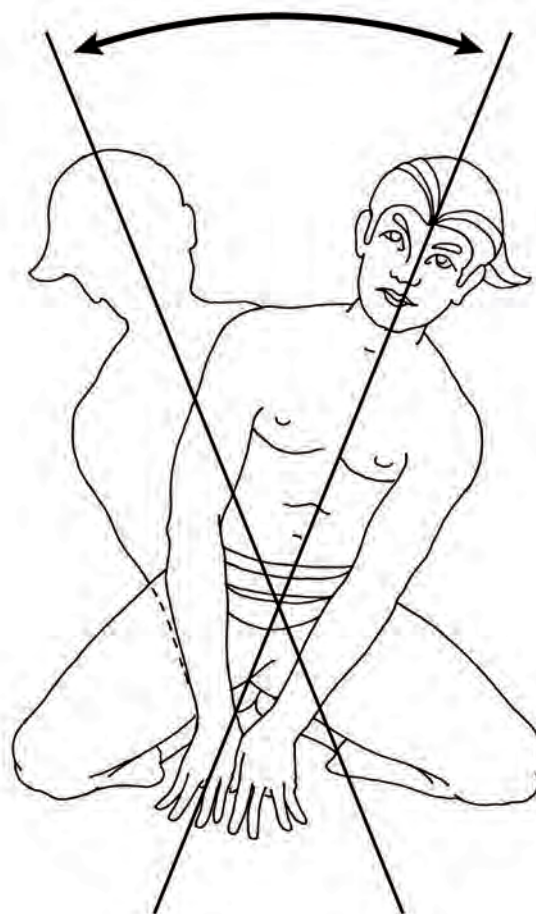
If you are kneeling, you may open your legs and bring your feet together behind you to form a solid base. The tops of your toes should rest against the floor, but you may occasionally bend them backward in tip-toe position. Keep your head and your spine straight. Straighten your arms and move your trunk on its axis from one side to the other, like a stalk of bamboo in the wind.

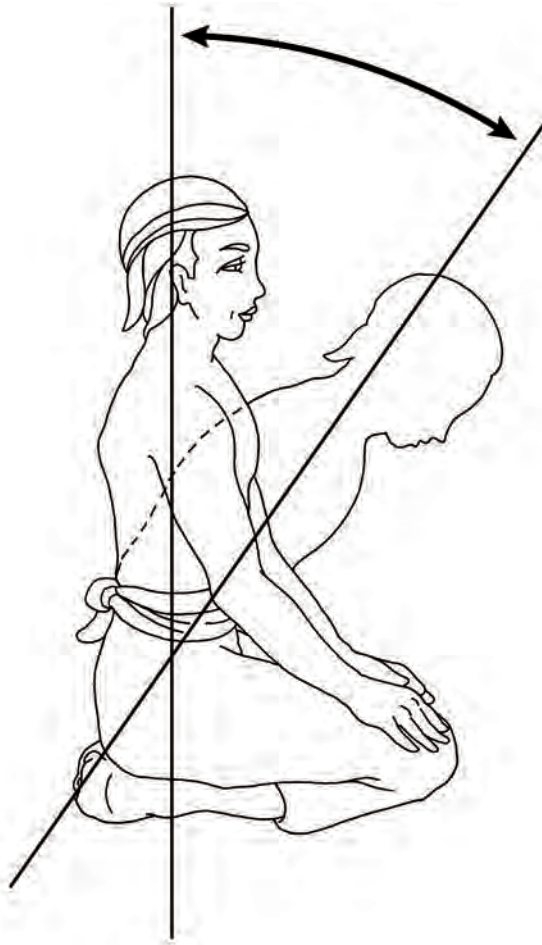
Examples of Thai techniques that lend themselves to side-to-side rocking include:

*Supine position:* alternating foot palming, alternating lower leg palming, working inner thighs with your feet, working the shoulders with your feet;

*Sitting position:* shoulder rolls with forearm, side-to-side mobilization of the head;  
*Prone position:* forearm rolls on the back, with client's leg above your lap; and

*Side position:* working leg lines, thumbing and palming back lines, thumbing hip pressure points.





### Front-to-back movements

With front-to-back rocking, the practitioner is usually kneeling, although some techniques may be applied with this type of rocking in semi-kneeling and standing position. When kneeling, your knees may be together or apart, but keep the tops of your feet against the floor to get a wide range of motion. If you are half-kneeling, make a steady lunging movement forward and backward. If you are standing, place one leg ahead of the other and lunge forward in a *t'ai chi* type of movement. Keep your back straight and your sacrum relaxed but strong. Oscillate the torso from front to back, like a rocking chair.

Examples of Thai techniques that lend themselves to front-to-back rocking are:

*Supine position:* Foot and leg compressions and pulls, foot and leg palming, butterfly presses and palming on thighs, most types of plows;

*Sitting position:* Shoulder stretches, backward arm pulls;

*Prone position:* cross leg presses, palming, butterfly pressing and thumbing back lines, cobras;

*Side position:* working back lines with your feet; and

*Child's pose position:* sacral compressions, working back lines.

### Circular or spiral movements

With circular rocking, the practitioner is usually kneeling or semi-kneeling. Keep the same ergonomic posture as in the above examples, and allow yourself to slowly gyrate in a spiral movement. Circular movement doesn't have to be exaggerated in order to be effective. Sometimes, even the slightest circular movement can transfer a sense of peace and comfort to your client. The direction can be clockwise or counter-clockwise, and the range of your movement can be tight or wide, depending on the Thai technique you are using and the size of your client's body relative to your own body. Try to not get stuck rotating in one direction, and vary the rotations from clockwise to counter-clockwise. This can be helpful to fully relax the client.



Examples of Thai techniques that lend themselves to spiral rocking are:

*Supine position:* Hip and leg rotations, ankle and wrist rotations, palming knees, working the neck;

*Sitting position:* back mobilization with client's hands behind head, neck mobilization;

*Prone position:* gentle spirals in cobra position; and

*Side position:* hip openings, arm mobilizations, backward arm stretches.

### **Work only within your reach and move your body positioning**

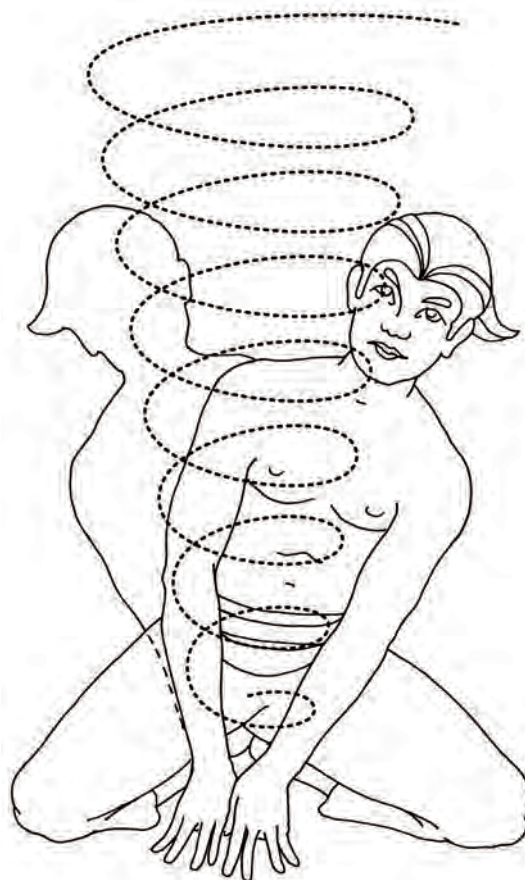
When you work in Thai massage, it's important to stay as physically close to your client as possible. Physical proximity helps to maximize the use of your bodyweight, and it helps to keep your hara connected to the parts of your body that make contact with your client.

Don't stretch or reach too far when you work. When using your arms and hands to apply pressure, transfer your weight first to your shoulders, then to your arms and then out to your hands. Keep your shoulders straight but relaxed and then lean inward or downward.

Work only within your reach. A good way to determine the maximum range of your working area is to draw an imaginary arc with your finger on the floor (or above the client) ahead of you. Try it now. Imagine yourself, for example, working in supine position, doing some foot palming. You are kneeling and sitting back on your heels. Now fully extend an arm with a pointed index finger, and draw an arc beginning on one side of your waist and ending on the other side, in a half circle. Whether you are sitting back on your feet, or moving upward on your shins, or working from an even higher position on your knees, this arc is the maximum area in which you can safely work without having to radically change your body positioning.

Move your body throughout the course of a Thai massage session, so that you are close to the area you are treating. Try to stay directly on top of (or in front of) that particular area in order to apply your pressure as effortlessly and effectively as possible.

Don't overextend yourself. If you're uncomfortable with a technique or a



sequence that you learned, and if it just doesn't feel right for you, then don't do it! Think of other ways to treat that area that would be less taxing on your body. And if you can't do that, then simply eliminate the move from your routine or sequence.

### **Protect your elbows, wrists, and thumbs**

When performing butterfly palm presses, whether on the shoulders, or on the thighs or the back, keep the inner parts of your elbows facing each other, with the creases of your arms facing slightly forward.

Always keep your wrists at a comfortable angle. Maintain your bodyweight directly over your arms, and lean in to apply downward pressure. A comfortable angle should be around 80 degrees. Working beyond that angle may pinch nerves in your wrists or overstretch your ligaments.

Keep your arm rotation comfortable and sustainable. Shift the orientation of your body, whenever necessary, to keep your arms in a more comfortable position and to reposition your bodyweight.

When you're palm pressing, direct energy through your shoulders and arms into the heel of your hand, and then spread the pressure throughout the palm of your hand to broaden and soften the contact. If you direct the pressure to your hand without broadening it through your palm, it may feel intrusive and sharp to your client. Failure to spread the pressure can also result in injury to your wrists.

When you work the sen lines with thumb pressing, use the pads of your thumbs, about halfway between the top joint and the tip. Using thumb tips can result in a sharp or intense feeling for your clients. If your thumbs don't easily bend backward at the first joint, try to use less pressure at the tips, and spread the pressure inward toward the palm. Visualize the spreading of energy through the pads of your thumbs as you work.

When you are palm pressing, especially on the upper legs, keep your thumbs close to your other fingers, so they aren't isolated and vulnerable to injury. This is also a practical way to avoid coming too close to private areas between the legs.

Remember to keep your arms straight, your shoulders relaxed, and your elbows locked, whenever possible. Move from your hara, keep your back straight, and use gravity (not muscle strength) to apply pressure through your hands.

### **Keep your spine straight and your chest open**

Always keep your spine in proper alignment, neither too rigid nor too loose. By engaging your core muscles as you move, you protect your lower back. This

is especially true when foot-pressing thighs in supine or side position and when working the lower back.

Remember to keep your head up and your neck aligned with your spine. Eliminate or modify any moves that require you to bend forward while rounding your spine, whether from a standing or a sitting position.

If you need to bend forward, bend from your hips, and engage your hara before you exert pressure. For moves that require you to pick up your client's feet for a stretch, first kneel or squat as you grab their feet, then straighten your knees as you inhale and come to a standing position. Use the same strategy when you lift your client's back off the mat for a stretch. Keep your back straight and always inhale as you move into a more erect position.

Focus on the space between your shoulder blades. Keep your chest open, and your shoulders lowered and relaxed whenever possible. Correct posture helps to prevent kyphosis (rounding of the spine) and minimizes back strain and rotator cuff problems.

If you catch yourself drooping, slouching, raising your shoulders, or leaning forward, immediately straighten your back, take a deep breath, and continue your work. If you are unable to adapt your body to proper mechanics, discontinue those techniques from your repertoire that cause you to strain your body.

Keep hips and  
shoulders aligned

### Keep your hips and shoulders in alignment

Keep your hips and shoulders facing in the same direction, and always try to move them together.

When executing spinal twists, such as the one in the photo, make sure to swivel your entire body from the hips upward, even if you keep your knee stiff against the client's thigh for stability. Work with synchronized breath, moving as you and your client exhale, and releasing or returning as you both inhale.

As a general rule, never apply pressure through your arms or legs if your hips are facing in another direction. Whenever you catch yourself doing this, immediately modify the movement by adjusting your body (or your client's body) into a posture with better alignment.





Support your  
bodyweight

### Support your own bodyweight

It's always best to support your own weight when working with your clients. If you allow your weight to transfer entirely to a client's body, you increase the risk of slipping, losing your balance, or hurting the client. It's generally more comfortable for your client to feel pressure only at the point of contact. Always be aware of the risks involved, especially with poses involving balance and suspension. Whenever you can, make modifications to poses, so you maintain a maximum amount of control and safety. If it feels unsafe, it probably is.

A few common Thai massage techniques that require the therapist to have good balance and to support his own bodyweight are: using feet to step on clients' legs in prone position; foot walking (stepping on feet); most types of gate openings ("blood stops"); and working back lines while sitting on the client's feet in prone position.

Let's take the example in the photo. The therapist's bodyweight is supported by his legs while he is squatting on the client's lower back and sacrum. The amount of weight that should be distributed is determined by the relative weights and sizes of the people involved. In this particular pose, since the therapist is larger and heavier than the client, he might apply only 30 percent of his bodyweight onto the client while supporting about 70 percent of his weight with his legs. If the roles were reversed, and if she were working on him, she would probably need to use 50 percent or 60 percent of her bodyweight to hold him against the mat while she executed this posture. The same would be true if she were opening wind gates at the femoral artery. A smaller person using palms, knees, or forearms to work these areas on a larger person needs to give more of her energy/weight.

By the way, keeping in mind what we discussed earlier about breathing techniques, which type of breathing might work best for the technique in the photo? That's right, oppositional breathing, with a synchronized ending!

**Closing thoughts**

In this essay, I've tried to describe some basic skills and concepts related to breath and body mechanics in traditional Thai massage. The concepts are fairly easy to grasp, but they require lots of practice before graceful mastery can be attained. Practice them first on your friends until you feel ready to integrate them in your work with clients. Try different ways of breathing that work best for you. Keep your back straight, and use your bodyweight not your muscle power. Practice safe. Practice happy.