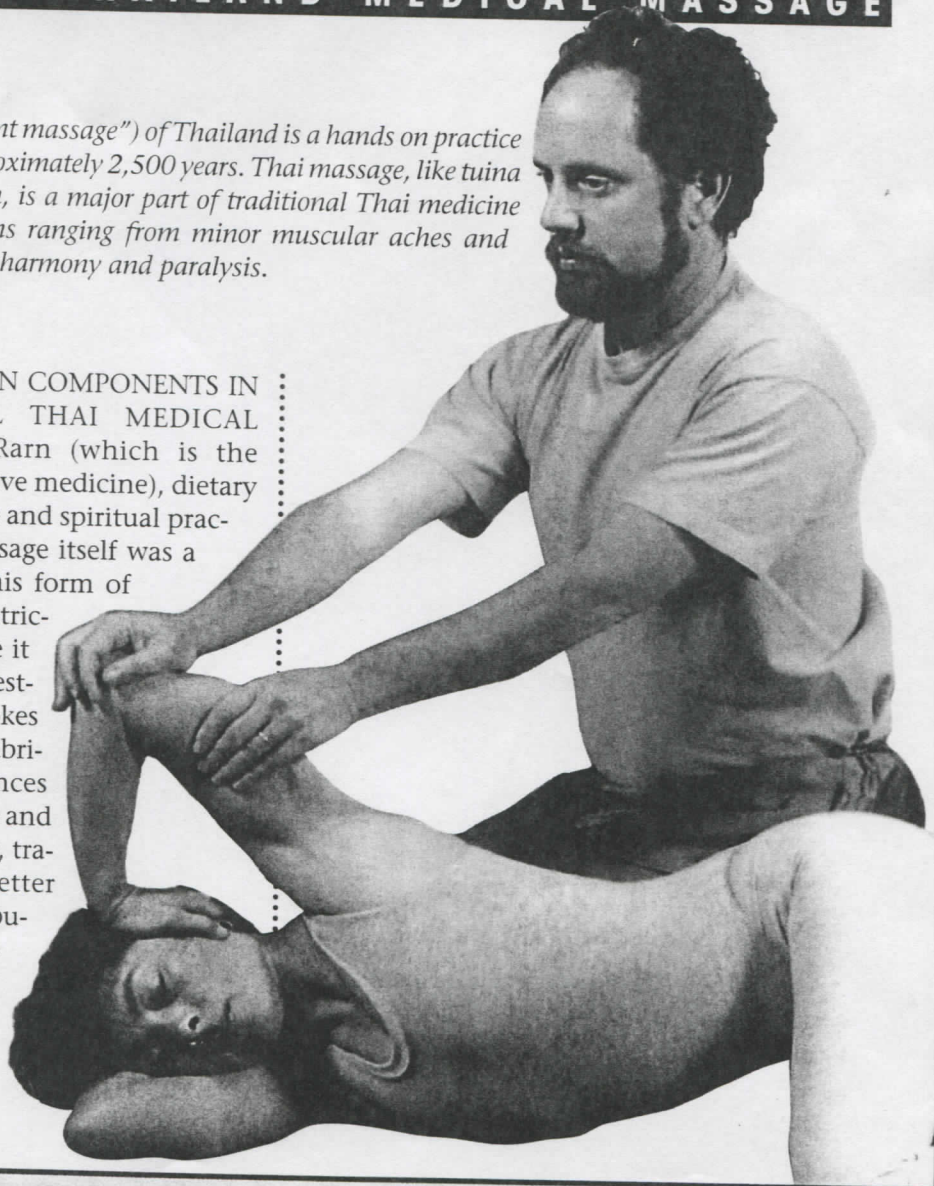


# In the Spirit of the FATHER DOCTOR

TRADITIONAL THAILAND MEDICAL MASSAGE

*Nuad Bo Rarn (literally "ancient massage") of Thailand is a hands on practice of healing that dates back approximately 2,500 years. Thai massage, like tuina of the Chinese medical system, is a major part of traditional Thai medicine and is used to treat afflictions ranging from minor muscular aches and headache to internal organ disharmony and paralysis.*

**T**HERE ARE FOUR MAIN COMPONENTS IN THE TRADITIONAL THAI MEDICAL SYSTEM: Nuad Bo Rarn (which is the physical or manipulative medicine), dietary instruction, herbal medicine and spiritual practices. Traditionally, the massage itself was a spiritual practice. To call this form of therapy "massage" is too restrictive in its definition because it bears no resemblance to Western massage with its long strokes and use of oil or lotion as a lubricant. With its main influences being Indian Yogic medicine and Chinese medical philosophy, traditional Thai therapy is better defined as a science of manipulative medicine and peripheral stimulation. Rather than simply kneading muscles, Nuad Bo Rarn consists of slow compression, gentle



rocking, deep stretching (like assisted yoga *asanas*) and specific pressure or acupoint work. The practitioners of Thai therapy utilize their thumbs, fingers, hands, elbows, knees and feet during the course of a treatment. And like Chinese tuina, Japanese shiatsu and other Eastern forms of natural healing, Nuad Bo Rarn has as its theoretical foundation an energetic model of the body.

The origins of Thai medicine and its unique massage practices are credited to a famous Indian doctor named Jivaka Komarabhacca. Dr. Jivaka was known to be the close friend and personal physician to the historical Buddha himself. He was also the personal physician to the Magadha king Bimbisara and to the Sanghathe order of Buddhist monks and nuns who lived in the monasteries (called Wats). Dr. Jivaka's practice included manipulative medicine as well as dietary instruction and herbology. His name is mentioned in the Pali canons of Theraveda Buddhism where he is regarded as the Father of Medicine. Theraveda is the oldest school of Buddhism, a religion that originated in India about 6 BC. (95% of the approximately 50 million citizens of Thailand are Theraveda Buddhists). To this day, prayers, called *Wal Khru*, are sent to the "Father Doctor" at the beginning and end of each massage class at the Old Medicine Hospital in Chaing Mai, Thailand, and students are instructed to silently give thanks to the Father Doctor prior to giving a Thai massage session.

The Pali writings that were medical in their emphasis were, and are, considered sacred and were kept with other holy Buddhist scriptures. Historically, the monks were the practitioners of the traditional medicine and the temples or Wats were its home. The Thai people came to the Wats for most of their needs and food, shelter, education and both medical and spiritual healing were dispensed there. Nuad Bo Rarn contributed to the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of the ancient Thai people and it continues to this

day to do so. The information about Thai medicine and ancient massage was passed down through the centuries as an oral and touch tradition, from teacher to student, generation to generation.

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In the 16th century, Ayutthia, the capital of Siam (as Thailand was called until the 1940s) was one of the greatest and wealthiest cities in Asia. It has been said that at the same time in history, London was a mere village by comparison. During this period of Ayutthia's prominence, the sacred texts of Buddhism and traditional medicine were gathered together and kept in the capital. In 1690, Simon de la Loubere, the French liaison to the Thai Royal Court in Ayutthia wrote, "When any person is sick at Siam, he begins with causing his whole body to be moulded by one who is skillful herein, who gets upon the body of the sick person and tramples him under his feet." Following a period of intense conflict with Burma to the North, the capital fell in 1767 and much of what was consecrated by the people was destroyed, including temples, religious sculptures and texts and many of the medical writings. By

1782, a new Thai monarchy was established under Rama I and the capital was moved to Bangkok. He then had these writings inscribed onto stone plaques and set into the walls of Wat Pho, a major monastery in Bangkok that sits across the street from the Imperial Palace. These beautiful inscriptions are still there and can be viewed by visitors to the temple.

The actual movement of traditional medicine from India to Thailand is not known outside of the general cross-cultural evolution of the Buddhist tradition into Thailand. It seems certain that the origin of Thai medicine had its roots in the Ayurvedic medical practices of India. The influence of Yogic practice is also apparent from the positions and stretching movements that are one of the main aspects of Thai massage. Thai culture has also been influenced by China, the great nation that lies to the North and that has so

strongly affected history and development :  
 throughout all of Asia. In the traditional medical :  
 context, we see Thai medicine viewing the body the same way that Chinese medicine does, as an energetic matrix with energy flowing along invisible channels the Thai practitioners call "Sen." It is believed that the body is made up of 72,000 Sen with 10 of the lines holding top priority and being the main emphasis of therapeutic work. However, in Thai massage there is not as much significance placed on the use of specific points, an aspect of therapy that is very important in acupuncture, tuina and shiatsu.

Thai massage, like many other forms of Oriental bodywork, is done on the floor using a firm mat or pad. By working this way, the practitioner is able to slowly use their body weight and leverage to achieve the deep pressure and yoga-like positions of the therapy. Many of the elaborate stretches used in Thai massage would be virtually impossi-

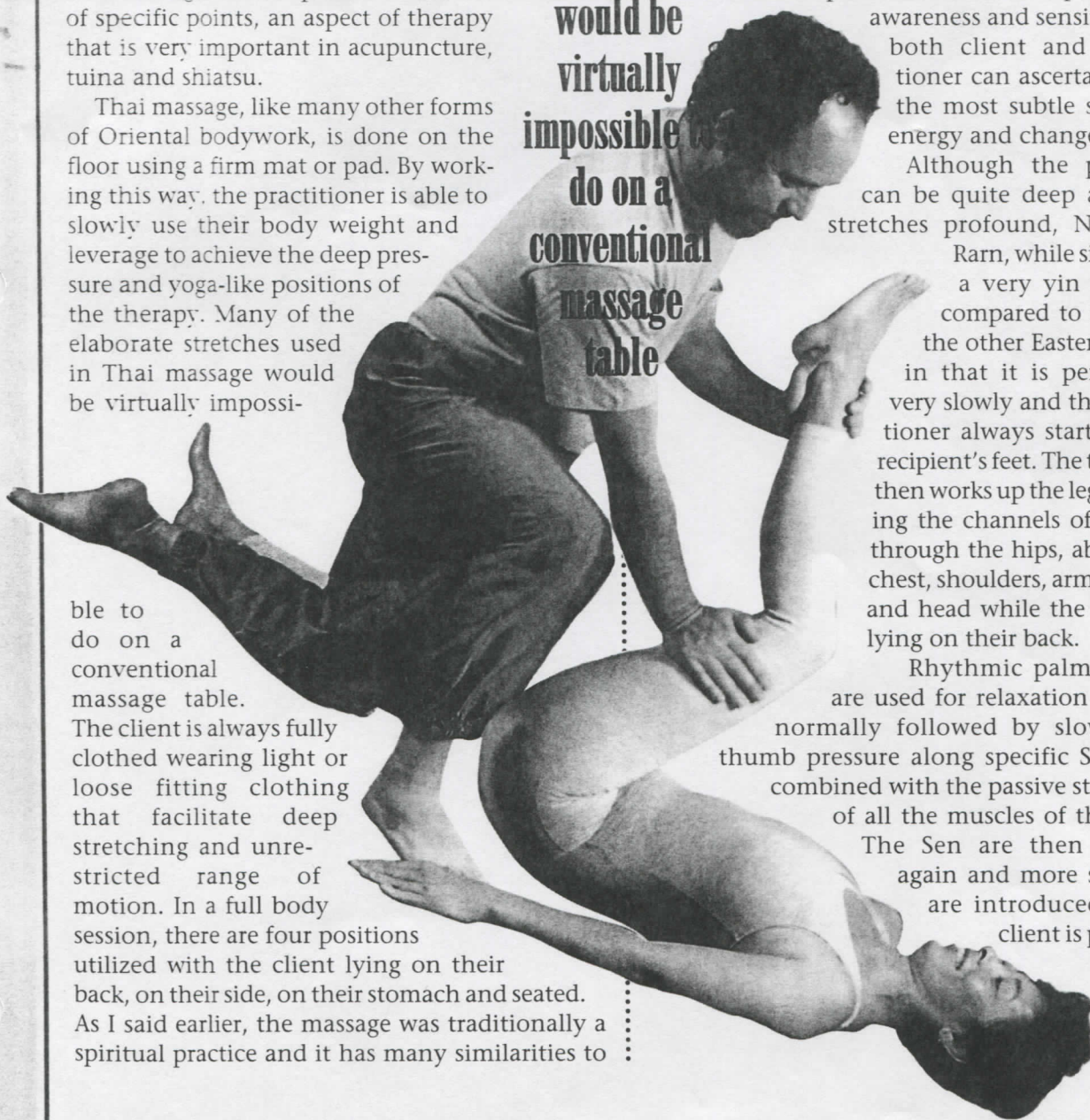
ble to do on a conventional massage table. The client is always fully clothed wearing light or loose fitting clothing that facilitate deep stretching and unrestricted range of motion. In a full body session, there are four positions utilized with the client lying on their back, on their side, on their stomach and seated. As I said earlier, the massage was traditionally a spiritual practice and it has many similarities to

**Many of the elaborate stretches used in Thai massage would be virtually impossible to do on a conventional massage table**

meditation. In fact, when being trained in the methods of Thai massage, all students are instructed that they are to "Work in a meditative and concentrated state of mind." Both the therapist and client should remain centered throughout the session and the slow pace of the work facilitates this state of awareness. The Thai's say that "the slowest way is best" and practitioners work in this meditative fashion waiting for the response in the body to happen. When the work is performed at this pace, the awareness and sensitivity of both client and practitioner can ascertain even the most subtle shifts of energy and change.

Although the pressure can be quite deep and the stretches profound, Nuad Bo Rarn, while similar, is a very yin therapy compared to some of the other Eastern forms in that it is performed very slowly and the practitioner always starts at the recipient's feet. The therapist then works up the legs, opening the channels of energy, through the hips, abdomen, chest, shoulders, arms, hands and head while the client is lying on their back.

Rhythmic palm presses are used for relaxation and are normally followed by slow, deep thumb pressure along specific Sen lines combined with the passive stretching of all the muscles of the body. The Sen are then worked again and more stretches are introduced as the client is placed in

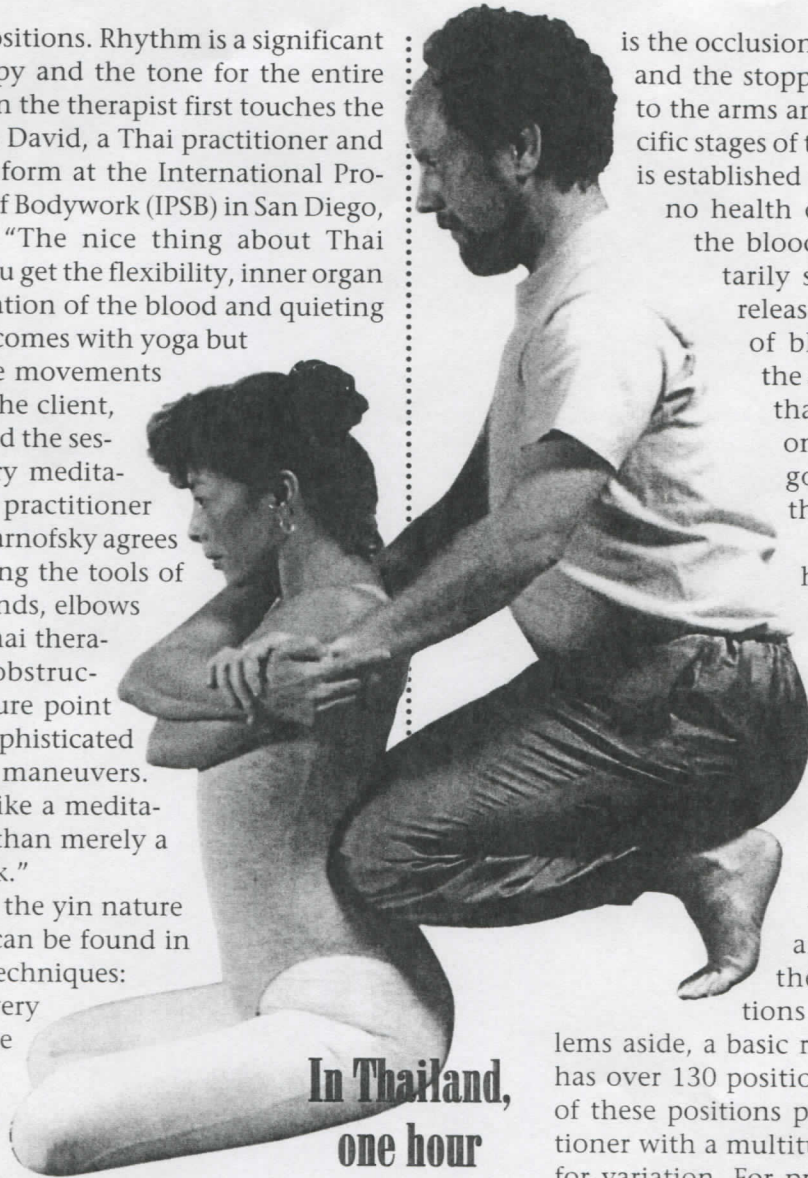


the other three positions. Rhythm is a significant part of the therapy and the tone for the entire session is set when the therapist first touches the client's feet. Lana David, a Thai practitioner and instructor of the form at the International Professional School of Bodywork (IPSB) in San Diego, California says, "The nice thing about Thai massage is that you get the flexibility, inner organ massage, oxygenation of the blood and quieting of the mind that comes with yoga but you're having the movements done to you. As the client, you're passive, and the session becomes very meditative." San Diego practitioner Yosel Wastrack-Tarnofsky agrees saying, "Employing the tools of his feet, arms, hands, elbows and knees, the Thai therapist removes....obstructions using pressure point techniques and sophisticated range-of-motion maneuvers. It appears more like a meditative yogic dance than merely a form of bodywork."

An example of the yin nature of Thai massage can be found in its manipulative techniques:

Bone setting is a very common practice among most traditional Oriental healing systems and manipulation of the spine can be found in Nuad Bo Rarn as well. What makes the style in Chaing Mai unique is that the manipulations are not forced but are done within the context of a slow stretch as the client breathes and relaxes. At one point in my training, we were being shown one of these positions and my instructor offered, "Move slowly and stretch, move and stretch again, when you hear the 'crack' you are done. If you don't hear it, you are still done, the stretch was enough." Another aspect of

therapy that seems to be unique to Thai massage



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feel the form should be left intact. Personally, I don't agree with the "Thai purists" and fall into

is the occlusion of certain arteries and the stoppage of blood flow to the arms and legs during specific stages of the session. After it is established that the client has no health contraindications, the blood flow is momentarily stopped and then released, sending a flood of blood and Qi into the area. The sensation that this produces is one of warm liquid gold flowing into the extremities.

In Thailand, one hour is not considered enough time to do a complete session and a traditional massage may last two to three times that long. This has to do with the slow pace in which the work is performed and the fact that, therapeutic applica-

tions for specific problems aside, a basic relaxation massage has over 130 positions in it. Each one of these positions presents the practitioner with a multitude of possibilities for variation. For practitioners in this country, this can sometimes present a problem in marketing. Many clients do not have two or three hours in any given day to devote to bodywork and depending on what the therapist charges, the cost may be prohibitive (when I was in Thailand in 1991, a massage cost 25 baht or \$4.00 per hour). For this reason, many practitioners in this country will omit certain parts of the long form to make the session shorter, a fact that irritates those therapists who

the former category. I feel that an hour of Thai is better than no Thai. If the therapist works in a "meditative and concentrated state of mind," the effects of the work are certainly felt. I've also found that clients who have had the shorter versions will be more prone to set aside the time and do longer sessions at a later time.

While being a very old therapy, Nuad Bo Rarn is still relatively unknown in this country to the public at large. Countless Americans have enjoyed traditional massage while traveling through Thailand and several body workers have gone to Thailand, learned the form and brought it back to this country. One of these was Dr. Richard Gold, a licensed acupuncturist and instructor at IPSB in San Diego. On a trip to Thailand, Dr. Gold got a traditional massage and was, like many other healers, taken with the work.

One of the main things that so impressed him about it was the very tangible connection between mind and body that the work seemed to bring about. Being a student of meditation for many years, he was always looking for the link between meditative practices and the various healing modalities. While the body/mind connection was something that could be communicated through conventional touch therapy, Nuad Bo Rarn, he felt, was the missing link and he immediately set out to find more information about the Thai medical system. After numerous searches through medical libraries in this country, he found that there was virtually no information on Thai medicine or traditional massage. He then convinced IPSB to fund a trip back to Thailand in December of 1989 to learn the form. Through a special arrangement made

between the San Diego school and the Foundation of Shivaga Komarpaj, the educational wing of the Old Traditional Hospital in Chaing Mai, Dr. Gold videotaped all of the classroom instruction and demonstration in the ancient massage and brought the curriculum back to this country. He also made arrangements to bring Master Teacher Chongkol Setthakorn from the Old Hospital to San Diego as a visiting professor. Together they established a Thai certification program at IPSB and Setthakorn trained a team of practitioners to teach the work, a team which I was very honored to be a part of. Since that time, the Thai certification program has been taken by students from all over the world and through efforts of the school and various instructors throughout this country, the ancient healing form is gaining more and more practitioners and popularity in the bodywork community.

When asked on various occasions to define traditional Thai massage and how it differs from other Oriental therapies, I have heard Dr. Gold answer with a question and a wonderful analogy, "Have you ever eaten Thai food? When considering the cultural influences on Thai massage, think of Thai food. It's sort of like Chinese food with its noodles and fresh stir-fried vegetables, but it really isn't. And its sort of like Indian food with its use of curry and mint and peanuts, but it isn't. Thai food is its own thing. Thai massage is like that. It's a combination of yogic stretches from India and peripheral stimulation from China, but it's its own thing,"



One last note on the Thai system being a spiritual practice. Along with the actual techniques, students of Nuad Bo Rarn are instructed in certain rules and methods to be followed when doing the work. While the idea of a bodywork system being a spiritual practice may seem odd or even unsuitable to some in this country (you certainly do not have to be Theraveda Buddhist to practice Thai massage), it is important to note that, at the very least, the system is an honorable and ethical one. I feel that this is best illustrated by the "Rules of Thai Massage." Many healers, regardless of their modality, would do well to follow these simple principles.

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**RULES OF THAI MASSAGE**

1. Study diligently the techniques and practice of Thai massage.
  2. Do not practice in public places (the temples were its home).
  3. Do not hope for any gains (don't practice for notoriety).
  4. Do not take patients from another doctor.
  5. Do not boast about your knowledge.
  6. Ask for advice and listen to people who know more than you.
  7. Bring a good reputation from the Seven Schools.
  8. Do not give out certificates in Basic Thai Massage to a person who is not qualified.
  9. Give thanks everyday to the Father Doctor, Om Namo.
- (Note: parentheses mine)

Practitioners of Oriental health and fitness systems all understand the concept of Qi and that good health depends on a balanced and harmonious flow of Qi through the body. Thai massage can help to remove obstructions and blockages, restore the flow of energy, improve vitality and build a high level of health. Through the use of point pressure and a wide variety of stretching movements, it opens joints, balances all the major muscle groups and is suitable for long term injuries. The patterns of gentle rocking and rhythmic compressions ease the recipient into a deeply relaxed state while helping them become more flexible than they thought possible.

This ancient therapy, this form of healing in the spirit of The Father Doctor, was probably best summed up in 1990 by Chonkol Setthakorn when he said, "Thai massage is like a thousand gentle waves washing over the body."

*Skip Kanester H.H.P. has an Oriental bodywork practice in North San Diego County and teaches Oriental massage workshops throughout the country. He is the faculty coordinator of the Oriental Studies Program at IPSB where he teaches Nuad Bo Rarn, Tuina, Seltai Shiatsu and Aromatherapy. He can be reached at (619) 942-5416 or (619) 272-4142.*

