

Letters from Asokananda

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Asokananda teaching at his research center, north of Chiang Mai, 2004.

Q: *How is it possible that different massage traditions teach techniques that are based on theories that seem to contradict each other?*

A: Like most other traditions (philosophical, religious etc.), massage is very often based on a traditional transmission where certain views are created or develop over a period of time which have no serious reason behind them. Somebody sets up laws or dogmas or they evolve historically, and others simply never question them. Quite often there are different ways of doing something and they are all correct, unless somebody ignorant is teaching in an irresponsible way.

Just a few examples: In Thai massage energy lines are always worked up and down, while in Shiatsu they are worked in specific directions. In Thai massage this is done to achieve maximum balance of the energy flow in all lines. According to my own experience, the Thai massage approach works well, giving brilliant results. In Shiatsu the goal is the same, but they follow the theory of a different Yin–Yang energy flow of lines in one or another direction. That approach seems to have the same balancing effect on the energy flow. So although the two traditions obviously contradict each other, both systems influence the energy body and the physical body in more or less the same, or at least a similar, way.

The same is true for the sometimes seemingly vast and confusing difference in the actual running of the energy lines, not only in different traditions, but even within the same massage tradition. The Chinese meridians differ considerably from the Zen Shiatsu meridians of *Shizuto Masunaga*. The Indian *prana* lines differ from these as well as from the Thai massage *sen* lines that I established together with Chow Kam Thye. These again are different from the Thai massage lines taught by the Massage Hospital in Chiang Mai which in turn are different from what my teacher Pichet teaches.

At first sight this seems to be pretty ridiculous. It becomes less so if we realize that systems of energy lines are nothing but concepts to describe the flow of energy in an invisible energy body. In the same way as you can draw maps of a city or a country or the world in many different forms, one highlighting roads, the other highlighting mountains or rivers or whatever, so also energy 'maps' are certain to differ based on the emphasis the author places on certain lines.

Remember that according to the yoga transmission the energy body is comprised of 72 000 energy lines. Quite a few of them do have a direct positive influence on the physical body and its organs and teachers in different traditions simply decided on the lines they personally found especially beneficial when they created their specific system to map out the energy flow.

That means that there is not one 'right' way to explain and depict these lines and all the others are wrong, but that most of them are absolutely valid attempts to explain the experience of a particular individual or a whole tradition. As soon as you become a master in the tradition that you follow, you will have to use the transmitted knowledge in a creative way anyway, seeing, respecting and honoring this knowledge as a background and reference point for your work. But if you cling to the knowledge by making a dogma out of it, you will never become a great practitioner. Only constant questioning of tradition and comparison with your actual practical experience keeps a tradition alive. It also throws all the responsibility back at you. A master cannot hide behind traditional transmission. But even for the inexperienced beginner there is nothing to worry about. The teachings of each particular school tend to be consistent within themselves. So if you follow the recommendations of the tradition that you have studied, you should always be alright. Mixing different systems can be more problematic. I rather recommend sticking to one tradition until you have gained a good understanding of it and you've got quite a bit of experience. Common sense and experience are the best guides if different systems are being mixed.

Q: *Is there any particular reason for starting Thai massage at the feet and then moving up?*

A: Thai massage starts at the feet as this helps to ground the energy work we are doing with the massage.

The Sutra of Tai Chi Chuan by Chang San-feng states: 'The foot is the root of energy. The energy then manifested through the legs is controlled by the waist and expressed through the hands to the fingers. From the feet to the legs up to the waist there should be one continuous flow of *chi* (life force).

By starting at the feet we support a purification process by helping a gradual energy ascent from the feet to the head and at the same time from the lower chakras (energy centers) to the crown chakra. It can be compared to the kundalini snake in the yoga tradition which also moves upwards along the same chakras.

Q: *Is there any particular reason for Thai massage to concentrate so much on the legs?*

A: The emphasis on working the legs is more pronounced in Northern style Thai massage, less so in the Southern style. We can only speculate on the reason for that. Very likely there is a rather simple reason to it. People living and working in the hills in Northern Thailand obviously did have problems with tired and overworked legs, strained knees, aching feet and leg muscles. So naturally the therapists put an emphasis on the legs to cure these aches.

On the other hand I personally find that an intensive workout on the legs does have a tremendous effect on balancing the energy flow for the rest of the body. There are numerous acupressure points on the legs covering practically the whole body, but especially for lower back pain, for headache, and for poor circulation.

Legs generally also suffer from poorer circulation compared with other parts of the body or the organs, as they are further away from the heart. So a thorough workout on the legs does make sense for quite a range of reason and should therefore not be neglected.

Q: *Are there any restrictions for women giving massage?*

A: There are no restrictions for women giving massage during menstruation. There are also no fixed restrictions for pregnant women, although pregnant women do require sufficient rest throughout the pregnancy and quite a few women will find it just too uncomfortable and tiring to go through giving a full Thai massage. But that is then the individual decision of each woman.

Q: *Occasionally the therapists' hands feel heavy and cramped during some massage sessions. How can that be avoided?*

A: As the hands are the most direct instruments of energy contact with the patient, they might feel heavy and cramped when you work on somebody with a lot of tension or a lot of problems, both physical or emotional/psychical.

The more balanced and relaxed the therapist himself is, the less prone he is to experience the influence of the patient's energies. A good way to protect oneself is to practice the yoga relaxation exercise of the Prana Eggs (*see article in the THAI archives under "Helpful Information."* - Editor). Yoga relaxation exercises or Vipassana meditation are essential to clean the therapists energy system from these unwanted energies. Especially powerful as a cleaning exercise after an energetically difficult massage is the *Kaya Kriya*. It is also advisable to wash the hands carefully after each massage or even better to take a shower.

Q: *Is the effectiveness of massage affected if a therapist is sexually active?*

A: Sexual energy is a strong energetic force and it influences anything one does to a great extent. But that certainly does not mean that one has to be a celibate to give massage. It is important, though, that one does not become a slave of one's sexual energies, which might indeed influence massage in a negative way, as there is certainly a close proximity between therapist and patient.

Sexual energies must be balanced. If one leads a householder's life and has a fulfilling sexual relationship, this balance can be achieved. If one's sexual life is problematic and unfulfilling, that is bound to show clearly in a work based on energy like Thai massage.

Living a celibate life, consciously transforming sexual energies and utilizing them for spiritual growth, also leads to balance. However, if the celibacy is forced by suppressing sexual desires, the massage will show the energetic imbalance of the therapist. So the quality of the massage does not depend on whether somebody is sexually active or not, but rather on how the sexually active person or the celibate deal with the power of sexual energies.

Q: *Can you give any advice on how to massage skinny, bony patients?*

A: Use more palming instead of thumbing. Rather avoid working with knees and elbows. Standing on the thighs is not a good idea. Special care is needed to avoid pain in the blood stops, they might even have to be omitted. But otherwise generally there shouldn't be any serious problem in going through the routine.

Q: *Can salt water be of any help for a therapist?*

A: Sure, salt water is an excellent cleansing agent and an antiseptic. Dipping the hands in salt water before the massage and from time to time during the massage as well as using salt water to wash the hands after the massage helps to protect oneself from taking in negative energies from your patient.

Q: *Can a therapist give massage if he has a little cold or fever? Will this affect the energy flow?*

A: It is better for a therapist to be healthy when giving a massage. A fever or cold certainly influences the therapist's concentration and strength and also his ability to fend off negative energy received from the patient. He might still be able to give a reasonably good massage, but as he will be more vulnerable for negative energies absorbed from the patient, he might actually get sicker.

Q: *In many massage therapies the advice is not to take hands off the patient. Any one or both hands should always be in contact with the patient till the end of the massage. Why is this so? Is there any such rule in Thai massage?*

A: There is no 'hands on' rule in Thai massage, but it is actually quite a good idea to use that approach. It helps to establish an uninterrupted energy relationship between the therapist and the patient. So it is in fact beneficial for energy balancing.

Q: *Due to skeletal deformities some people are not able to lie down properly or maintain the particular postures needed for massage. How should one deal with them?*

A: It is always possible and even necessary to adjust to the particular needs of the patient posture-wise. The patient can be propped up with pillows or in some exceptional cases you might even use a stool or chair for the sitting position, although that limits the number of exercises the therapist will be able to perform. If somebody does have difficulties to lie on their back, supporting with pillows is a good idea.

Q: *How should I deal with a patient who is very skeptical about the massage?*

A: Even if people are at first skeptical about receiving a massage, that is not a hindrance to giving them one. The fact that they have come to you and are willing to receive one in the first place is already a sign that they are open for it somehow. Energy work does give best and quickest results though on people who are receptive to it. If somebody does have a negative attitude towards it, that would block the free flow of energy and make massage much more difficult if not impossible. But a person like that will very rarely turn up at the doorsteps of a Thai therapist anyway.

Q: *Some people are very ticklish and it is rather difficult to give them a massage. Is there anything that can be done?*

A: Ticklishness can be a sign of a lack of trust in the therapist. It often disappears altogether after the patient gets to know the therapist better and is able to relax more, to feel more at home and comfortable with the therapist. Ticklishness also can be a sign of hidden fears, deeply stored away in the patient's subconscious. In that case it will take time for the tension to come out and to get released. For the therapist that simply means being extremely patient and allowing the opening-up process to unfold. It is generally helpful to increase the pressure slightly whenever ticklishness manifests in a particular area of the body. To work more slowly might also help.

Q: *Is it okay if a patient drifts off into sleep or a semi-sleep state during massage?*

A: Yes, there is no harm and nothing wrong with that. It rather is a sign that the patient is able to let go and to relax – and that she has confidence and trust in the therapist.

Q: *Is it okay for a patient to go to sleep right after a massage?*

A: It is possible that a patient feels rather sleepy after the massage. In such a case there is no harm in going to sleep. The release of tension triggered of by the massage will generally continue. On the other hand a patient might feel extremely energized by the massage and find it difficult to get some sleep at all. This is alright too and there is no reason to worry. The insomnia will be gone the following day.

Q: *Can a patient and therapist talk to each other or others during massage?*

A: It is generally better not to talk during a massage. The therapist's concentration suffers if he is involved in talking and that certainly is not going to benefit the energy work. But some patients do need somebody to talk to. For them it is essential to have somebody who listens to their problems and even gives advice in addition to the body and energy work. So the therapist to a certain extent is expected to be a kind of a consultant for all kinds of problems. A professional Thai therapist should be aware of that and preferably undergo some psychological training to be able to fulfill the role of adviser on various important issues of life. If you have a patient for whom you fulfill that need, conversation is permitted as it will help the patient to open up and release tension. So it depends on the needs of the patient.

If you consider yourself not qualified enough to be a life consultant in addition to being a therapist, it is better to make silence a general rule for your massages. You certainly have to avoid getting into a chatting mood and there should never be any conversation with a third person. I am aware that this has become quite a habit in some commercial massage parlors in Thailand and I have even seen therapists watching TV while giving massage, but I regard that as extremely unprofessional and I am sure that no serious Thai therapist considers copying such behavior.

Q: *Is it necessary to remove rings, chains, watches, bangles etc. while giving or receiving a massage?*

A: Yes, that is necessary. Most of these are made of metals and metals influence the flow of Prana. To avoid the metals energetically interfering with the massage it is wise for both, therapist and patient, to remove all these gadgets. There is also a considerable risk of injuries in some exercises if therapist or patient is wearing any kind of jewelry. Only in cases where it is extremely difficult to remove a certain object, the therapist might allow an exception but then exert special care to avoid damage.

Q: Can the patient take a bath or eat right after the massage?

A: After the massage the body is ideally completely relaxed. PMB (the so called 'Post Metabolic Process'), triggered off by the exercises occurs during that time. The same happens after a session of Hatha yoga. It is during this period that a lot of fat is broken down and toxins are removed. Taking a shower or eating stops this process all of a sudden. So if you want to get the benefits of the PMB you should wait for at least two hours before taking a bath or having something to eat. If on the other hand somebody wants to put on weight, taking a shower right after the massage followed immediately by a protein rich meal is exactly what is called for. But that certainly would not be a good idea for anyone who wants to lose weight.

Q: *Some of my patients have occasional twitches or jerks when I give them massage. What does that mean?*

A: This is a common sign of tension release. There is absolutely nothing to worry about.

Q: *Is there any benefit of having the patient lying with his head to the North, using the polarity of the earth for giving massage?*

A: There is no rule on that in Thai massage. But I certainly do recommend making use of the earth's polarity for massage whenever possible. This approach, fundamental to some yoga traditions including the one that I follow myself, is a tremendous aid to energy balancing. Placing the head to the North is also advisable as a general direction for sleeping.

Q: *Superficial ailments seem to get cured rather fast by Thai massage while more serious ailments take longer and are more difficult to treat. Why?*

A: Superficial ailments express more gross disturbances of the energy flow dealing more with gross past karmas. They generally respond more easily to energy work. Serious ailments express more subtle disturbances of the energy flow dealing with more subtle past karmas which are pushed back deep into the subconscious. It takes considerably more effort by the therapist to influence that. A therapist with a lot of experience with deep energy work might have quicker results than somebody whose feeling for the energy lines is only rudimentary. The receptiveness of the patient for energy work also plays an important role.

Q: *What is the best time for giving or receiving a massage? Is it true that the body is more open and receptive on certain days? Is this because the body is influenced by the phases of the moon, the season, the weather etc.?*

A: Massage can be given and received at any time of the day, although the therapist's attentiveness is influenced by his personal biorhythm. There are times of the day when one is more attentive and aware than at other times. So if one is aware of one's personal highs and lows that might be taken into account and the massage hours could be adjusted accordingly. But there certainly is no one fixed period of time that is most suitable for Thai massage.

The physical body and the energy body are indeed more open and receptive on certain days. But this can be due to a variety of reasons and is not just due to one simple factor. The weather may be one of these factors: rainy, foggy weather tends to stiffen up the physical body and the *prana* body alike, while bright sunshine opens them up. Full moon generally opens up, new moon closes. Also the food that we eat can be important. *Tamasic* food (any kind of dulling food, e.g. meat) closes, while *rajasic* food (food that induces excitement like chilies, peppers or coffee) tends to make the bodies oversensitive. So if the patient has been eating quite a bit of *rajasic* food right before the massage, the therapist might sense a feeling of nervousness. *Sattvic* food (energetically neutral, e.g. most fruits and vegetables, milk products, and whole meal grains) makes the patient more open and receptive for massage as well as for yoga and any other activity which involves an intensive energy workout.

The time of eating also makes a difference. Massage right after a meal is the worst as the patient's energy is drawn to the stomach for digestion and the patient is not open for receiving a massage. If somebody who has not eaten in the evening is massaged in the early morning his receptiveness will be exceptionally high. But other external factors like personal relationships with partners, relatives etc., the situation at work, all change the receptiveness of the patient as well as the concentration of the therapist on different days in one way or the other.

Q: *Acupressure works only when the muscles are loose. How then can we justify the stretched postures in Thai massage where muscles are taut?*

A: Deep point work in Thai massage is generally done on loose muscles. This is distinctly different from energy line work where the emphasis is on energy balancing. Stretching lines makes that considerably more effective. So the basic guideline is: deep acupressure is better done in a relaxed state, line work is more beneficial in a stretched position.

Q: *I have occasionally observed patients coughing when pressing certain points. What does that mean?*

A: This is simply one of the many expressions of tension release.

Q: *Is it alright if several therapists work on a patient simultaneously?*

A: Although there are a few Thai massage places where that is done I don't think it is a good idea. In my opinion Thai massage should be always done one-to-one. The reason is that it is difficult enough for one therapist to perfectly tune into the energy system of a patient. If there are two or even more therapists involved, different energy bodies are interacting. They will all be on different energy levels and this is going to disrupt the proper energy flow between a therapist and a patient. Massage done by several therapists is rather more likely to create a feeling of fragmentation and nervousness than of balance and relaxation.

Q: *Is it necessary to work on both sides of the body even if there is pain or an ailment on one side only?*

A: I strongly recommend that. Thai massage is a holistic massage based on energy balancing. It is therefore not sufficient to work only one side of the body or just a particularly painful area. It is permitted to concentrate on certain areas if that seems to be necessary but that should be within the framework of a complete balancing workout.

Q: *What is the meaning of emotional outbursts during Thai massage and how should I deal with them?*

A: Emotional release is not that uncommon during Thai massage. Patients may have fits of laughter or may start to cry or scream. That is in fact a healthy cleansing process, a release of tension, of past karmas stored deeply in the patient's subconscious. This happens especially often when a patient is very receptive to energy work. In such a patient the emotional or psychic bodies may also get touched in addition to the physical and *prana* bodies which are mainly worked with Thai massage.

It is better to explain the possible deep effects of Thai massage to a patient beforehand, so that she is not taken by surprise. If you encounter a strong emotional release try to figure out from which main energy center the release mainly comes from. Balance the release by connecting the respective chakra with opposing chakras. If the release originates let's say

from the sixth or seventh chakra, ground it by placing one hand on the root chakra connecting the other chakra with the other hand. If the release comes from the heart chakra, combine with the fifth or third chakra, as they are powerful cleansing chakras helping the release of aggression, hatred or anger. If the release is from the lower chakras, the combination with the cleansing chakras is also recommended.



Asokananda teaching in the Lahu village school, 2004. Photo by Bob Haddad.

Q: *Constant pressing with the thumbs and fingers can make them hard and calloused, especially the thumbs. If that happens to a therapist, does it affect the energy flow between the therapist and the patient?*

A: No, it does not negatively affect the energy flow.

Q: *How frequently should one work on somebody when doing therapy?*

A: If possible, it is great to work on a person daily when doing therapy. Generally, working more often will show quicker healing results. But the condition of the patient has to be taken into account. If somebody is very weak and sick daily massage might be too taxing, while if you treat somebody for tension and bodily pains like frozen shoulder or lower back pain, a daily workout is certainly more efficient. Often that is not practical. What I would recommend is to do at least one treatment once a week in therapeutic massage. Most people going for massage therapy in Thailand go on a once-a-week basis.

Q: *Is massage allowed on people who have problems with the internal organs?*

A: Thai massage is not only allowed on people with internal organ disturbances but strongly recommended. Thai massage is helpful for all kinds of ailments, but not everybody responds to massage therapy in the same way. Working the energy lines all over the body works wonders for some people with organ problems and they can see and feel improvement after a couple of treatments only. Others with similar diseases will not observe any difference at all over the same period of time. We should be honest about that and not promise cures which are dependent on a whole range of factors, the patient's receptiveness to energy treatment being an extremely important one. But there are certainly no contraindications and giving massage therapy a chance is no harm for sure.

Q: *Is there a tradition of diagnostics in Thai massage?*

A: There is no detailed tradition of diagnostics in Thai massage, which I rather see as an advantage. This prevents us from getting stuck with monocausal explanations. Experienced therapists can feel obstructions of the energy flow and energy blocks and through careful observation and a tuning-in to the patient's energy system intuitively figure out what kind of workout the patient needs.

Q: *Skin problems are becoming more and more widespread. Can massage be helpful?*

A: A therapist should not work directly on infected skin. There are exceptions though: using tea tree oil during the face massage is great against acne and pimples. Teatree oil is also a very potent fungicide. Point work and line work is done to treat itching, allergies and acne. Point *Hegu*, the Great Eliminator on the hands, has been used in the Thai tradition as well as in Chinese acupressure and acupuncture. An intensive ear massage is helpful. The last point on the first outside line on the calf close to the knee is good. Also work the dorsum of the foot, especially between the big toe and the second toe. Place an emphasis on the first inside line of the leg and the middle line (second line) on the outside of the arm. A strict vegetarian diet also helps to alleviate skin problems.

Q: *Some people experience a strange taste like lead when they receive a massage. What does that mean?*

A: This is an excellent sign. It is an indication of a detoxification process triggered off by the massage.

Q: *Can Thai massage help drug and alcohol addicts?*

A: Thai massage has an impact on the physical as well as on the psychic level. It is highly recommended as a supportive measure in drug rehabilitation. It can strengthen the body's resistance and reduce withdrawal symptoms. Working on *Sen Kalathari*, *Sen Sahatsarangsi* and *Sen Thawari* is especially important.

Q: *Can Thai massage be given to a person having minor body ailments like a cold or a little fever?*

A: Thai massage can be given to a person with minor ailments, although one has to be aware that – similar to homeopathy – the symptoms might become worse right after the massage before any benefit can be felt. This is due to the starting of the cleansing process. Use more line work and less stretching if somebody has a fever or cold.

Q: *Is the efficiency of massage reduced if a patient is under allopathic drugs?*

A: Thai massage is supportive to most medical treatments and although it complements Ayurveda, homeopathy and Chinese medicine better, it is generally not contra-indicated if the patient is on allopathic drugs. In case a patient takes allopathic drugs which only suppress the symptoms of the disease but don't really cure the problem, the massage might indeed reduce the efficiency of the drug as the line work in massage always supports release and letting go.

Q: *Can spinal twists be done if a patient has spinal injuries or a slipped disc?*

A: Spinal twists are best avoided on people with slipped discs or other spinal injuries. Only working the lines and releasing muscular tension is asked for.

Q: *If the direction of digestion is clockwise, why then is normal stomach massage often done anti-clockwise?*

A: In case of normal digestion, the emphasis is on giving maximum relaxation. Maximum relaxation, like in yoga, is achieved by building up tension and tension release. For example there are yoga relaxation techniques where one cramps up the whole body and lets go. The same principle is used in stomach massage. Working anti-clockwise, working against the normal direction of digestion gives maximum relaxation. It won't hinder normal digestion.

Q: *Is normal (counter-clockwise) stomach massage okay for diarrhea?*

A: Yes, stomach massage in the case of diarrhea can be done anti-clockwise. But any stomach massage has to be done gently to avoid inflicting too much pain. But more important than massaging the stomach in this case is to intensively work the backlines as there is a multitude of acupressure points for the abdomen and the intestines on the two main backlines.

Q: *Is stomach massage equally effective for people with paunches?*

A: Yes, it is effective.

Q: *What is the rationale behind pressing towards the navel in stomach massage?*

A: In the stomach massage we have two options. One is working towards the navel, which gives maximum relaxation for the stomach region. The other technique is pressing straight down, which is a better massage for the internal organs, stimulating and regulating the organs. So both techniques are alright, but they have different effects. A recommended procedure combining both techniques is: do the first round palming with direct pressure straight down for the organ massage and the second round with finger pressure towards the navel for relaxation. It is the therapist's choice how to work depending on what he places his emphasis.

Q: *Some people have complained about body-aches the day after receiving massage. Am I doing something wrong?*

A: Body aches after an intensive workout are possible the day after the massage, as muscles often get worked that in daily life are normally not being used. This is not a bad sign but an indication that the body is starting to open up. If a person gets regular massage the body adjusts and the aches will stop. The body-aches also don't persist very long. They should disappear the next day.

Q: *Persons with abdominal, chest and other pains are often hesitant to allow the therapist to press in the painful area. How can this problem be addressed?*

A: Many people hold quite a bit of emotional tension in the abdomen and the chest, which makes them rather difficult areas to touch. Be considerate of that. Massage should not be avoided, but the therapist has to be careful not to exert much pressure. Massage has to be very light. Main emphasis in the mentioned cases should be work on the backlines. If an area like the lower back is very painful and the pain is based on muscular tension, it is a good idea to apply hot wet towels first. This will make it much easier to apply pressure.

