



2 Luk Pra Kob: The Art of Thai Herbal Compresses

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Most courses in traditional Thai massage focus on the execution of assisted stretches, acupressure, and a very basic discussion of *sen* line theory. If students are lucky enough to learn from an experienced teacher, they may also receive instruction about proper body mechanics, breathwork, and a general sense of how to flow gracefully from one technique to the next. But in most courses of study, even those that last for many months, the use of Thai herbal compresses is often overlooked or underemphasized.

After several years of studying *nuad boran* with a number of teachers and schools in Thailand and in the West, I was finally exposed to the wonders of *luk pra kob*. After a few months of rudimentary practice, I sought out teachers that used compresses in their treatments, and I began to experiment with different herbal mixes, wrappers and application styles, but I had no idea how deeply this work would affect my practice.

Luk pra kob (or “Thai herbal balls” as they are sometimes called) can be purchased pre-made, or you can choose to make them yourself. If you live in a region where dry and fresh herbs cannot be purchased or easily shipped to you, you may have no alternative but to use the pre-made kind. Most commercially available pre-made

herbal balls are imported from Thailand, and are made of dried herbs and rhizomes. They are wrapped in cheesecloth and have a distinctive long handle made of cloth, tied with cotton string or with thin strips of bamboo. In Thailand however, many healers don't use pre-made luk pra kob, but prefer instead to make their own compresses from fresh herbs and rhizomes, as well as dried materials.

There are distinct advantages to preparing your own compresses. You can choose the quantities and types of herbal materials you want for each compress; you can use fresh, rather than only dried materials; and you can modify the ingredients of a compress for a particular client based on a specific physical condition or perhaps to create a certain olfactory mood. In addition, you may direct your healing energy into an herbal compress as you prepare it for an individual client. Finally, your client may take home the compress after the session and use it as an herbal bath infusion. For these and other reasons, I choose to make my own herbal compresses.

Traditional Thai compresses have longer handles, requiring the compress to be held with a closed fist in vertical position, with the thumb on top. Rather than preparing compresses with long handles bound with string, I make them with shorter, rounded handles that fit more securely in the hand. The more-rounded shape allows a therapist to hold it more securely and to use the compress with a greater degree of control. Because of the lack of a long handle, a small dry washcloth is needed to hold the top of the compress when it gets hot.

One of my teachers once showed me a method of placing herbs onto a sheet of cotton cloth and then sealing the bundle at the neck with a wide rubber band. This worked well, but after being steamed, the herbs stuck to the inside of the cloth, making it difficult and time-consuming to recycle the cotton wrapper. I further refined the rubber band approach by placing the herbs and roots inside a drawstring muslin bag first, which I then wrap with sheer cotton cloth. This allows for washing and recycling of the outer wrapping material, and provides a ready-made bath infusion to be taken home by the client for later use. Clients love soaking in an herbal bath on the night of their Thai massage.

Mixing and preparing the herbs

Making a compress or a bath infusion can be an enjoyable part of

the overall preparation for your sessions each day. If you have a very busy schedule on a particular day, you may choose to prepare several compresses the night before your sessions, and put them in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Whenever possible, however, try to prepare your compresses each morning for the sessions you are about to give that day.

As you are preparing and mixing the ingredients, think of the client that you'll be working on. Imagine that person's physical conditions, tensions and difficulties. Consider ways you will work with them in your session. Take a moment to meditate, and direct positive energy into the compress you'll be using on that person.

Pour your dry herbal blend into a large mixing bowl, and get ready to add your fresh ginger root and any other fresh ingredients. It is best to not slice ginger, turmeric, *plai*, lemongrass or *galanga*. Instead, smash them against a flat surface with a heavy object such as a meat tenderizer or a rock. Then separate them into small pieces with your hands so that the stringy fibers are exposed. If you use fresh leafy herbs, you should tear them with your hands, not cut them with scissors. When you are done with your preparations, mix the fresh pieces into the dry mix, and stir with your hands to distribute it evenly. Now you may begin to pack your compresses.

For the wrapper you may use cheesecloth or any other sheer cotton cloth. I use cotton "shop cloths" – the ones used by car mechanics and industrial workers to clean their hands. These cloths can be easily found in major department stores and supply shops in the West, or you can buy them on the internet. Make sure they are made with a loose weave, so the herbal properties can pass through the cloth. Hold the cloth up to a strong light, and if you can see light shining through, it should be fine. Shop cloths are pre-cut to a reasonable size and they can be washed and used over and over again. You can also purchase sheets or rolls of sheer cotton or cheesecloth and cut them into smaller rags of your desired length and width.

If you decide to use muslin bags, place a generous amount of mixed fresh and dry herbs into the muslin bag, add a pinch of camphor crystals if you wish, and tie the drawstring pouch with a tight bow. If you don't use muslin bags, you can place your herbal mixture directly into the center of the cotton cloth.

If you choose to make your own compresses with long stiff handles, you will need a longer piece of cloth, a large amount of cotton string, and perhaps some small strips of bamboo. If you make them



this way, or if you work with dry compresses imported from Thailand, you may also need a deeper steamer so that the taller compresses fit inside. If you want to assemble and disassemble your compresses quickly however, and if you plan to use a domestic electric vegetable steamer, then try the shop cloth and rubber band approach. It works very well.

Bring the four corners of the cloth together with your hands, grab the neck of the bundle, and mold the herbal mix into a tight round shape. Use a wide rubber band to close the neck, and twist it around the neck two or three times to seal it tightly. Now create the small handle to hold the compress. Bring the four exposed flaps of cloth underneath the rubber band, and make sure they are tightly secured. Mold the new cloth “handle” over the top portion of the compress with your hand, and adjust the flaps as necessary so you can grab the ball tightly. Make sure the rubber band isn’t exposed, since it will become hotter than the cloth and it could potentially burn you or your client.

General recipes for herbal mixes are mentioned toward the end of this essay, as well as mixtures for herbal bath infusions. Whether you prepare your own compresses or use the pre-made variety, your clients will thank you for the warmth, steam, pressure and medicinal benefits that result from using luk pra kob.

General information about herbal compresses

Hot herbal compresses have a long history of use in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. The earliest written records in Thailand are from the Ayutthaya period (14th–18th century) when Siamese soldiers returning from battle were treated with compresses to ease their mental states and help to relax their bodies. Today in Thailand, herbal compresses are used in massage shops, spas, and among family members, using specialized recipes passed down through the generations.

There are many traditional Thai recipes for compresses. Common blends incorporate materials such as ginger, plai, turmeric, lemongrass, kaffir lime (leaves and the rind of the fruit), tamarind leaves, eucalyptus, galangal and camphor. Salt is often added to open skin pores, and sometimes cinnamon or sweet herbs and flowers may be included. Knowledgeable herbalists and healers prepare their compresses based on the individual needs of their patients, but most of them also have a standard all-purpose recipe.

The herbal blend that I prepare is based on traditional ingredients, except that it doesn’t use fresh kaffir lime leaves, tamarind leaves and plai, which are hard to find and expensive in the West, or turmeric, which stains skin and clothing. In addition to a base of ginger, lemongrass, eucalyptus and camphor, for example, you may choose to add a small amount of freshly-picked herbs that are available in your region. Examples include lemon balm, peppermint, anise leaf, rosemary, lavender and jasmine. Research the medicinal properties of each plant first, and make sure there are no contraindications for your clients’ conditions. Add local herbs only in moderation, and make sure the majority of the mix remains true to Thai tradition.

Sick or sensitive clients can have a very relaxing and invigorating experience with herbal compresses, even if no traditional Thai massage is applied. In this case, therapists commonly use several compresses to work the entire body, along the sen lines, and on the stomach, chest, back, arms and legs. In Thailand, compresses are often used on pregnant women without any additional Thai massage treatment.

Smelling and inhaling herb-infused vapors during a compress session can induce deep relaxation. Many herbs have a balancing effect on the mind, and help to reduce stress. Materials such as eucalyptus and camphor act as decongestants for the lungs and sinuses. Using hot compresses on the chest, throat and sinuses can loosen mucous and open up nasal passages.

The steamer

It’s best to use an electric steamer, and one with a thermostat will give you extra control. Make sure you use a true vegetable steamer and not a rice cooker or a crock pot. A metal basket or plastic compartment has large holes in it and is positioned directly above the boiling water below. The herb bundles shouldn’t come directly in contact with the boiling water, but they must become damp from the rising steam in order to be effective.

As the water evaporates from the steamer, you will need to replace it. Keep a large container of fresh water nearby, so you can replace the water several times during the course of your treatment. The lid should be firmly in position at all times, except when you move the compresses in and out of the steamer. Be careful to not overfill the steamer with water, since the boiling action might

wet the bottom of the compress. A variety of electric steamers with thermostats are available in appliance and department stores, and on the internet.

Application and warnings

Before steaming, sprinkle the outside of the wrapped compress with water or rice vinegar and massage the compress lightly to loosen the herbal materials and distribute the moisture. Steam for a minimum of 10–15 minutes at 93–107 degrees Centigrade (200–225 degrees Fahrenheit). Do not submerge compresses in hot water because they'll become too hot to handle for the client and therapist, and also because much of their medicinal value will seep into the water. If a compress accidentally drops into the hot water in your steamer, make sure to wring out the water and dry the outside of the compress with a towel before reusing it, since it could easily scald your client's skin.

If you're doing a session where you will be using compresses extensively, it's best to steam two at a time so the treatment can be conducted without interruption. Alternate them as necessary and return one to the steamer as you remove the other. Use a dry wash cloth to grab a fresh compress from the steamer, and as you apply it to your client's body.

Always test a compress against your upper arm, neck, stomach or face to make sure it's not too hot for your client. If it's too hot, use one of the cooling methods described in this article or simply keep it out of the steamer for a minute or two.

Don't use compresses on clients within 24 hours after swelling, inflammation or bleeding, as the heat might worsen their condition. You can treat a swollen area between 24 and 36 hours after the condition first appears, but be careful to use compresses that are warm, not hot, or to be safe, use pre-steamed cool or cold compresses. Take extra care if your clients have diabetes, paralysis, or varicose veins, and if you're working on children and older people, since their skin may be tender. Always test the compress on yourself first to make sure it's not too hot.

Advise your clients to not shower or bathe for at least several hours after an herbal session. This is so the medicinal value of the herbs can remain on and under the skin long enough to be absorbed into the body. This is true even if you are applying compresses on top of clothing.

Try to apply the compress onto bare skin whenever possible. If you are working through clothing, make sure the client is wearing natural fabrics such as cotton or rayon.

After the herbal session, a light stain may remain on skin and clothing, but it should come out in the wash with no problem. Turmeric, whether in fresh rhizome or dry powder form, may permanently stain clothing a dark orange color, so be aware of this if you use this powerful herbal medicine in your mixture.

Benefits

Thai herbal compresses are used to alleviate pain and inflammation by opening skin pores and transferring medicating heat to the muscles, joints and energy lines. Compress therapy helps to harmonize and relax the body, to loosen energy blockages, and to speed the healing of scars, including those caused by child birth. Compresses relax the muscles and stimulate blood circulation and energy flow. The powerful combination of heat and medicinal herbs helps to reduce aches, increases lymphatic drainage, and conditions the skin. Medicinal herbs effectively treat sprains, pain, bruises and soreness, and they relax and loosen tendons and ligaments.

In Thailand, compresses often include antioxidants such as turmeric, a natural skin softener; tamarind, which hydrates and regenerates skin cells; kaffir lime leaves and fruit, a skin toner and blood circulation booster; and *plai*, (Thai ginger) which eases muscle and joint aches.

Storage

Herbal compresses may be used several times before they are discarded. Compresses may be refreshed by discarding some of the used herbs and adding small amounts of fresh herbs, roots and camphor as needed. To store overnight, wrap each compress in a small plastic sandwich bag after use, and store it in the refrigerator. If you or your clients use them as shower loofas or bath infusions, make sure to wring them out completely before storing them in the refrigerator.

If you prepare your herbs from a pre-mixed dry base, such as the blends mentioned later in this essay, be sure to keep the dry herbs in an airtight plastic bag or container, and store them in a cool, dark place.

Herbs, rhizomes and natural medicines

An extraordinary number of plants are used to prepare natural medicines in Thailand, and some of these are especially suitable for compresses. For Thai massage practitioners living outside of Southeast Asia, access to some plants that thrive in Thailand is difficult. Nevertheless, good quality herbal compresses can be made from natural ingredients that are available for sale and bulk distribution in many Western countries. The herbs mentioned below are a few of the most common Thai medicinal herbs that are used in compresses.



lemongrass – dried and fresh pieces and stalks

Lemongrass Lemongrass is a perennial herb that thrives in the tropics and subtropics. Thai lemongrass is known as *ta khrai* and is cultivated commercially throughout Thailand and Southeast Asia for culinary and medicinal purposes. The plant grows in dense clumps up to two meters (six feet) in diameter and has leaves up to one meter (three feet) long. The lower part of the stalk has a pale white color and contains the most pungent flavor. This part of the plant is used in Thai soups and curries. The entire stalk may be used to make teas, decoctions, poultices, and as a treatment for colds, fevers, coughs and indigestion. It also is known to treat nausea, stomach pain and vomiting. Among hill tribe people in Thailand, it is used topically for sprains, bruises and sore muscles.

As aromatherapy oil, lemongrass is useful for treating headaches and it works very well as an insect repellent. When it's mixed with a carrier oil and massaged directly onto irritated skin, it boosts circulation and speeds healing. If you live in the West and you work with compresses regularly, it's easiest to work with dried lemongrass, since fresh stalks can be costly and hard to find. If you do use fresh lemongrass, make sure to crush the bulbs and stalks after you cut them, so the herbal properties can be optimally released.

Eucalyptus Eucalyptus (*yukhaliptat* in Thai) is native to Australia, and began to be used medicinally in Thailand only in the 20th century. It is increasingly used in Thailand to relieve sprains and sore muscles. There are several different species of eucalyptus, all of which have medicinal use. It is an extremely effective remedy for colds, sinus and lung problems, cough, and asthma. Symptoms are relieved by inhalation of the vapors and topical application to the chest, throat, and the area under the nose. Eucalyptus tea is good

for indigestion and fever, and the leaves are used topically on infections and skin burns. When steamed, the vapors of the herb open air passages and clean the sinuses and lungs.

The tree grows in many places around the world, and is readily available for herbal compresses in fresh or dried form. Note: do not use the small round type of eucalyptus that is found in florists and supermarkets in the West, since the leaves are often treated with chemicals for use in floral bouquets. If you are fortunate to live in a zone where eucalyptus trees grow in the wild, you will be able to pick your own leaves. If not, you can use dried eucalyptus, which is available in bulk from herbal supply companies.



eucalyptus –dried cut and whole leaf

Camphor Camphor (*garaboon* or *kalaboon* in Thai) is a product that is distilled from the gum or resin of a type of cinnamon tree. The crystals that result are sold in powder form, or may be compressed into tablets for easy storage. Camphor is a strong decongestant, and is inhaled to treat colds, congestion, sore throat, cough, sinusitis and bronchitis. It is also beneficial for irregular menstruation, and eye and lung infections. Although camphor actually stimulates the brain and increases heart and blood circulation, it also reduces stress, anxiety and insomnia. In herbal compresses applied topically, camphor crystals act as an anti-inflammatory, and relieve arthritis, sprains and muscle pain. Add a pinch of crystals to the top of each compress before tying and steaming. Avoid touching your eyes and nose after handling camphor, and wash your hands thoroughly after contact.



camphor – compressed tablets and crystals

Ginger Ginger (*khing*, in Thai) is one of the most important ingredients in Thai medicine. As a topical application, it has strong antiseptic properties, and it treats bacterial and skin infections, acne and parasites. Ginger is a powerful stimulant, and aids in digestion, control of flatulence, diarrhea, vomiting, colds, sore throat, insomnia, heart disease, acid indigestion, irregular menstruation, chronic back pain and many other maladies. Common Thai ginger is called *plai*, and is of a different variety than the ginger that is available in Western groceries, but the medicinal properties are similar. For Thai massage therapists living in the West, common ginger may be used with excellent results.

To prepare fresh ginger for compresses, smash the rhizomes with a hammer, meat tenderizer or a hard flat object such as a rock. Once the roots are smashed and flattened, pull them apart into



ginger – fresh, dried pieces and powder

small fibrous pieces and mix evenly with your herbal mixture. Once hot, the ginger will help to maintain an even temperature in the compress. The fibers and juice of the ginger act as a transmitter of the combined medicinal properties of herbs and roots, and impart a fabulous aroma, which helps to calm the client's mind.



turmeric – fresh and powder

Turmeric Turmeric (*kha min*) is an important herbal medicine, and has been valued as such throughout the ages. Native to South Asia, it is known for its ability to reduce gas, ease diseases of the digestive system, and treat skin disorders such as rashes, sores and insect bites. Scientific research has confirmed that turmeric blocks certain toxins from entering the liver and kills some types of bacteria. Turmeric is also known to arrest certain types of cancer, and is being used experimentally in some countries to treat cancer victims. Many cancer survivors are known to take turmeric in capsule form to ward off recurrences. In Thailand, turmeric is often used in cooking, herbal medicine and herbal compresses. With its powerful curative properties, turmeric is one of the key ingredients in traditional Thai beauty treatments and you'll find a wide variety of herbal soaps and skin products made of this miracle root. Turmeric oil serves as an efficient moisturizer and has antiseptic properties to heal skin ailments.



kaffir lime – fresh fruit and leaves

Kaffir lime Kaffir lime leaf (*ma krut*) imparts an unmistakable, refreshing taste that is essential to many Thai soups & curries. A digestive aid, medicinal properties in the leaves cleanse the blood and help maintain healthy teeth and gums. In Thailand, kaffir lime leaves are added to shampoo since they clean the scalp and hair, and are believed to reduce hair loss. Traditionally, the lime was cut and rubbed directly onto the hair and scalp. The juice and oil from the peel help prevent dandruff and leave the hair soft and shiny. Kaffir lime extract is also used as a natural deodorant. The leaves grow with two opposing sections joined at the center. Sizes vary, but the average individual leaf is approx 2" long. Harvesting is done by hand and it's a time-consuming process because the branches have long thorns. For use in cooking, kaffir lime leaves freeze well in an airtight bag or container.

Other ingredients commonly used in compresses

Plai Plai (*prai*) is a type of ginger that is widely used in Thai traditional medicine for topical treatment of sprains, contusions, joint swelling, muscular pain, abscesses and similar inflammation-related disorders. Plai oil has long been used by Thai healers to ease joint and muscle pains, and it is used as a natural moisturizer to tone and soften the skin and to condition the scalp. The ground fresh rhizome is used in traditional Thai massage as a muscle relaxant and may be applied as a poultice or steamed in a compress. The flesh is dark yellow-orange, and it can stain clothing and skin temporarily.

Salt Salt is sometimes added to Thai herbal compresses, and is an important ingredient in herbal bath infusions. It cleans and opens skin pores, thereby facilitating the transfer of medicinal properties. Known as *klua* (*glua*) in Thai language, it softens the skin, and works as an exfoliant for dry skin cells. Salt eases muscle aches, and relieves sunburn, rashes, and skin irritations. You may add small rocks of sea salt or large flakes of kosher salt to your compresses and bath infusions.

Tamarind Tamarind leaves and flowers are used in compresses and poultices in Thailand to address swollen joints, sprains and boils. The tree is native to Africa and probably reached Asia thousands of years ago. Known as *ma kaam* in Thai language, dried or boiled tamarind leaves can greatly reduce inflammation, and can treat skin disorders. There are many other medicinal uses of the fruit, seeds and bark of the tamarind tree.

Peppermint Peppermint leaf (*saranae* in Thai) is considered a hot and aromatic herb in Thai medicine, and is a common treatment for stomach pain, nausea and indigestion. The aroma is delightful when steamed in compresses, and the vapor treats nervousness, insomnia and stress-related conditions such as exhaustion and headaches. Inhalation of vapors can calm coughing and relieve asthma. Peppermint grows easily in almost all soil conditions. If you're fortunate to have a garden at home, consider growing your own peppermint to use in hot and cold tea, and in your compresses. Whenever you use fresh herbs such as peppermint, always rip the leaves with your hands, rather than cutting them with a scissors or using them whole.

Galangal Galangal or galanga (*kha* in Thai) is a relative of the ginger plant. The flavor is considerably stronger than that of common ginger, somewhat similar to mustard, and it has a rich aroma. It was used traditionally to cure skin diseases, and is now used in spa treatments as an ingredient in body wraps to soothe and nourish the skin. The pale yellow skin is striated like a snake skin, and has pink-tinged tips, but the interior is cream-colored. When eaten, slices of galanga are often added to soups, and the root is ground into curry paste.

How to use herbal compresses in Thai massage

Herbal compresses may be used during the course of a Thai treatment in several ways. It's common to use them during a session whenever we find blockages that need softening before manual techniques are used. However compresses may also be used to welcome or calm the client before beginning an otherwise "dry" Thai session. Conversely, they can be used only at the end of a dry treatment, as a final technique for relaxation and integration.

Compresses during the Thai massage

An effective way to use compresses in a Thai treatment is to integrate them into a regular Thai massage session. Prepare your compresses, and steam them for at least 15-20 minutes at medium heat before you start using them. As you work during your session, move the steamer so it is within easy reach as you progress up and down the body during your normal routine. In order to accomplish this, you may have to place the steamer on a tray of some sort, so that you can slide it easily on your floor surface. Food trays or cutting boards work well, and you may also need an electric extension cord. Maintain water level in the steamer, and adjust the thermostat as needed during the session.

Begin your Thai massage treatment as usual, at the feet, and continue your sequence until you find a spot where you sense holding or tension. Reach for a compress with your free hand, test it on yourself first, and then begin to apply heat, pressure and herbal medicine into the blocked area. Work directly on the blockage while supporting the body part either on the mat or against your body somehow. Once you feel the area has responded to your work, return the compress to the steamer and continue with your

palming, thumbing or other Thai techniques. Repeat this pattern as necessary during the course of the entire session. At the end of the session, you may consider using the compress for a longer duration on the neck, head and face.

Compresses before or after the Thai massage

Compresses may be used on a client's entire body either before or after a regular (dry) Thai massage session. Work the sen lines with your compresses in supine position by starting with the feet, proceeding up the legs, and working the inside lines to the groin. Then work the outside lines of both legs. Proceed to the abdomen, crossing the chest and up to the shoulders. If you work in prone position, start again from the bottom, working the backs of the legs, the buttocks, the lower back and hips, the main back lines, and then the shoulders, neck and arms. Stay on the lines as much as possible throughout your entire routine, and hold the compresses for a few seconds in each place before moving onward along a sen line. Using compresses before a Thai treatment is a wonderful way to welcome your client and to warm up and open the body. Using them after a Thai treatment provides a soothing, peaceful closure.

Refining your work with herbal compresses

Once you learn the basics of using Thai herbal compresses (medicinal properties, mixing and preparing compresses, basic handling techniques, etc.), then you begin the real learning curve - working with them skillfully and in a flowing fashion during a Thai session. Here are some issues to consider when using compresses during a Thai massage session:

- How to transition gracefully from a "dry" Thai massage technique to a "wet" compress technique
- Handling the steamer with one hand while maintaining client contact with the other hand: (removing and returning compresses, adding water, changing thermostat temperature, etc.)
- Maximizing use of the heat and vapors each time you remove the compress from the steamer
- Remembering to test the compress on yourself at regular intervals to avoid burning your client

- How to master the various active and passive compress techniques outlined in this essay, and how to know when to use them

General guidelines

Regardless of where on the body you apply your compresses, consider the following general guidelines.

- Work slowly, but be very careful to not burn your clients by holding the compress against their skin for too long. When you remove a hot compress from the steamer, test it first on your skin first before applying it to your client. If possible, test it on the same area of your own body. Keep in mind that men generally tolerate hotter temperatures on their skin than women.
- In most cases, begin on the left side for women and on the right side for men. Generally, only on one side.
- On arms and legs, consider working inward toward the center of the body, as you continue your work upward on a client's body. An exception to this general rule is when you encounter a blockage that is near the end of an extremity you should work on both sides of the body, even if symptoms appear there, such as on the forearm, wrist, hand, calf, ankle or foot. In this case, you can try to dissipate the blockage outward, instead of pushing it inward toward the center of the body and then upward. *Lom* (energy) flows in both directions through the sen lines, but as with general Thai massage, it's a good idea to work compresses beginning at the bottom of the body and ending at the top of the body.
- If you prepare your own compresses with short rounded handles, make sure to have a few dry washcloths nearby. When you need to remove a compress from the steamer, do so with a dry washcloth in your hand. This minimizes transference of heat to your hand as you work.

Active techniques used with compresses

Tapping

Rapid, light tapping along the body is an excellent way to cool down an extremely hot compress. The medicinal components of the herbs are transmitted partially through the heat, so tapping and dabbing allows you to make use of the compress as it cools to a



Rapid tapping is stimulating, and helps to cool down a hot compress

more practical temperature. It is very important that you first test the compress on a similar area of your own body before you make contact with your client. Tap lightly and quickly to release vapor and to warm up an energy line before you go deeper with the compress or execute Thai massage manipulations.

Pressing

A common way to use compresses is to press them onto the body, using light to moderate pressure. The compresses should be in a medium hot state. Apply directly onto light clothing, or to bare skin, which is preferable. Take hold of the compress, position yourself so you use your body weight and not your arm muscles, and press into the area. Hold it for a second or two, and release slowly before moving to the next area. This technique is good for the legs, abdomen, chest, arms, shoulders and back.

Mobilizing a body part around a compress

In some cases you can move the client's body around the compress, rather than simply pressing the compress against the body. This is an especially good idea whenever you can use the client's body weight to sink into the compress, such as in the neck sequence

Pressing, using the compress as an extension of your hand



below. Gently support the head, and roll it slowly from side to side. Then slip in the compress, holding it in one hand and supporting the other side of the head with your other hand. Always be ready to lift the head away from the compress if it becomes too hot. Move the compress incrementally from one side of the neck to the other while gently rolling and lifting the head, and allowing it to sink into the compress. Switch the compress to the other hand and repeat on the other side. Finally, place the compress against the occipital ridge, and while holding the client's forehead, bend the head backward over the compress. Repeat the whole routine as many times as you wish. Be careful to not burn your client.



Rolling

This is a traditional Thai way to apply compresses. Start with one end of the compress on the body. Keep your wrist flexed upward to begin, and then apply a rolling movement by lowering your wrist and raising your elbow. Begin working at the end of a sen line and work upward (or downward) on that line using this rolling motion. When using this technique, roll in one direction for as long a distance as possible.



Rolling with a compress

Stretching & Rolling

You can use a hot compress as an aid in stretching techniques, especially for the neck, shoulders, arms, and legs. Traditional forearm rolling movements can be carried out with compresses too. Instead of rolling the shoulders with your forearm, use a rolling compress instead. The neck and adjacent shoulder can also be stretched with a compress in final supine position, or in prone position.



Chopping

Good for working the back lines, use the compress in a percussive way, quickly striking the back, and working up and down the back lines and outward to the shoulders. This is usually done in seated position with the client bent forward, palms on the ground, but it may also be done in prone position. In addition to the stimulating effect of the chop itself, this is a good way to cool down a very hot compress. In fact, it's best to use this technique with a very hot compress. Do not press or hold the compress against the skin. Make sure your contact lasts only as long as the chop itself.

Passive use of compresses

Inhalation

You normally need to raise the temperature of the steamer in order to prepare a compress for inhalation. In Thai massage we generally work the head and face at the end of a session. When you are almost finished working the body, and you're getting ready to start working on the head, raise the thermostat so the water begins to boil vigorously. After about 3 minutes, the compress should be too hot to handle, but it will be perfect to use as an inhaler.

Turn your client's head to one side, place the steaming hot compress on the mat alongside her face, and encourage her to inhale the medicinal vapors. You may gently tap the compress to release

more vapors. After a few seconds, move your client's head by supporting her neck from underneath and twisting it gently in the other direction. Switch the compress to the other side, and repeat the inhaling action.

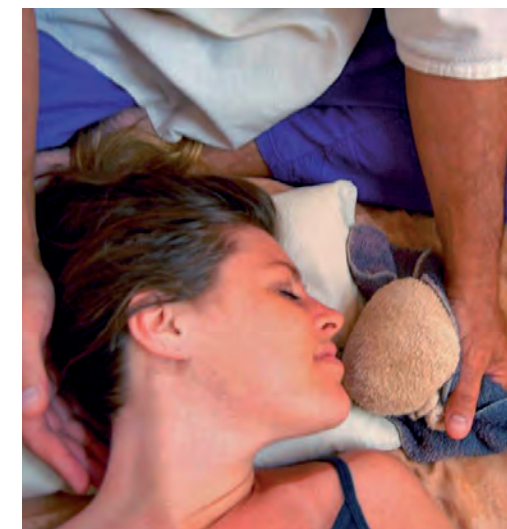
When working on the face, if the compress is not too hot, hold it directly underneath the nose and then move it slowly up the nose, gently pressing the point of the nose upward. Then work up the bridge of the nose and apply pressure under the forehead ridge. Repeat this technique as often as you like, while encouraging your client to inhale the vapors.

As pillows

A compress that is slightly warm can be ideal as a head rest. Place it under the middle section of the person's neck, and allow the head to drape over the compress. Keep in position for as long as you are able before removing it to the steamer, or until the session is finished.

As warmers

Warm compresses can be used to passively warm important areas of the body. When the client is lying on her back, and you, for example, are working from behind her, place a medium-warm compress on her hara (slightly below the navel). Continue your work on other parts of the body, and occasionally, reach down and move the compress a bit higher up the center of the rib cage. Continue in this way, following *sen sumana* up to the neck. If time allows, you can repeat this pattern, working from the hara to below the jaw. Compresses made from old socks are especially conducive to working *sen sumana*, since the tubular shape fits nicely as you slide it up and down the chest groove.



Re-using compresses

Thai herbal compresses can be re-used throughout the day from one client to the next. Just keep them in the steamer on the “warm” setting all day long, and check your water level every few hours. If you are using compresses for light duty, as an occasional accompaniment to your Thai massage sessions, then they can even be used from one day to the next, as long as they are kept in the refrigerator in an airtight plastic bag or container. If you use the compress on more than one person, it can be helpful to add a small amount of new herbs, a few pieces of fresh ginger, or an extra pinch of camphor. To do this, open the drawstring of the muslin bag, remove some of the ingredients, and mix a handful of fresh herbs into the already moist materials. For each new client however, always replace the outer cotton covering. If a compress has been used in a session where there has been a severe reaction of some kind, especially an emotional release, it’s best to discard the compress and never use it ever again.

If you prepare the herbs and roots in a small muslin bag as previously discussed, you can give your clients the recently-used compress to take home, so they can use it as a bath infusion or a shower loofa. At this time you may choose to refresh the contents of the muslin bag with a handful of fresh herbs or a few drops of essential oil. Instruct your clients to wring out the compress after each use and to store it in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. The herbal sachet can be used several times, thereby extending the use of the herbs and their healing benefits. After it is used once as a bath infusion, it will lose much of its medicinal properties, but it still may be used afterward as a shower loofa. Once in the shower, rub the compress bag against a bar of soap and use it to scrub the body.

Using cold compresses

An often overlooked but important way to apply compresses is when they are cold, not warm. The compresses must first be steamed for 15–20 minutes in order to release the medicinal properties in the herbs. Then they can be refrigerated or iced. After they’ve been thoroughly chilled, they may be applied onto ligament or tendon sprains, hematomas, hernias, contusions, and other injuries that may benefit from cold therapy including headaches and neck pain. Apply cold compresses only to the specific site of the

injury. Cold compresses generally reduce swelling, and can help to dissipate stagnant or blocked energy. Cold compresses can be left on the injured area for sustained periods of time while the practitioner attends to other parts of the body during a session. Return the cold compress to the refrigerator or place it on a bowl of ice covered with plastic wrap if you wish to use it continuously during a session.

Sample routines for Thai herbal compress therapy

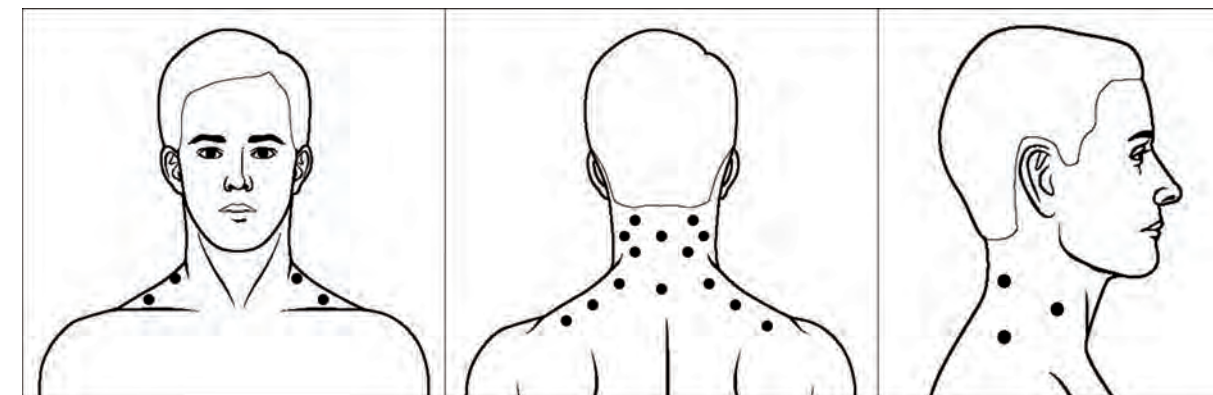
Below are several sample routines to treat clients with specific conditions, namely shoulder/neck pain and general stress. These two suggested routines are only a few of the many different ways to use compresses in order to address your client’s individual conditions.

For neck and shoulder pain

Apply compresses with a firm, slightly rolling pressure. If the client is in seated position, support her back with your leg or abdomen as you work. You may also work the neck in final supine position. If the compress is extremely hot, you can begin by tapping or lightly chopping along the indicated areas. Once the compress has cooled down, you can proceed with deeper pressure.

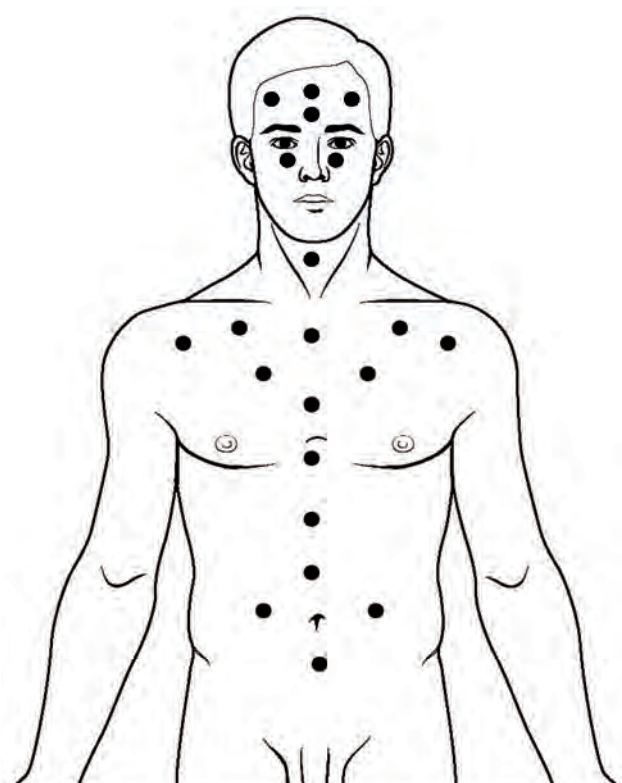
It is often helpful to move the client’s neck gently from side to side and from front to back as you work. For forward/back movements, secure the forehead with the palm of one hand and apply a compress with the other as you slowly mobilize the neck clockwise, counter-clockwise, forward and backward.

Some neck and shoulder points



For general stress and anxiety

Work the stomach either with direct pressure downward, or by pressing downward and then rolling toward the navel or hara. Try to press downward only while your client exhales. Hold the pressure for as long as the heat allows, and release as your client inhales. Once the stomach is relaxed, work upward on *sen sumana*, and outward on *sen kalathari* to the shoulder sockets. Work back to *sen sumana*, work downward slowly to the hara, and then ascend all the way up to the throat, just below the chin, and then upward onto the face. Allow your client to breathe in the vapors as much as possible. Test the compress on yourself as needed to insure it is not too hot, and to know how long to hold it before moving to another spot. Visualize the *sumana* and *kalathari* *sen* lines as you work. When pressing on the abdomen and chest, always work with the client's natural breath as much as possible.



Favorite herbal compress recipes

All-purpose herbal blend

The all-purpose mix that I prepare and use with my clients and students is based on Thai herbal materials that are readily accessible in The West.

lemongrass (2 parts)	peppermint (1 part)
eucalyptus (2 parts)	dried galangal pieces (½ part)
dried ginger pieces (1 part)	camphor
ginger powder (1 part)	fresh ginger

ingredients

For each compress, mix approximately 50% volume of freshly-smashed ginger into the dry blend proportions above, and then add a pinch of camphor crystals. You can also add some salt to the mixture, if desired.

Here are some other compress blends you might try

Decongestant blend: Good for clearing congestion in lungs and sinuses. Spend extra time working on the chest, lung area, upper back and throat:

eucalyptus leaves, fresh or dried	cloves
fresh ginger root	camphor crystals
kaffir lime leaves, or fresh lime rind	

ingredients

Relaxing blend: This sweet-smelling mix is good for general relaxation and to relieve stress:

peppermint	rose petals
ylang-ylang flowers	lemongrass
jasmine flowers	salt

ingredients

Skin cleanser: Good to cleanse the skin, open pores and care for insect bites and superficial cuts and wounds:

Stimulating blend: Good for energizing and lifting spirits.

If you have never experienced a Thai herbal bath soak, you're missing out on one of life's simple pleasures. Herbal bath infusions can

ingredients

eucalyptus leaves	salt
galangal root (fresh or dried)	lemon, lime or orange rind
turmeric (fresh or dried)	citrus essential oil

be made fresh, just for the bath, or they can be prepared using a warm compress that just came out of the steamer after a Thai mas-

ingredients

fresh ginger root	camphor crystals
lemongrass (fresh and/or dry)	Herbal bath infusions: procedure and recipes
peppermint	
cinnamon sticks (broken into small pieces)	

sage. You will need to place the herbs, roots and flowers in a tied muslin bag (cotton sachet). Use large muslin bags (approximate size 15 x 20 cm – 6 x 8 inches) so the herbal mixture can move around freely inside the tied bag. Use a generous amount of herbs and rhizomes, and fill the bags to about ¾ of their volume capacity. If you're using fresh herbs that haven't been pre-steamed, be sure to soak the sachet in the tub for a few minutes in extremely hot water. Before soaking in the bath, first take a shower to remove surface dirt, sweat and oils from your skin.

To prepare the bath, follow these guidelines: Place the sachet directly under the faucet and allow only hot water to run directly over it. Use the hottest water you have available, and allow it to run slowly over the sachet until the tub is filled to approximately 1/3 of its volume. Close the bathroom door as the tub is filling so the medicinal vapors remain in the room. Return in a few minutes to see how things are going. Stir the water, and squeeze the herbal bag a few times so the tinctures are released into the water. If the infusion is too hot for your hands, press the bag against the side of the bath tub with another object to release the herbal properties. Stir the bath again, and continue to fill the tub with more hot water, or mix in some colder water, so the next 1/3 of the tub will be close to the temperature you desire for the bath. Use as much hot water as possible, even if you must wait for the water to cool to your optimal

*** Remember to shower and scrub your skin first before taking the bath. Place the herbal pack under hot running water and slowly fill your tub. Soak for 10–15 minutes at the hottest temperature you can bear. Once in the bath, you can continue to squeeze the infusion into the bath water, and you can also squeeze the warm tinctures over your face and head. Don't use soap; just rub the muslin bag over your body as you soak. Pat yourself dry after the bath and don't apply creams or moisturizers. Let the herbs work their magic.*

bathing temperature. Prepare the bathroom with anything else you might desire, such as candles, a glass of water, or a cup of herbal tea.

The all-purpose herbal blend for compresses mentioned previously makes an excellent bath infusion, but I find it interesting and fun to modify ingredients and herbal properties for specific types of results. In addition to the dry and fresh herbs and roots, you can always add a few drops of complementary essential oils or extractions to the bath water.

Cleansing and detox bath

This recipe can help to revitalize the mind and cleanse the body. In a muslin bag, place 5-6 slices of dried or freshly-smashed galangal (or a handful of small pieces of dried galangal), a handful of dried lemongrass, 6-8 ripped kaffir lime leaves (or a tablespoon of kaffir lime power), and a generous amount of ginger powder. Then add a few drops of pandan extract to the sachet and tie it closed with a bow, or add the drops directly into the bath water if you like, and proceed from ** above.

galangal (30%), lemongrass (30%), ginger powder	(30%), kaffir lime (10%), pandan extract.
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Invigorating bath

Use dried and/or fresh lemongrass, peppermint, eucalyptus and rose. If fresh, make sure to tear and crush leaves and petals. Smash and tear the ginger root into small pieces, and pull it apart with your hands so it's stringy. Crush fresh cloves to a thick sand consistency in a mortar and pestle, or if not available, use clove powder. Follow the approximate percentages above, and proceed from ** above.

lemongrass (20%), peppermint (20%), eucalyptus (15%), fresh	ginger (20%), cloves (10%), salt (10%), rose petals (5%).
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Relaxing bath

Use fresh and/or dried herbs and roots (if fresh, crush and tear



ingredients

ingredients

as indicated above). Cut the rind off of the fruit, including the white flesh directly under the skin, or grate it. Place all herbs, roots and fruit in a muslin bag, but blend the salt and liquefied honey directly into the bath water. Follow the approximate percentages above, and proceed from ** above.

ingredients

lemongrass (20%), rose petals (5%), liquefied honey (10%)
(20%), lavender (20%), ginger and salt (5%).
(20%), lime or lemon rind

Final words

I hope this article serves as encouragement for those Thai therapists who do not use luk pra kob with their clients, and that it offers new ideas for those who already do. Thai herbal compresses are an important part of traditional Thai medicine, and they greatly complement the practice of traditional Thai massage. Happy compressing!