

Traditional Thai Massage: Learning and Practicing with Integrity

By Bob Haddad, RTT



Most bodywork professionals know that Thai massage (nuad boran, in Thai language) is not “massage” as we know it in the West. It’s unfortunate that the term “Thai massage” has become so popular because that second word, massage, is misleading and inaccurate. The work isn’t done on a table, oil isn’t used, there is no rubbing on skin or kneading of muscles, and the receiver is fully clothed. The goal is not to work muscles, fascia, tendons, ligaments, organs and soft tissue, though these anatomical parts are positively affected by the work. Neither is its purpose to simply stretch and apply passive yoga to another person on a floor mat. At its essence, Thai massage is a balanced blend of physical, energetic and spiritual healing techniques and concepts. It is the skilful combination of applying both

broad and targeted acupressure, finding and dissolving blockages in the network of energy lines (sen) that run through each of us, opening and toning the body with yoga-like stretches, and last but not least, allowing and encouraging the receiver to engage in a process of self healing, relaxation, and renewal.

Understanding the modality

An effective Thai treatment can’t be given by mechanically following a sequence. Although sequences are important for beginners to learn the basics, teachers and schools that prepare students to follow proprietary, fixed sequences throughout their study and practice may be hindering them from evolving into deeply sensitive therapists.



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Individualized holistic treatment is at the heart of the traditional Thai medicine system, and Thai massage should be administered in this way in order to be fully effective. An accomplished Thai therapist continually practices and studies, preferably with a variety of teachers, throughout his entire career. He “listens” to the body of each client as he works, learns to sense energy flow and blockages, and relies on intuition, sensitivity and stillness to guide him through each treatment.

Thai massage, at its essence, is a spiritual healing art, not just a physical therapy. In Thailand, massage (nuad) belongs to one of the branches of Thai medicine, and it incorporates Buddhist healing principles. Accomplished therapists and teachers understand the power of meditation and stillness while at work, both for the giver and the receiver. They work slowly and in a meditative way, and they always encourage silence.

Good body mechanics and correct breathing play extremely important roles in Thai massage. An experienced Thai therapist works only within his immediate reach, and positions his body directly ahead of, or on top of, the area where he is working. The hara, the core area located slightly below the navel, is where all movement should originate. A therapist’s back should be straight, the shoulders relaxed, the chest open, and in most cases, arms should be straight and locked at the elbows when applying pressure. Masterful Thai therapists utilize correct breathing patterns as they work, they remain observant



Lateral sen lines

of their client’s breathing throughout each session, and they adjust their breathing to work most effectively with that of their client.

Thai massage is most powerful and effective when it is carried out, for the most part, in silence. The therapist needs to focus his energies, observing and listening to the body,

hearing the breath, and adapting his techniques to the needs of the individual before him. The receiver should ideally feel at peace, relaxed, spiritually centered, and in a parasympathetic state, since these conditions always encourage good results. Excessive talking during a session can be a distraction, and so can music, especially if it isn’t kept at a low volume. It’s best to not engage clients in conversation, to comment about their condition, or to offer excessive prompting or coaching.

The dilemma of current-day study

Among professional bodyworkers in North America and Europe, studying Thai massage has become a popular way to fulfill requirements for continuing education units, but unfortunately, many people teach or practice Thai massage without having adequate knowledge or study experience. Some study only for a few weeks or months before beginning to practice or teach. Mixing Thai massage with other modalities such as western table massage, shiatsu, and yoga is also common. Some market and promote courses of study by using the word “Thai,” when the curricula may not be true to Thai traditions. The word Thai has marketing power because it conjures exotic and exciting images, but table work marketed as “Thai,” for example, is so stripped of its versatility and power that it is mostly ineffectual.

Local laws that regulate legal practice vary throughout countries, states and provinces. In some places, massage boards and regulatory agencies deem it legal only for licensed (Western) massage therapists to practice traditional Thai massage, regardless of their amount of training in the discipline. Indeed in many places, people can legally practice Thai massage even if they haven’t ever studied the discipline! A background in table massage, however, doesn’t necessarily qualify someone to be a good Thai massage practitioner or teacher – they require two completely different skill sets. To further compound the situation, national certification boards don’t often evaluate the credentials of someone who applies to be an instructor of Thai massage, and this adds to the disparity of knowledge and expertise among Thai massage continuing education providers.

All of these circumstances figured among the motivating factors for the founding of Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI) in 2005. THAI’s guidelines remain today



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as the only nonpartisan international standards for the study and practice of traditional Thai massage, and the requirements to become a Registered Thai Therapist (RTT) and Instructor are rigorous. (See www.thaihealingalliance.com for more information)

Finding qualified teachers

As you can see, it's important for all students of Thai massage to study only with highly qualified teachers. Check the teacher's study and training history, and if it's not listed on their web site or in their promotional information, ask them about it before you consider registering for a workshop. How long have they studied Thai massage, and with whom? Have they studied in Thailand? If so, when was the last time they were there? Do the descriptions of their courses use western anatomical language or Eastern healing terminology? Do they blend Thai massage with other modalities? Are they Instructor members of Thai Healing Alliance, or do they at least meet the minimum requirements of 500 hours of hands-on Thai massage study with a wide variety of qualified instructors and schools? Before you register for a continuing education course in Thai massage, check into a teacher's background just as you would for a prospective employee, or a tenant for your rental home.

Summary

Traditional Thai massage is a unique and powerful vehicle of healing, and it is worthy of being practiced, taught, and promoted within the context of traditional Thai medicine, not from a perspective of Western bodywork therapies, Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, or any other body of knowledge.

I encourage all students, practitioners and teachers of Thai massage to be diligent in their approach to study; to evolve slowly, patiently, creatively and respectfully as practitioners of this noble healing art; and to dignify and elevate traditional Thai massage by studying and practicing



it within the framework of the traditional medicine, culture, and spiritual values of Thailand.



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