

Massage or Bodywork - Does it Metta?

By Kath Rutland

As I sit down to write this in the breeze of a welcome fan in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, I am once again inspired by the wealth of healing talent and vast reserves of knowledge brimming within this city.

I am in Chiang Mai for the second time in as many years. Having started my massage therapy practice in Bragg Creek last June, one year later I have not only transformed that practice into a full-time affair, but have somehow managed to return to this wonderful city to further my learning in the centuries-old art of Nuad Bo'Rarn or Traditional Thai Massage.

The majority of therapists in North America/Canada (including myself) have studied in accredited schools to achieve safe and competent levels in what is generally known as Swedish or Classical massage. Varying degrees of education enable us to perform as "therapeutic" masseurs in a number of environments.

As a recently enlightened devotee of Thai Therapy, I firmly believe that this particular practice is one of the most effective in relieving stress, anxiety, stiffness, chronic pain and other disorders such as headache and insomnia - disorders that many of us in Canada learn to live with and manage with the use of drugs. I don't know about you, but I hate taking pills! A reasonable lifestyle, (diet, exercise) combined with regular Thai Therapy

(weekly/monthly/bi-monthly) can work wonders for mental and physical health. How does this work?

This brings me to the title of this article: Massage or Bodywork - Does it Metta? My answer is "no – the label you attach to hand-on healing is not significant, it's the intent and the result that *are* important". I see two distinct groups of physical therapy in action; the Western versions of massage which can often, if not usually, be applied in quite clinical settings, and with a somewhat clinical approach focused on kneading and working the muscles and soft tissues of the body, or on stretching specific muscle groups, versus the Eastern methodologies which have an emotional and energy-based approach to whole body healing.

Western massage is highly effective in treating specific injuries and/or general relaxation. Many therapists achieve great results, and all major sports these days incorporate Sports Massage into their training schedules in order to improve performance and minimize injuries.

Eastern massage or bodywork on the other hand, is still held in suspicion by many. Talk of energy balancing or cleansing and terms of that ilk are apt to send us running for the hills. This I'm afraid, is merely fear of the unknown, or the misunderstood. I'd like to throw in a key element to perhaps explain some of the effectiveness of eastern methods: This element is **METTA**.

Hands up all those who know what *metta* is? Yes, I know there's a few of you out there, but I believe we're outnumbered! Metta (a Pali or Sanskrit

word) very simply, is the act and intention of selfless loving-kindness or pure altruism in its truest form. Is this not something we all as human beings should aspire to?

Practiced as taught in Chiang Mai at ITM and the Old Medicine Hospital, and as it has been practiced in Thailand for over 2500 years, Traditional Thai Massage is the physical application of Metta - loving-kindness. The practitioner pays silent homage to the founder of this technique and to all his teachers before each session, and approaches the treatment with clear intent to help / heal / be compassionate. This intent coupled with accurately practiced physical techniques transform the Thai session into a meditative dance; on a good day this will bring a complete sense of peace and wholeness to the recipient, along with relief from pain.

So, where does bodywork come into all this - unless we're talking the latest F150? In our politicized world there are those who wish to confine the term "therapeutic massage" within strict parameters based on the western techniques. Thai Therapy does not employ the muscle-kneading and stroking techniques with which most of us are familiar. The Thai approach is to stimulate the body's energy systems to invigorate and correct imbalances, coupled with warming and stretching of the tissues to improve physical mobility and tone. You could call this "bodywork", but it is at root a *therapeutic* application. "Massage" is basically the closest anglicized translation of the word "Nuad" but is not a true reflection of the full meaning of the name Nuad Bo'Rarn. In my opinion, and the opinion of most Thai

practitioners, the combination of muscle work, stretching and acupuncture stimulation means Nuad Bo'Rarn effects a three-pointed approach – three times as good?

At the end of the day, I ask again - does it Metta? As long as the practice is carried out by a well-trained, knowledgeable and honest practitioner, there are no known negative side-effects for either Western or Eastern massage. Semantics aside, I have to say that I have fallen in love with Nuad Bo'Rarn for the warmth, healing and general well-being it brings to my life and to the lives of those with whom I work.

In my most recent trip to Chiang Mai, I have refreshed past teachings, reminding myself of details of approach and discovered improvements in techniques to create a more full and dynamic session. I have begun to learn the art of Thai foot reflexology which – surprise! – is slightly different from the reflexology most of us are familiar with.

The 'crowning glory' of this learning trip was to embark on the herbal hot compress variation of Nuad Bo'Rarn. I had experienced this myself on my previous visit & when a new course was introduced I was quick to sign up. Herbal hot compress massage is fabulous! The application of steamed balls of fresh and dried herbs during a Nuad Bo'Rarn session is the most relaxing and wonderful sensation, great for cleansing the skin and detoxification, the effect of the heat and smell of the herbs sends you into raptures and totally unwinds the body. I came home laden down with a sack of herbal balls for use in my practice and as soon as I can get my hands on a

**steamer we'll be steaming up our
practice office – I can't wait!**

**As you can tell, this practice has
kindled some enthusiasm in my life –
and dramatically improved my own
health and outlook. Maybe you too will
try Nuad Bo'Rarn. What have you got
to lose other than the opportunity to
discover something new and positive
about your life?**

Sawatdee kha!

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