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Misunderstood Modality Myths About Thai Massage

By Martin Misenhimer

When Thai massage came on the American scene some twenty years ago, it seemed strange and daunting to many massage therapists. Its floor work and use of yoga-like stretches introduced an unfamiliar way to work with clients. Now after several years of practicing and teaching Thai massage, I have seen a number of myths take hold in the massage community in relation to what this modality is all about. The following explores some of the most common misperceptions.

MYTH: THAI MASSAGE IS HARD ON THE PRACTITIONER'S BODY

Would-be practitioners often fear that Thai massage will be taxing to perform because the work is done on the floor and involves moving clients' limbs. In fact, Thai massage actually saves wear and tear on practitioner joints and muscles--sometimes even reviving the professional lives of massage therapists who otherwise would be driven out of work by repetitive motion injuries.

The reasons for this have to do with fundamental principles of Thai massage:

All work is performed with a neutral spine. A practitioner's body is positioned either directly above or at roughly 90 degrees to the client's body. This eliminates the spinal torque created when standing next to the client to give a table massage. Working for hours with a torqued spine creates back pain.

The power behind Thai massage is gravity, not muscle exertion. For example, when standing upright the bones of your legs are aligned and gravity is working for you. However, as soon as you begin to bend your knees toward a sitting or squatting position, your muscles have to work hard to hold you up. It's the same when performing massage. Working with bent arms means using muscle. By contrast, working with extended limbs is almost effortless.

The actions of Thai massage involve pushing and rocking more than stroking and kneading. This eliminates continual exertion of the vulnerable tissues of arms, wrists, and fingers--a prime culprit behind the repetitive motion injuries too common among massage practitioners.

To see how this all comes together, consider the example of a common massage action: rotating the client's leg in its hip socket. In a traditional massage, you stand next to the client and support the leg with the contracting muscles of bent arms; if your client weighs two hundred pounds or more, that's a lot of work. With Thai massage, you're in a lunge on the floor and simply holding

the client's heel. Gravity is doing most of the work; you merely rock into the client's body. It's deceptively easy. Plus as practitioner, you are receiving the rejuvenating effects of doing a yoga pose.

MYTH: YOU HAVE TO BE IN TIP-TOP SHAPE TO PRACTICE THAI MASSAGE

I hear this often from potential practitioners. Usually, they have received a Thai massage and because the experience was so powerful--and because their eyes were closed--they assume the giver was working very hard. Not so. The power behind Thai massage isn't muscular strength. The power behind Thai massage is excellent body mechanics and conscious breathing.

It does take some getting used to, however. After their first weekend some workshop students do feel as if they've worked out a bit at the gym. I remember at the end of my own first weeklong training, I was required to give a full ninety-minute treatment. By the end of it, I was drenched in sweat. Now I don't perspire unless I'm working in a very hot room. For most students, regular practice eliminates the workout soreness within a couple of weeks.

That said, people with severe, chronic knee pain should probably stay away from practicing Thai massage, since much of it is performed kneeling on the floor. Severe chronic back pain also might rule out the practice.

MYTH: IT IS DIFFICULT TO WORK ON THE FLOOR

Most Western adults, unless they're into yoga, have not spent much time on the floor since they were children. Since Thai massage is done mostly kneeling and squatting, it can feel initially challenging until your body grows accustomed to moving in this new way. For most students, however, this unease starts to dissipate by the end of the first weekend and is gone within a few weeks of regular practice.

You don't need a perfect yoga body to perform Thai massage. I can't squat with my heels on the floor and I've been giving Thai massage for more than six years. The key is to modify each technique not only for the client's comfort but also for your own--as long as you follow the guidelines of alignment and sound body mechanics. One student I know cannot work kneeling; he has found ways to work in a lunge or with one leg extended. The techniques are highly adaptable.

MYTH: I'M TOO SMALL TO WORK ON BIG BODIES

Tiny Asian women give Thai massage all day long to big bodies, then go home at night feeling fine. This is possible because of the ingenious use of body mechanics.

The basic Thai-massage routine learned by beginner and intermediate students does not involve much lifting of the clients' body weight. When a limb must be moved, it often is possible just to slide it into proper position. Even lifting a limb is easier than it appears. Working directly above or at ninety degrees to the client lets alignment and leverage do the work, not muscle.

I once taught a thirty-hour workshop in which one of the students, a tiny woman not more than five feet tall, got paired up for the practicum with the biggest guy in the class. Not surprisingly, she was very worried about that. Yet afterwards, she sent me an e-mail saying how shocked she was not only that the massage was easy, but that she didn't even feel tired afterward.

MYTH: YOU HAVE TO KNOW YOGA AND MEDITATION TO DO THAI MASSAGE

Thai massage is a complete system that has borrowed aspects of yoga, acupressure, and a traditional medical practice that has existed in Thailand for more than a thousand years. Some masters believe the only way to teach Thai massage is in the context of the spiritual traditions of Thailand. Indeed, such commitment can become an enriching way of life.

However, if you did nothing but learn the mechanics of Thai massage, you would still be able to give your clients a powerful therapeutic experience. In fact, the benefits of yoga and meditation would sneak up on you as a side effect.

Attention to body mechanics itself becomes something of a meditative practice. For example, I start every workshop having my students scan their own bodies. From a standing position, we go step by step from the feet all the way up to the crown of the head, coming into optimal alignment. Once that experience is imprinted on the body, it can be found again as we learn the techniques of Thai massage.

Sometimes in class when I find someone working out of alignment, instead of immediately correcting them I'll go to the receiver and ask them to pay attention to how it feels to be receiving the touch as it is. Then I guide the giver into better alignment--usually just a small adjustment--and ask again. Invariably, receivers can feel the difference between, for example, a bent arm transmitting stress and a straight arm working effortlessly. It's part of the energy exchange that occurs with any massage.

The Thai massage touch feels much better when the massage therapist is attending to his own needs. Indeed, giving the massage then becomes a refreshing experience. That, in and of itself, is a profound learning in a culture that believes giving to others means depleting oneself.

MYTH: THAI MASSAGE IS PAINFUL TO RECEIVE

In fact, my very first Thai massage was not just painful--it was excruciating. It was back in 1993. My wife, Beth, and I were in our twenties--young, naive, adventurous, and poor--living and working in Thailand. Eager to soak up every bit of Thai culture we possibly could, we went together one day to receive Thai massages. Neither of us had ever had bodywork of any kind.

Far off the beaten path, we found the private home where our appointment was scheduled. Out back was a raised bamboo platform. Waiting for us on the platform were two short, stocky women. They didn't speak English, and we didn't speak Thai. Eventually, through their pointing and gestures, we understood that we were supposed to get on the platform and lie down.

Beth proceeded to have a wonderful experience; she remembers her massage as relaxing and

blissful. All I can remember is pain. This woman stood on my inner thigh twisting, poking, and jabbing. She moved my limbs as if trying to tear them off my body. I just lay there hoping the thing would end.

After that one awful experience, I didn't go back. But several years later, back in the United States, I read a magazine article about a Thai massage therapist near my hometown. The author portrayed the treatment she'd received as a graceful, flowing, harmonious dance between giver and receiver. The article went on to describe Thai massage as an ancient healing art involving elements of yoga, t'ai chi Chi, breathwork, and meditation.

That got my attention. I was already incorporating many of those practices into my private life and was eager to learn more. So, I picked up the phone and booked an appointment. The massage was everything the article described. I was amazed.

Why were the two experiences so different?

There are several reasons why Thai massage might be painful. The therapist might be inexperienced or poorly educated. The therapist might be out of tune with the receiver and inadvertently push beyond the client's comfort zone. Or, pain might be accepted as part of the treatment style. There are two dominant styles of massage in Thailand: Northern and Southern. The latter tends to be a little more invasive and therefore potentially painful. The Eastern cultural attitude toward pain is different than our Western sensibility, more accepting. Even in the West, deeper work that goes slightly over the edge toward pain sometimes yields therapeutic benefits. But as a whole, we tend to avoid pain.

Thai massage should be blissful for the receiver. Practiced with mindful intention to do no harm, it deftly encourages clients to their edge of flexibility but never beyond. It respects the body's limits. Each client therefore has the same experience of having a good stretch, regardless of whether they are relatively stiff or relatively open. The rocking, rhythmic quality of Thai massage and its gentle movements are experienced as both comforting and liberating.

MYTH: MY CLIENTS ARE TOO FRAIL OR ELDERLY FOR THAI MASSAGE

Thai massage is wonderful for elderly people and for those coping with disabilities. In many cases, it's exactly what they need.

One of the main reasons people at a certain age start deteriorating rapidly in health is because they no longer move. Thai massage takes their muscles and joints through their optimal range of motion. This can be a profound and liberating experience for them.

Some seniors and people with physical disabilities might have a tough time getting down to or back up from the floor. In that case, Thai massage techniques can be adapted for table work. Even in the case where a client is in full health, each technique is always adapted according to the individual client. For those who are very frail, you must be extra careful to stay within their limits and use extremely gentle pressure.

MYTH: I CAN'T EARN A LIVING DOING THAI MASSAGE

One reason people think this is because until recently, relatively few people had heard of Thai massage. That is changing.

The International Spa Association (ISPA) identifies Thai massage as one of the "key trends" in the spa industry and one of the fastest-growing modalities requested by customers. Eager to diversify their offerings, many spas are looking for practitioners with Thai massage skills.

For independent massage therapists, the Thai modality can help you stand out from the competition next door. In some parts of the country, one can even charge more for it. Thai massage also opens the door to ancillary product sales, such as Thai clothing and decorative objects.

The other great business advantage of Thai massage is its connection to yoga. Thai massage is sometimes called "yoga massage" or "assisted yoga." Clients enjoy the benefits of yoga--from opening tight joints to deep relaxation--simply from being moved passively into yoga-like poses. Thus Thai massage appeals to yoga enthusiasts who want to advance their practice as well as to people who want the benefits of yoga without having to unroll a mat.

Annual revenues for all things yoga have reached an estimated \$27 billion in the United States. The Thai modality gives massage practitioners a great way to tap into this booming market. The first thing I did when I moved to a new town was to contact the local yoga instructor. He turned out to be a truly gifted teacher, and today we share studio space. His students provide a steady stream of massage clients.

MYTH: LOGISTICS OF OFFERING THAI MASSAGE ARE TOO COMPLICATED

This myth has two main components. I'll address them one at a time.

"There's not enough space in my treatment room": clinic and spa treatment rooms typically are very small, and there is quick turnaround between clients. If you've got some clients coming for table work and some coming for floor work, it wouldn't be feasible to switch setups every time. Thai massage techniques can be adapted for table work. Many clients who experience Thai massage on the floor, incidentally, never go back to the table.

"I'd have to buy a lot of costly new equipment": the only equipment you may want is a Thai massage mat. They cost less than \$200. What you don't need are sheets, lotions, oils, and a washing machine; Thai massage is performed with the client fully clothed. Incidentally, a Thai massage mat weighs just seventeen pounds and rolls up easily for transport to 18" x 30". The average portable massage table, in contrast, weighs more than thirty pounds and folded has dimensions of 30" by 37". Since nearly half of massage therapists travel to client locations or work in very small treatment rooms, the Thai modality eliminates the strain of carrying around a heavy, awkward piece of equipment.

MYTH: LEARNING THAI MASSAGE IS EXPENSIVE AND TAKES A LONG TIME

To become a Registered Thai Therapist (RTT), students must complete two hundred hours of formal study, as defined by the Thai Healing Alliance, the international professional organization that suggests Thai massage educational standards. As a point of comparison, the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork requires test candidates to have at least five hundred hours of training from an established school of massage and/or bodywork.

Thai massage is no more complicated to learn than any other massage modality that involves a whole-body treatment routine. A fifteen-hour weekend workshop can teach a basic sixty-minute sequence. Some massage therapists go home to practice and refine these basic skills and then decide ultimately to pursue a certificate. But, Thai massage does not have to be a stand-alone modality. Many practicing massage therapists take weekend workshops to learn techniques they can integrate into their existing table work. Or, they come to learn biomechanics that ease the strain on their own bodies.

What's special about learning Thai massage is its emphasis on practitioner self-awareness. Students are taught to attend to their own breath, body mechanics, and inner experience in ways that transform the massage into a self-nurturing meditation. This makes the massage a better experience for the client, since any tension in the giver will consciously or unconsciously pass into the receiver. It also leads to a safer and more satisfying experience for the practitioner.

THE BEAUTY OF THAI MASSAGE

By now you recognize that I am an avid proponent of traditional Thai massage. There is one more thing I'd like to add. After I've given a treatment, I feel almost as refreshed as if I were the client lying on the mat before me. The most important thing to remember about Thai massage is this: it does not tax the therapist in order to yield profound results for the client. I don't work hard because of the body mechanics, meditation, and breathwork. Further, the gentle rocking movements calm me as much as they calm my client. With breath and movement coordinated, I'm doing yoga for myself. It's brilliant!