



Refining Classic Techniques

When the body gets working appropriately, the force of gravity can flow through. Then, spontaneously, the body heals itself.

— IDA ROLF —

It's surprising how many standard techniques are done in ways that are strained or unsustainable. Failure to use core muscles and a general lack of breath awareness are only two of the issues. Some teachers aren't trained adequately, so their students don't learn to use their bodies correctly when executing techniques. As a result of all of this, massage therapists around the world work harder than they need to; they use the muscles of their arms, hands, and shoulders unnecessarily; and they struggle to use techniques that they themselves don't feel comfortable doing.

Twelve techniques that are often done incorrectly or ineffectively are explained and reviewed in detail in this chapter. I hope these explanations help to demystify, clarify, and refine the practice of these important classic Thai techniques.

~ Assisted Cobra ~

Back-bending postures known as “cobras” in the yoga world are commonly done in some styles of Thai massage, but all too often they are done with poor posture, a curved back, bent arms, and improper breathing patterns.



Setup

For the most common version of the assisted cobra, the receiver is in prone position, with legs slightly open and arms resting comfortably. Kneel lightly on the lower gluteal muscles (not on the legs) and place your legs and feet inside the opening of your partner's legs. At first, keep the tops of your feet against the floor, and sit back to rest on your ankles and heels. This position allows you to rock back and forth easily while using your core for leverage. Support some of your bodyweight with your knees and lower legs.

Reach out and hold her wrists with your palms facing outward and her palms facing inward. Make sure your arms are fully extended, without bending your elbows. Ask her to also hold your wrists and remain there for a moment while holding (but not pulling on) her arms. If necessary, hold your partner's forearms instead of her wrists, so you can fully extend your own arms.

Before you do anything further, take note of her breathing, and establish an opposite breathing pattern. When she breathes in, you breathe out. Do this once or twice until you are both breathing in an opposite pattern. When you're ready, inhale as she exhales, come up to straighten your back, and use your *hara* to lean backward. Never bend your arms or pull with your arm muscles. Always keep your arms straight and locked at the elbows when you bring her upper torso into position. Don't exceed a comfortable angle as you lean backward, and when necessary, remind your partner to keep her head straight and to point her chin slightly upward. When you sense the first point of resistance, stop and hold her in that position for a few seconds, and then slowly release the body back to the mat as you both exhale. Repeat this pattern a few more times, going slightly deeper each time if her body allows.

Although some practitioners allow clients to touch and rest on the mat before pulling them up again, this isn't always necessary. Instead, you can release most of the pressure in the stretch by rocking forward for a brief moment and then pulling upward again to a slightly deeper stretch. You can repeat the technique like this several times until you finally release the body completely to the floor on a mutual exhale.

For people who are accustomed to doing the cobra, or who practice yoga regularly, you may be able to bend their backs easily and quite deeply. If this is the case, you may hold them in each position for a slightly longer time, or rock them slightly back and forth, or even swing them very slightly from left to right before you bring them down to the mat again. For less flexible people, or when physical conditions or trust issues are concerned, you may be able to lift the chest only slightly away from the mat. This is good enough for some people, and if you return the body to the mat and repeat the cobra several times, you will probably be able to go a little bit deeper each time. Be patient, and always listen to the body of your partner as you work.

Additional note on breathing

Although it's best to execute assisted cobras with an opposite breathing pattern, it's helpful to release your partner to the mat with a synchronized breathing pattern, while both people exhale at the same time. Try it this way: When you lift the person into position, you should inhale as you lift, but you want the other person to be exhaling when she is pulled into

position. While you are holding her in position, simply switch your breathing pattern so you inhale and exhale together for a few breaths. Then, when you're ready, you can let her down as you both exhale.

Two other versions of assisted cobras are common in some sequences of traditional Thai massage:

Standing position: Stand with your legs bent slightly at the knees. Your feet stand outside the receiver's legs, which remain close to each other. Reach down, and hold each other's wrists or forearms using the "motorcycle" grip described previously. Next, establish opposite breathing, and when you're ready, slowly come to a standing position, and bring her upper body into a nice back bend. Hold for a few moments, and release the body toward the mat before you bring it to the next depth. Return the body to the mat as usual on a mutual exhale.

Sitting on feet: Sit on the feet of the receiver, paying special attention to your balance and position (see full description elsewhere in this chapter). Reach down and grab her hands, and place them so they rest on your upper legs, close to your hips. Next, bend forward, and use your cupped fingers to firmly grasp her shoulders midway between the base of the neck and the top of the arm bone (humerus). Now wait to establish an opposite breathing pattern, and when you're ready, rock and lean backward with straight arms as you inhale. Hold in position for a few seconds, and if you like, explore the gentle forward and back movements described earlier before releasing her completely to the mat on a mutual exhale.

Reminders

- Maintain your feet and toes in optimal position.
- Keep your arms extended and your back straight.
- Lift as you inhale and as the client exhales.
- Remind your partner to bring *her* head up, rather than let it dangle forward.
- Exhale together as the body is released to the mat.
- Don't exceed a comfortable stretch for the client, and work with incremental depth.
- Always bend your client in the opposite direction (child's pose or plow) shortly after you perform a deep cobra stretch.

