

# Standing Thai Massage on Its Head

By Paul Fowler, LMT, RTT

As I was working with my friend and teacher Chance, we talked about inversions. Inversions Thai style. First, let's define. An inversion is when the heart is higher than the head. Simple as that. Let's think of all the poses that we do where the head is higher than the heart. There are not a lot perhaps, but a good number. Now, let's think about what it takes to put someone in that position. Is it easy or is it difficult? Does it take strength or energy on your part, or are you able to use gravity and alignment to make it happen? Are we doing it because we think the client expects that from a Thai massage? Or is it because we want to "wow" our client with some "cool" Thai massage moves? I can only answer these questions for myself of course. And for me, most of the inversions take energy and often times they are difficult. And sometimes, I find myself trying to "wow" my client, especially if it seemed to be a pretty low key, "uneventful" session.

All of this begs the question, could it be that for most inverted poses, our western bodies are not suited to receive comfortably? Could it be that for most of inverted poses, our western bodies are not able to give comfortably? Here's another question. How often do you use inverted poses in your practice? For me, the answer is very rarely. They just rarely feel good. And I'm often concerned that I might injure someone. So, why are inverted poses included in many traditional Thai massage sequences (and for beginners no less)? I don't know the answer to that. But I do know that when I receive sessions in Thailand, I am rarely put into an inversion. They do not seem to be popular here. So why do we hold on to them in the west? Because they are part of "traditional Thai massage?"

When I analyze every single pose that is in a "traditional Thai massage" sequence, those poses or techniques that I cannot do comfortably, I simply remove from the sequence. If it's not comfortable for me, then it probably will not be comfortable for my client. And if it is not comfortable, how can it help them?

At our school we are taking a hard look at the "sequence" we have been teaching to our students. And we are making some hard choices. In an discussion I once had with Homprang (Baan Hom Samunphrai), I asked her if it would be a good idea to put together a sequence from a western perspective, using what we know in the west and who we are in the west. She answered strongly in the affirmative. After all, she made up her sequence based on her personal experiences and training. Pichest Boonthumme also did that, though he has long since dismissed the idea that a firm sequence can be beneficial to all. In the West, shouldn't we do the same?

All the well known teachers I've met in Thailand say the same thing over and over again. Create a practice that works for you and for your client. Throw out the book. Throw out your idea of Thai massage. Throw out the "teachings". Just tune into the body and to what it needs. Take care of your body first of all. Then we can address our clients' bodies. And if you are uncomfortable in any way when you do the practice, stop, back up, and take another look at what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Regarding inversions, suspensions, lifts, and the like, ask yourself when you are doing them, "if I were to stay here for a few minutes, would I be comfortable? Would my client be comfortable?" If the answer is no, then first examine what you hoped to achieve by applying that pose, and then see if you can achieve that result another way, a way that is more supported and relaxed for both you and your client.

I know that to some, it may be far-reaching to advise removing most of the inversions in your practice, but the health and safety of both you and your client is much more important than carrying out a fixed sequence as you were originally taught. After years of practice, your approach to Thai massage ultimately does not come from a teacher or a book, but from tapping into your own wisdom, experience and body.

Pay attention to your body when and if you put someone in an inversion, and then let your body - and not your mind- be your guide. When you approach it this way, you will know exactly what to do, because you will be listening with compassion, sensitivity and your inherent wisdom.