

# **THAI sets a new standard for the study and practice of traditional Thai massage**

*By Bob Haddad*

Traditional Thai massage is quite new in the West, yet in the past few years, it has been popularized on magazine covers and in newspaper articles, and is now considered to be the fastest growing healing modality in the United States. A few years into my learning of Thai massage, I began to wonder about the sudden rise in popularity of *nuad*, especially as I came into contact with people who considered themselves to be qualified as professional Thai massage therapists after having studied only for a few weeks or less.



Some of these students were humble, while others seemed to have an air of arrogance, as if to suggest they knew what they were doing. As I dug further into this abyss, I found not only unskilled practitioners, but also teachers of traditional Thai massage who appeared under-qualified. More questions arose. Who were these people proclaiming themselves to be professional Thai massage therapists after studying only for a few weeks? Where did they get their training, and what did it consist of? What impressions had they been given by their teachers? How qualified were they to be administering a healing art rooted in thousands of years of tradition?

## **Questions and more questions**

I continued to meet more students whose primary goal was to become “certified” in Thai yoga massage as quickly as possible, so they could add another notch to their belt of professional and marketing endeavors. Yet everything I had been internalizing about *nuad phaen boran*, and everything I was learning from my teachers and colleagues in Thailand spoke to the vast depth of knowledge and learning that remained ahead, the “unfolding” into the discipline that, at its essence, is humble, respectful and selfless. I was absolutely sure that after studying and practicing for several years, I still had so much more to learn. Yet here were people who had the impression that they could work professionally after only a few weeks of study. I wondered if there was something I could do to bring together students, practitioners and teachers of traditional Thai massage under a shared set of minimum study requirements, values and practice.

## **Nomenclature, regulation and control issues**

On one hand, I found many teachers and schools around the world offering programs that awarded “certifications” for completing a certain number of hours of training with those same teachers or schools. Yet on the other hand, I knew there was no bona fide certification process for Thai massage that was legally acknowledged and administered anywhere outside of Thailand. Furthermore, local and regional laws in many countries restrict or forbid the practice of bodywork modalities without first being licensed as a western massage therapist, physical therapist, chiropractor, or other bodywork professional. I learned about the loopholes, -- how an unlicensed western massage therapist can use the words “Thai massage” in one Canadian province but not in another, and how in the United States, local law varied wildly from state to state. North Carolina law, for example, forbids a Thai massage practitioner from using the words “massage” and “bodywork” to describe her practice, yet a few hours north in Virginia, these words are legally acceptable, even though neither party is a licensed (western) massage therapist. I learned how many local laws and ordinances

were lobbied by and influenced by the owners and directors of western massage schools, some of whom seemed quite willing to control the practice of traditional *nuad boran* under the umbrella of western massage curricula. I even came into contact with professional organizations largely unfamiliar with Thai massage that seemed poised to engage in power struggles in order to regulate and attempt to control the practice of our beloved *nuad*.

It was clear that something had to be done to protect the discipline and to prevent it from being absorbed into the political and regulatory control of those outside the tradition. After all, *nuad boran*, at its core, is an energy-based healing system that uses the body as a means to the end, not as the end unto itself. Contrary to its vernacular misnomer, “Thai massage” is not really “massage,” and so it should not be lumped into a generic category of western massage and bodywork, subject to the rules and regulations that govern those practices. Neither is it wholly derived from, nor reflective of, traditional Chinese medicine. Traditional *nuad phaen boran* is unique in the world, having evolved in Thailand, based to some extent on the healing concepts and practices of Indian Ayurvedic medicine.

In the fall of 2003, I began to sketch out some ideas about how such an organization could be brought to life. In January 2004, while studying with Ajahn Pichest Boothumme in Chiang Mai, I made a strong connection with two of his long time students, and I asked for their feedback over dinner. One night, sitting at an outdoor restaurant in Chiang Mai with James Peckham and D’vorah Swartzman, I drew on a napkin the first outline for what would eventually become the Thai Healing Alliance International.

### **The plan unfolds**

For the next several months, the plan became more cohesive. We sought the input of insiders to Thai massage and also people who had no interest or knowledge of the discipline. Later that year, I met Pierce Salguero of Tao Mountain, and we corresponded and spoke several times about the need for an alliance for traditional Thai healing. I drew up a formal proposal and a business and organizational plan for the Alliance, and in August of 2004, James, Pierce and I spent time talking, strategizing, and working out the kinks of my first proposal. Based on their input, the plan was refined and sent to about ten respected Thai massage colleagues and teachers in Thailand, the USA, Canada, and England. Those who were helpful with their feedback included the late Asokananda, Jonas Westring, Jan Chaithavuthi, Richard Gold, and Janice Vitavec. Based on this feedback, the proposals were tweaked and re-submitted once again, until they were considered generally acceptable to all parties.

Although a general consensus had been reached regarding membership levels and required hours of study and practice, most were still unable to assume responsibilities associated with the organization. THAI needed to survive any one of its members, and not become yet another fringe group, run by one person or one ideology for his own personal gain. THAI needed to be a wholly non-partisan alliance, comprised of members who had a say in their own organization, and who would take on the responsibilities necessary to make it work. In the course of my reaching out, I came across a few practitioners and teachers who agreed to join the effort. In spring of 2005, a dedicated small group of people convened over a weekend to further refine the original proposal, and to try to set the organization into motion. With the help of volunteers, a small Membership Committee and an initial Advisory Board, Thai Healing Alliance International was launched in November, 2005.

The Thai Healing Alliance is a non-profit 501c6 organization based on voluntary membership, and does not seek to regulate or control the practice of Thai massage. However, by offering membership at various levels, each with corresponding study and practice requirements, THAI has set a new standard of practice, a barometer by which to gauge serious practitioners and teachers of traditional Thai healing arts. We believe that bringing people together under the title of RTT (Registered Thai Therapist) will contribute to cohesiveness, sharing of knowledge and unity, and we hope that a few years from now, all serious students, practitioners and teachers of traditional Thai massage will choose to be affiliated with the Thai Healing Alliance.

Below find some general organizational information on THAI. For complete information, application forms and other materials, visit: [www.ThaiHealingAlliance.com](http://www.ThaiHealingAlliance.com)

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES—THE THAI HEALING ALLIANCE**

With respect and gratitude to the Thai people and Thai culture, and to further the understanding and practice of traditional Thai healing arts throughout the world, we hereby form an international, member-based non-profit organization of students, practitioners and teachers of traditional Thai healing. These disciplines include traditional Thai massage (known in various forms as *Nuad Boran*, Thai Massage, Thai Yoga Massage, Thai Yoga Therapy, *jap sen*, *sen* therapy, etc.) and Thai herbal traditions (Thai Ayurveda, Thai spa therapies, and related folk healing arts). The goals and objectives of our organization are as follows:

- a) to help bring about a heightened awareness of traditional Thai healing arts as steeped in the ancient traditions of Thailand and distinct from other therapies such as Chinese, Indian, Western massage, etc.
- b) to spread news and relevant information about traditional Thai healing throughout the world
- c) to provide a forum for networking and growth among all members, and outreach to the extended international community
- d) to set guidelines for basic standardization and acknowledged levels of study and expertise among member practitioners, teachers and schools.
- e) to host and co-sponsor workshops, conferences and presentations relevant to Thai healing arts and to their study, practice and dissemination throughout the world.

## **MEMBER BENEFITS**

When you join THAI, you become recognized by a professional organization that acknowledges, approves and endorses serious students, practitioners and teachers of traditional Thai massage and Thai healing arts throughout the world.

Member benefits include an annual membership certificate, the title of RTT (Registered Thai Therapist), a subscription to the *Living Traditions* newsletter, client and student referrals through the THAI referral service, the ability to network with all members and advertise on the website, and other important benefits.

In addition, all members have access to a special Members-Only section of the website which contains:

Access to the THAI archives, a major resource for articles of interest and current research on traditional Thai massage

Reciprocal links to all members' websites

A complete database listing of all members for research and networking

Updated listings of regional events

News items, advertisements, special offers and related discounts on products and services



**THAI HEALING ALLIANCE IS BORN**

Welcome to the present issue of the new journal THAI traditions. This journal is available to a select group of members of the Thai Healing Alliance International and also to the extended community of practitioners of Natural Thai Massage. The journal and this page design celebrate the coming of a new era.

**THAI HEALING ALLIANCE INTERNATIONAL (THAI)** is an international network of students, practitioners, teachers and institutions engaged in the study and practice of traditional Thai Massage. THAI is a non-profit organization. Thai Massage (T.M.) is a holistic health care system and Thai Massage Institute (T.M.I.) is a non-profit organization that provides training and certification in Thai Massage.

**Membership Benefits:** Thai and American THAI members (U.S. members) have access to a members-only section of the THAI web site including:

- A complete database listing of all members for research and networking
- Reciprocal links to members' websites
- Updated listings of regional events
- A complete listing of regional events
- A listing of all members for research and networking
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The membership information web site [www.thaihealing.com](http://www.thaihealing.com) will be updated soon. We will be pleased to see you there. We will be pleased to see you there. We will be pleased to see you there.

Active members display their annual membership certificate in their place of practice, share web links with THAI, and use the Organization's logo on their web sites, and on certificates they award to their students. Members abide by the Thai Healing Alliance Code of Ethics, and comply with the regulations and guidelines set forth by the Organization. Members are encouraged to attend regionally-sponsored events and to further their studies with a variety of THAI approved providers.

### Levels of membership:

The levels are: Student, Practitioner, Advanced Practitioner, Instructor, Institution, and Associate Member. Yearly membership fees vary according to each level. All members must have completed part of their study with a THAI Approved Provider.

**Basic Member** - Minimum requirements are 30 hours of formal study with an approved instructor or institution.

**Practitioner** - Minimum requirements are 120 hours of formal, supervised study by approved instructors or institutions within a maximum period of time of 3 years. In addition, the applicant must have completed 50 logged hours of hands-on private practice. A member who achieves Practitioner status will be acknowledged by the Thai Healing Alliance as a Registered Thai Therapist (RTT)

**Advanced Practitioner** - Minimum requirements are 240 hours of supervised training by approved instructors or institutions, 10 hours of which must be related to cultural disciplines such as Thai Herbal Medicine, Theravada Buddhist studies, Southeast Asian studies, Thai language study, and other related cultural activities. A trip to Thailand automatically qualifies for this 10 hour requirement. In addition, the applicant must have completed 240 logged hours of hand-on private practice.

**Instructor** – Minimum requirements are 300 hours of supervised training by approved instructors and institutions. The applicant must have completed 500 hours of logged hands-on practice (260 hours more than the Advanced Practitioner level), and must submit coursework guidelines for review and approval by the Executive Council. The applicant must have completed a minimum of 10 additional hours of Thai cultural studies (such as those outlined in “Advanced Practitioner” above.) Instructor members are endorsed as approved educational providers for all THAI members as they advance in levels of membership through required courses of study.

**Institution** - Institution membership includes one Instructor level membership. Each person involved in teaching Thai healing arts at the institution must qualify to be an active member of the Organization at the Advanced Practitioner level or higher. At least one person must qualify for Instructor level membership. Additional conditions apply. Institution Members are endorsed as approved educational providers for THAI members as they advance in levels of membership through required courses of study.

**Associate Member** - Individuals or organizations linked to Thai culture and supportive of our goals and objectives. These members may include herbalists, spas, suppliers, air carriers, retailers, etc. Associate Members may purchase advertising space on the THAI website and in THAI newsletters.

## **ADDITIONAL MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION**

### Applying for membership

New members are accepted at any time upon successful completion of an application, receipt of dues, and review and approval by the Membership committee of the Executive Council. Regardless of when a new member is accepted, the membership period expires on Dec 31 of each year. For a limited time during 2006, all new members may join THAI at a discount by downloading the discount coupon from the THAI web site. In addition, all members who qualify for Instructor and Institution level membership will be given free membership in the organization for member year 2006.

### Renewing and upgrading membership

Renewal membership certificates are issued every year upon receipt of annual dues, and are valid from January 1 to December 31 of each year. Members may advance to a higher level at any time by competing and submitting a new application with updated study information. Dues for the upgraded level of membership are payable upon the next annual renewal.

### Instructor and Institutional Guidelines

Instructors and institutions offering acknowledged courses and workshops to THAI members must be approved by the Council through a written application process. Courses may be offered in any region of the world, but all must be taught by instructor(s) who hold active membership in THAI, and whose curricula are approved for advancing levels of membership in the Organization. Instructors, practitioners and institutions in Thailand are allowed free membership in THAI.

## **THAI NEEDS YOUR HELP**

We are making history with the Thai Healing Alliance. Never before has there been a non-partisan member-based organization for the standardized practice and study of traditional Thai massage. We need volunteers to help us follow through with our mission, specifically in the areas of member outreach, marketing, advertising, and publicity. A complete list of volunteer positions is listed on the home page of the THAI web site.

We seek THAI sponsors, individuals who are financially fortunate enough to make a donation to support the expenses and operations of the Alliance. All Sponsors' names appear in a special section of the website and on the masthead of all publications. Each Sponsor level includes several years of membership in THAI, as well as special premiums. See the "Collaborate" dropdown menu on the THAI web site for more details.

We are also looking for additional members of the Executive and Advisory councils who are willing and able to dedicate time and effort to the cause.

Please help us attain our goals to bring about a unified and standardized world community of students and practitioners of traditional Thai healing arts. We need each other to continue to grow in our mutual work, interests and passions, and to preserve the dignity and integrity of the traditional healing arts of Thailand.

Join, volunteer, donate your time or money by contacting **[info@thaihealingalliance.com](mailto:info@thaihealingalliance.com)**

To read more, and to download your member application form, please visit: **[www.ThaiHealingAlliance.com](http://www.ThaiHealingAlliance.com)**

Together, let's make a change in the world of traditional Thai massage.