

ten for today

BY REBECCA JONES

ASIAN BODYWORK TRENDS

From energy work to exotic massage techniques, many traditional, Asian-born health practices are now attracting a generation of Western spa clients. In fact, “ancient” may well be the hottest trend in massage therapy today.

Miami-based spa consultant Steve Capellini, author of *Massage for Dummies* (For Dummies, 2010) and *The Complete Spa Book for Massage Therapists* (Milady, 2009), among other titles, last year designed a series of treatments that combine a variety of Eastern and Western techniques, including Thai herbal balls, shiatsu, Hawaiian lomilomi, and Swedish strokes. Now this “Global Traditions Massage” is one of the most popular packages available at the upscale Spa at Pelican Hill in Newport Coast, California.

“It’s certainly a trend in spas,” says Capellini about incorporating Eastern techniques. He cautions, however, about the importance of ensuring that massage clients still receive a pleasurable experience.

Whether you’re interested in learning new skills to make yourself more marketable to a spa, or just want to expand your knowledge and incorporate some Eastern-inspired modalities into your existing practice, here are some things to ponder as you explore Asian bodywork.

1. WHY WOULD A WESTERNER WANT TO EXPLORE ASIAN TECHNIQUES?

“There’s just a more transcendent feeling—an energistic feeling—about Eastern therapies,” says Capellini, who trained in Thailand. “I think a lot of people in the massage world are artistic or creative or spiritual, and maybe less mechanical. Yet mostly what we learn in Western massage schools is mechanical technique.”

Tsy Schupack, a reiki instructor and co-owner of A Way of Wellness in Arvada, Colorado, points out that the integration of Eastern mind-body-spirit philosophy into the Western mainstream has already happened. “What hasn’t been seen on Oprah?” she asks.

Reiki, developed in the 1920s in Japan, doesn’t actually involve massage at all, but rather is a form of energy work. Still, massage therapists flock to Schupack’s classes. “If I had to pick one aspect that is most often mentioned by therapists during their training is that it just knocks their socks off to discover that energy can be used as a structural tool in their sessions,” Schupack says. “And the one that brings tears to their eyes is when they say they never knew it was possible to feel so connected to themselves, others, and the work.”



2. WHAT'S THE MOST POPULAR ASIAN THERAPY?

Capellini says Thai herbal therapy and Thai massage are bestsellers. Thai herbal balls, which are bundles of dried herbs wrapped in cloth and tied tight, are often combined with Thai massage. “You soak the balls for a couple of minutes in water to rehydrate the herbs, then steam them for 10 minutes to get them warm, and get the oils to mix,” says Tom Wellman, president of



Sa-wan Spa Products of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, an importer of the balls.

Similar to stone massage, the herbal balls allow therapists to apply heat to muscles, but also offer herbal and aromatherapy benefits as well. “It allows you to work deeper into the muscles without as much wear and tear on your hands or your body,” Wellman says. Afterward, the client gets to keep and reuse the ball, which typically sells for about \$7 each.

Wellman says the Thai herbal ball treatment has become especially popular on cruise ships, but that it could help build any massage therapy practice. “What people like about them is they’re different. You’re giving your customers something they’ve never seen before, and it’s an experience most people like quite a bit. It’s likely to get them talking about it with friends.”

3. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR THERAPISTS TO KNOW ABOUT THAI MASSAGE IS ...

Traditional Thai massage—or *nuad boran*—is unlike Western massage in that it is performed on a floor mat, not a table, and uses no oils. “There are a few techniques that can be adapted to a table from *nuad boran*, but true Thai massage cannot, and should not, be performed on a table,” says Bob Haddad, director of Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI), the North Carolina-based network of Thai massage practitioners.

As it grows in popularity, workshops for the technique are becoming easier to find. Check the THAI website (www.thaihealingalliance.com) for a list of upcoming classes. “I usually advise students to take the slow-but-sure approach to learning, since the best way to learn is over a long period of time, getting feedback from several teachers,” Haddad says. “Most serious practitioners of Thai massage spend more than one year doing basic study and practice before they begin to practice professionally.”

Haddad says aside from lots of study and practice, what’s needed to learn Thai massage is “an open heart, a willingness to listen to our clients’ bodies and energies, and a firm but comfy floor mat.”

4. IF YOU HAVE ACCESS TO A POOL OR WATER, THINK WATSU

Take the techniques of shiatsu, move them into the water, and you get “watsu,” a modality created by Harold Dull in 1980. While Western by design, watsu was born on the tenets of Asian techniques. “You float your client in the water and use appropriate devices around their legs so they’re buoyant,” says Joyce Reim, owner and director of the School of Shiatsu and Massage, located at Harbin Hot Springs in Middletown, California. Watsu was born here, and it’s still the only school certified to teach watsu.

Watsu certification requires a 550-hour training program, but many therapists incorporate aquatic techniques into their repertoire without calling them watsu. Reim says warm pools help to release and open up energy in the body, and the buoyancy of the water helps clients relax.

5. WHAT ABOUT CUPPING?

Cupping is an ancient Chinese practice in which a suction cup is applied to the skin; it involves energy work along the body’s meridians.

Anita Shannon, president of ACE Massage Cupping in Asheville, North Carolina, has taken this ancient Chinese medical practice and reworked it into a bodywork tool. Instead of leaving the cups stationary, as in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), she moves a cup around during a massage. Rather than working with energy meridians, she works with muscular and body systems. And she doesn’t use fire to create a vacuum as traditional practitioners do. Rather, she uses a vacuum pistol. She leads classes in the technique all across the country.

“We can take a tight, rigid muscle and soften it immediately by dredging it with a vacuum,” she says. “It’s a very strong therapy, so we want to go slowly with people.”

6. FOR REAL LUXURY, CONSIDER LULUR

Some high-end spas have taken this elaborate Indonesian ritual (lulur) and turned it into the height of exotic pampering for clients.

Ancient Javanese princesses followed a 40-day lulur ritual before marriage. Today, a lulur massage begins with a scented oil massage along with acupressure, then a warm yogurt massage, then an exhilarating shower followed by a warm bubble bath, then more massage.

7. DO THESE EXOTIC THERAPIES POSE ANY DANGERS?

Of course they may, just as many massage techniques might, if practiced by an untrained or insufficiently trained therapist.

Capellini advises caution, especially when dealing with therapies that involve heat. Shannon warns that cupping can leave the skin discolored, and nothing will invalidate your liability coverage faster than attempting traditional fire cupping.

“Just don’t use stuff you don’t know anything about,” Capellini says. “It’s a good idea to be aware of as much about a product or technique as you can be.”

8. THE BEST PLACE TO LEARN EASTERN TECHNIQUES IS IN THE EAST

Sure, there are massage conventions and trade shows where you can get a taste of a technique. And if you like something, you can take weekend classes, then enroll in longer programs if you find something that really appeals to you. But to really experience an Asian therapy at its most authentic, many experts believe you need to leave the Western hemisphere.

“Do some exploratory work to see if you like it before going overseas,” Capellini suggests. “But most people I know have a great experience when they go East. There’s no substitute for that state of mind. In Asia, they have a giving, service-oriented humility that a lot of us could benefit from incorporating into what we do.”

9. “BUT EASTERN PHILOSOPHY JUST DOESN’T RESONATE WITH ME”

The work may not appeal to your Western clients. And that’s OK.

“Embrace ambiguity,” Schupack advises. “Not all concepts will work for all people all the time. Take what you like and leave the rest.

“Come across an idea that sounds beneficial?” she asks. “Integrate it into your practice. Begin one step at a time.”

10. I NEED A MENU LISTING ALL THESE DIFFERENT FORMS OF THERAPY

Indeed, you could fill a textbook with all the different forms of Eastern therapy and their variations.

Visit ABMP.com for a comprehensive list of more than 260 modalities acknowledged by Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals, including Asian bodywork. You can

also turn to the American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (www.aobta.org); it recognizes 17 defined forms of Asian bodywork, including acupressure, amma, chi nei tsang, five-element shiatsu, integrative eclectic shiatsu, jin shin do, macrobiotic shiatsu, shiatsu, traditional Thai bodywork, tui na, and Zen shiatsu. **m&b**

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