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Thai Herbal Steams and Soaks

Exotic aromas, steamy vapors, penetrating heat: soothing, healing. Since the earliest times, Thai herbal practitioners have prescribed therapeutic herbal heat. At first, they built saunas, or a room where they would place a charcoal burner, maybe covered with stones, and then either lay herbs or pour an essential oil or infusion over this to create an aromatic mist. The formula would depend on what grew wild in the area. Later, they planted gardens and also preserved the herbs by drying.

Today, we still find herbal saunas at many of the local healing centers, often at Buddhist temples. But the heat therapy has evolved from dry heat to moist, or steam and immersion baths, as beauty spas have become popular. This is because, while a sauna dries the skin, steam and hot baths moisturize, since oil and vapors are more easily absorbed.

Similar to Thai massage and herbal treatments, herbal saunas, steam baths, and immersions treat both the body and the mind. Their scented aromas soothe and relax while the herbs remedy surface conditions as well as penetrate through inhalation and absorption to cure internal ailments. Following Ayurvedic doctrine, their objective is to help achieve a balance of the four elements: earth, wind, fire, and water.

Thai heat therapies also serve as an excellent detoxification. As body temperature rises, blood vessels expand, coming even closer to the surface. Perspiration also begins to flow from the pores, carrying excessive chemical substances from the blood, such as sodium and potassium, as well as toxins and other impurities lodged in body tissue and skin.

Most therapists recommend about a ten-to fifteen-minute steam bath or immersion, followed by a refreshing plunge into a cold pool or chilling shower. Then back in for one more. While the heat opens pores, the cold closes them, so nutrition, curatives, and moisturizers will not be lost. At the end, you feel both refreshed as well as slightly drained, or tired. Remember, too, it is never a good idea to subject yourself to long periods of intense heat as you can lose an excessive amount of body fluid, which can be dangerous.

Today, both fresh and dried herbs are used in Thai heat treatments. Fresh is always better as they have the strongest, most effective components, but this isn't always possible. So, while dried herbs are a solution, over time, they will lose their efficacy and so should not be kept for too long. Furthermore, with fresh herbs, potions should be disposed of after use, as they can quickly begin to sour and reek, especially in warm climates. Meanwhile, dried herb concoctions have the advantage that they can be kept and used over again for three to five days. For hot baths, in addition to small amounts of essential oils, herbs can be wrapped tightly in a muslin cloth and then immersed in the water.

Thai herbal steam baths and immersions can comprise just one ingredient or a combination, depending on their purpose. The medicinal plants employed can be classified into four groups: volatile oils, such as leaves of the lime; mildly acidic, including tamarind leaves; sublimable like camphor; and curative, for specific ailments,



such as anti-inflammatory morning glory.

While a sweet scent is helping one to relax and release tension, the vapors or oils can be treating respiratory symptoms such as asthma. In addition to allergies like hay fever, the steam and baths can alleviate eczema and other dermatological conditions, including itchy rashes and acne. Furthermore, Thai-style saunas, steam baths, and immersions are an excellent preparation before a Thai massage or spa treatment, as they relax the muscles and mind, detoxify, and soften the skin for scrubs, as well as enhance absorption of important nutrients during facial and body wraps.

The following is a list of the more popular medicinal plants used in Thai heat treatments, together with their benefits.



Acacia concinna (*Sompoi*)
Relieves tooth and mouth aches.

Basil (*Horapha*)
Relieves itchy rashes, and the aroma is very refreshing.

Camphor (*Karabun*)
The camphor tree bark is a mild antiseptic and works like a natural antihistamine.

Camphor leaf (*Nat*)
Treats eczema and inflammation.

Cassumunar (*Phlai*)
Relieves muscle stiffness.

Lemon Grass (*Takhrai*)
Relieves headaches, stimulates blood circulation, invigorates, and deodorizes.



Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus*)
Relieves respiratory conditions and refreshes.

Galingale (*Krachai*)
Treats shortness of breath.

Ginger (*Khing*)
Energizes and stimulates body systems.

Jasmine (*Mali*)
The aroma is very soothing and relaxing. Relieves depression, tension, and irritability, as well as premenstrual syndrome.

Kaffir (*Makrut*)
A mild antiseptic, it cures infection. It also improves respiration and digestion.

Morning Glory (*Phak Bung*)
Alleviates skin inflammation and allergies.

Menthol (*Phimsen*)

Alleviates respiratory congestion and cold symptoms. Treats heart and skin conditions and deodorizes.

Turmeric (*Khamin*)

Treats eczema, inflammations, and infected wounds.

Tamarind leaf (*Bai Makham*)

Relieves itching. In hot baths, tamarind can serve as a catalyst for the other herbs' remedial properties.

Recommended Amounts



Acacia	1 cluster
Camphor	3-5 leaves / 15 grams of powder
Cassumuna	2-3 cloves
Kaffi	3 leaves
Lemon Grass	3 stalks
Morning Glory	5 flowers
Tamarind	2-3 leaves

Steps for a Traditional Thai Heat Treatment

1. Check blood pressure.
2. Take a warm shower or bath first to remove dirt and to open pores.
3. Enter the sauna, steam bath, or immersion for 10-15 minutes. Then rinse off in cold water before entering a second time.
4. After the second period, do not bathe immediately, but sit and relax for a spell. Let your skin dry and cool off naturally and then take a final bath or shower.

Don't Take a Heat Treatment

1. If you are suffering from a fever of 38 °C (99.5 °F), as you could be susceptible to other bacteria or infections.
2. If you suffer from chronic illnesses, such as liver, heart, high blood pressure, convulsions, or intense asthma.
3. During menstruation.
4. If you have open wounds.
5. If you have just eaten.
6. If you are feeling weak or dizzy, possibly from fasting or lack of sleep.

Traditional Thai Post-Natal Care for Mothers

Until the 20th century, most women in Thailand, particularly in the rural areas, gave birth at home, so the local midwife played an important role not just during birth, but also during the pregnancy and post-natal period. She would prescribe herbal drugs such as *ya hom*, fragrant medicine, or a blend of flowers and plants including jasmine, camphor, and *ylang-ylang*. When inhaled, the scented pellets relieved morning sickness, or nausea. Mixed with water, the tonic alleviated dizziness. At the same time, massage was employed to ease aching limbs. This still goes on today, but should only be performed by a trained masseuse.

In the past, but much less so today because of modern lifestyles, once a woman gave birth, she would undergo the *yu fai*, staying close to fire, therapy for up to three weeks. Basically, this means the woman remains in a room where a charcoal stove is kept burning, creating a sauna. No herbs are employed; the woman is just made to perspire and flush out toxins that built up during the past nine months. During this time, the woman does not bathe, but her body is continually wiped with a clean cloth.

During a nine-month pregnancy, a woman's body undergoes tremendous changes. She gains weight. Her body stretches. She experiences swelling and stiffness. Her circulatory system is made to work harder. And her hormonal balance is altered, which is seen in her skin and moods. Therefore, in addition to *yu fai*, the woman often took a daily herbal sauna or steam treatment for ten to twenty minutes to counteract these conditions and restore musculature, particularly in the womb. Warm poultices could also be applied to the body; for example, a daily turmeric compress would be applied to the abdomen and buttocks to rejuvenate skin tone.

While the herbs used depended on the region, midwives often developed their own adaptations of *yu fai* as well. For instance, in one southern province, a midwife developed a belt that the woman could wear around her waist. It would hold small, metal incense boxes next to the woman's abdomen so she could move around and not be restricted to a bed.



It was also believed that women who rejected the *yu fai* treatment would become more temperamental when they reached the age of 50 to 60. Today, though, many would say this can be attributed to menopause. It was also said that these women, especially if they gave birth when 35 or older, would be more susceptible to aches and pains in later life during cold and damp weather or, today, to quick temperature shifts, like moving in and out of an air-conditioned room.

Yu Fai Benefits

1. Faster discharge of amniotic fluid.
2. Easier breast milk flow.
3. Faster abdomen reduction and skin tone restoration.
4. Faster reduction of body fluids and weight.
5. Relief of back, skeletal, and muscle strains, aches, and pains.
6. Rejuvenation of skin

