

# Thai Massage: A Cross-Training for Dance

By Scott Putman

During my graduate studies at the University of California, Irvine I was forced to justify my belief in and ideas behind the dances I created as well as my passion for dance in general. A strong dedication to martial forms and dance continued to cultivate energy in my body and therefore made perfect sense to me, but academic and western justification were still necessary to articulate its importance to others. It was no longer enough for me to sense and feel the energy of my own body. I had to find a way to build a bridge of communication between what I knew to be true in my dancing soul and what society seemed to embrace in the world around me.

Since that time I have been inspired by parallel movements in modern art such as Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism as a means to embark upon a four-year project known as the *Experiment in White Project*. Not only has this endeavor proven to be a rich and rewarding source for work but it has also raised questions about how to train my dancers so that they might manifest their energy and technical abilities to perform in new and creative ways.

Dancers have been trained for some time with the idea that the pelvis is the anchor and initiator of all movement. I still find that this is the best way to get at the center of movement and the place for the greatest propulsion. However, I am now finding myself interested in weaving other ideas into this method of teaching and moving. I am curious about integrating the idea of gathering energy from the earth and translating that energy into kinetic energy. I believe that by stimulating the intrinsic musculature to move the dancing body, a similar and even more effective style of movement might be initiated.

For several years I have been practicing Thai massage, and in that time I have witnessed amazing benefits in my own capacity to cultivate energy as well as the healing effects that it seems to offer both myself and my clients. As a result, I have drawn the conclusion that utilizing Thai massage as a cross training for dance can be physically and psychologically beneficial when combined with an avid dance practice and/or training program.

In order to access the technical demands of dance, as well as its depth of performance, a dancer must be able to blend a variety of techniques with a full embodiment of expression within each piece of choreography. In order to do this, my dancers often train in ballet and in modern dance five days a week for an hour and a half each. This adds up to 3 hours of technical training before the rehearsal process even begins; a demanding day for both body and mind.

Knowing how rigorous a dancer's schedule can be, I propose that consistently receiving Thai massage can be utilized as a means of cross training. I believe that it addresses issues of balance, flexibility and strength through its inherent non-gravitational movement and does not create unnecessary physical strain and/or exhaustion on the body and mind; a byproduct sometimes created within the pressures of a gym environment. Though "cross training" is traditionally associated with working supplementary muscle groups to support a primary mode of training, a well organized dance class, regardless of style, will address multiple muscle groups and the majority of physical needs of its dancers. This type of class also helps to build a dancer's stamina and strength on a muscular and aerobic level. The rehearsal process, when well directed, also promotes aerobic activity through its repetitive nature.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned demands that a dancer often places on his or her body in class and during rehearsals, it seems counterproductive to risk injury and/or exhaustion at a gym training on machines and in repetitive motions that do not serve the health and well being of body and spirit. By using Thai massage instead as a method of cross-training, a dancer's physical body will not only feel revitalized, but the cultivation of spiritual focus that often takes place during traditional sessions will enable him or her to connect more deeply with body and mind, and ultimately inspire a more successful artistic expression on stage.

In my experience, it is often the case that dancers are unable to access correct alignment and placement of dance forms. They get "stuck" trying to create a picture or imitate movement while overworking the exterior musculature and inhibiting correct placement of the physical dance form and greater range of motion. Repeating this time and again exhausts the body and slows the growth and development of a dancer's process. Working like this can also develop poor movement habits that take time to break and modify.

I believe that if regime dancers added Thai massage to their practice on a bi-monthly basis, the benefits to their technique, focus and energy would be well worth it. By allowing a practitioner to guide them through sensations of correct body alignment, they would be able to sense and feel *without* gravity the potential of what they can ultimately achieve *with* gravity. With repetition, the memories of these sensations will manifest while working at the barre or center practice. Instead of trying to "muscle everything," the aforementioned sensory feelings achieved in a relaxed state during Thai massage will help the dancer find form and placement during practice. This will also occur utilizing

only the necessary intrinsic musculature rather than the exterior musculature that can potentially cause injury through over and misuse.

Another aspect of Thai massage that I find beneficial is its internal focus on breathing. A similar focus is necessary in dance. Rather than utilizing a manipulating and forcing technique, the internal guiding that one develops when receiving Thai massage offers dancers a way of communicating with their bodies while in movement and within the demands of a classroom experience.

The cultivation of energy that often occurs during Thai massage also offers great benefits to dancers as it encourages a sustainable flow of energy throughout the body. It inspires an accurate firing of musculature and management of energy in technical exercises and therefore addresses the issue of endurance in both practice and performance. Understanding how energy flows throughout the body and being able to manage it is a key factor in executing technique and performance qualities. An

uninterrupted flow of energy along the *sen* lines will help to maintain a dancer's physical health and allows his or her body to move more efficiently.

As the director of a dance company, choreographer and teacher, I am more interested in the health and longevity of my dancers than in a dancer who is removed, exhausted or lacks presence in his or her body. I believe that a healthy and happy dancer creates the foundation for masterful work. By cultivating those qualities in my dancers, a perfect creation and expression of art becomes manifest. This occurs within the choreography that is created, in the way that it is interpreted by the dancers and ultimately through how it is experienced by the audience during performance.

At present, these thoughts are a springboard for me to deepen my practice of Thai massage within the dance environment and quantify the effects it has on both a personal and performance level. I welcome others with a passion for both dance and Thai massage to join me on this journey to help communicate these ideas in an academic and western setting.