

# ***Thai Massage Retreat & Conference***

*By Hillary H. Olsen*

Extraordinary moments can arise when we stay present and remain open to things as they happen and unfold. The THAI retreat in June 2007 was a momentous and special experience because at every moment and at every turn there were wonderful “unfoldings” that took place. The Thai massage community came together in a non-partisan fashion for the continued growth and awareness of Thai massage at local, national, and international levels.

The retreat took place June 21-25, 2007 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, at Camp New Hope, a lovely setting in the pine forest. In attendance were students, practitioners and teachers from 17 different U.S. states, as well as Thai massage practitioners from Canada, Sweden, and Germany. It was rare and inspiring to see so many qualified practitioners gather together - leaving their egos at the door - to honor and respect each other. The instructors for the retreat were Janice Vitavec, Rose Griscom, David Weitzer, Hans Lütz, and Bob Haddad. Two workshops were held each day in different buildings, and one special presentation was given at mid day, where we all gathered together. Opening and closing ceremonies included chanting the Om Namoh - not merely reciting it - which many of us had not done before. During the course of the four days, participants enjoyed practice time to share techniques, to learn different approaches, and to encourage each other in the growth of our individual practices.

There were so many memorable moments during this retreat, and I’m sure each of us has a personal story to tell. These are some of my personal highlights: The first evening we showed a Thai film, “*The Overture.*” Because of technical difficulties, the English subtitles did not appear on the screen, but instead of stopping the film, one of our Thai-speaking participants began translating. Not only did she translate what was happening in the movie, but she also educated us on aspects of Thai culture and history that were relevant to the story. It was wonderful to sit and listen to Souris share her cultural knowledge with us. The experience was simply magical.



*The teachers lead prayers for all Thai massage teachers on the final day of the THAI Retreat, 2007. From left to right, Rose, Bob, Hans, David and Janice.*

Our daily activities, workshops, and lunch took place at a retreat center called Camp New Hope. It wasn’t until writing this article that the name’s significance dawned on me: New Hope. Could we have asked for a better location name to typify and describe the inaugural THAI retreat? With the newness and freshness of a child - a blooming flower, dewy grass - practitioners and instructors held the first retreat with new hope at New Hope. With the beginner’s mind that Buddhism emphasizes, we were doing this together, starting on a new path as unique individuals within a larger, supportive community.



*THAI members Paul Fowler, David Weitzer and Paul Weitz test their intuitive abilities on a willing receiver.*

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For the Friday evening social, THAI organized local musicians and contra dancers to teach us how to shake and groove the traditional way. Contra Dance is a traditional American folk tradition that includes partner and group dancing, and all the dance steps are led by a caller. It was so much fun to let loose and to hoot and holler!

On Saturday there was a forum about THAI and about the future of traditional Thai massage. After a spirited discussion on relevant matters and legal issues, David Weitzer asked everyone to join hands. When people gather with different ideas, strong opinions often arise which may sometimes divide us, but David reminded us that regardless of our personal opinions, we should always maintain peace and love in our hearts for our fellow practitioners.



*Participants at the Retreat in a typical contradance formation.*

With closed eyes, connected hands, and open hearts, tears and laughter enveloped and united all of us. We were reminded that beyond everything else, love is what will keep us united and growing as a community.

On Sunday there was a dedication ceremony to all of our teachers and lineages. The ceremony fell on the anniversary of Asokananda's death - certainly no coincidence. Everyone shared personal stories of their teachers, and we honored them each by name and expressed gratitude for those who have helped us on our paths.

It is through our honor and respect for the tradition and for our teachers that we have come together in THAI. It is clear that we have a responsibility to carry this tradition into a postmodern culture. Thai healing traditions must not be lost, and every lineage should be honored and respected. As we do this, we will continue to grow - spiritually, mentally and physically - so we can give our best to our clients and to the Thai massage community. Special gratitude must also be given to each of the teachers at this Retreat, and to Bob Haddad, for his vision and patience, and for all he has done to help bring us together as a community.