

Thai Yoga Bodywork

In this time-honored Eastern healing tradition,
the giver gets as good a workout as the receiver.

By Sara Avant Stover
Photographed by Vidura Barrios

Like most of the best things in my life, Thailand and Thai Yoga Bodywork arrived as surprises. On a May afternoon six years ago, when I was a senior at Barnard College, I was sipping a cappuccino at the Hungarian Pastry Shop in New York City with a former high-school teacher. That fall, he was going to be the new headmaster of an international boarding school in Chiang Mai, Thailand—and he told me that one teacher he'd lined up had unexpectedly backed out. Knowing both my thirst for travel and that my graduation was imminent, he offered me the position. "I don't mean to rush you," he concluded, "but I need to know your decision within 48 hours."

As an African Studies major, the only things I associated with Thailand at that time were rice fields and elephants. An immediate visit to Barnes & Noble's travel section led me to *The Lonely Planet* chapter on Chiang Mai. I learned that it was a city in the country's mountainous north, it had a yoga studio—and, best of all—I could get a two-hour massage for a measly \$6. With that, I closed the book, needing to know no more. That evening, I accepted the job. This was no mistake; from this decision evolved an unexpected love affair with Thailand and its healing art, traditional Thai massage.

Upon arriving in Chiang Mai, I caught onto a few things very quickly: Thailand's cuisine is mind-bogglingly delicious; everyone seemed to be smiling; and Thai massage is ubiquitous! Within my first 72 hours as an expatriate, I experienced my first Thai massage.

Having only received Swedish and deep-tissue massages, I didn't quite know what to expect. After two decadent hours of lying on a floor mat in a borrowed cotton tank top and pants, and being pressed, rocked, twisted, and stretched into the most ingenious of shapes and possibilities, I left feeling much like I do

Some Tips Before Beginning:

- Breathe deeply and fully throughout the session, and encourage the recipient to do the same.
- Be aware of your body position, so that it is comfortable and safe for you. Be creative and incorporate movements or yoga poses that feel rejuvenating for you and undistruptive for the recipient.
- Try to soften the parts of your body that are making contact with the recipient.
- Access more power through leaning your body weight rather than exerting muscle force.
- Let all of your actions be gifts of kindness for the recipient.
- Always initiate movement from your own power center, located just below the navel.
- Transition between different positions slowly, smoothly, and gracefully.
- Give up trying to accomplish anything in particular, let go of any desired results, and have fun!

Unless cleared by a health-care professional, do not give treatments to persons diagnosed with heart disease, circulatory problems, varicose veins, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, acute trauma, inflammation, fever, contagious disease, open wounds, serious back diagnosis (such as herniated discs), impingements, neurological diagnosis such as stroke, nerve damage, and impaired sensory perception. *Fit Yoga*, Jonas Westring, and the author cannot be held responsible for any injuries that result from practicing Thai Yoga Bodywork.





1. Centering

- First check in with the receiver to see if she has any injuries you should know about. If it is appropriate to proceed, have the receiver rest in Savasana.
- Kneel at her feet and place your hands in Anjali mudra.
- Together, draw in three deep breaths and attune to the warmth and energy in the palms of your hands. Affirm that your actions will be beneficial for the receiver and for yourself. Offer a moment of reverence for those who have passed along this ancient technique to you.

after practicing yoga: grounded and bright. Amazing! I was hooked—and puzzled. What *was* that?!

I soon learned that Traditional Thai Massage (known as *nuad boran* in northern Thailand) arrived there approximately 2,500 years ago after its birth in India through Dr. Jivaka Kumar Bhacca, personal physician to the Buddha and known to Thais as the “Father of Healing.” This healing art thrived in Thailand’s Buddhist temples, where lay people would come for healing and, from there, it spread out into villages where children treated their elders, who had spent long days working in rice fields.

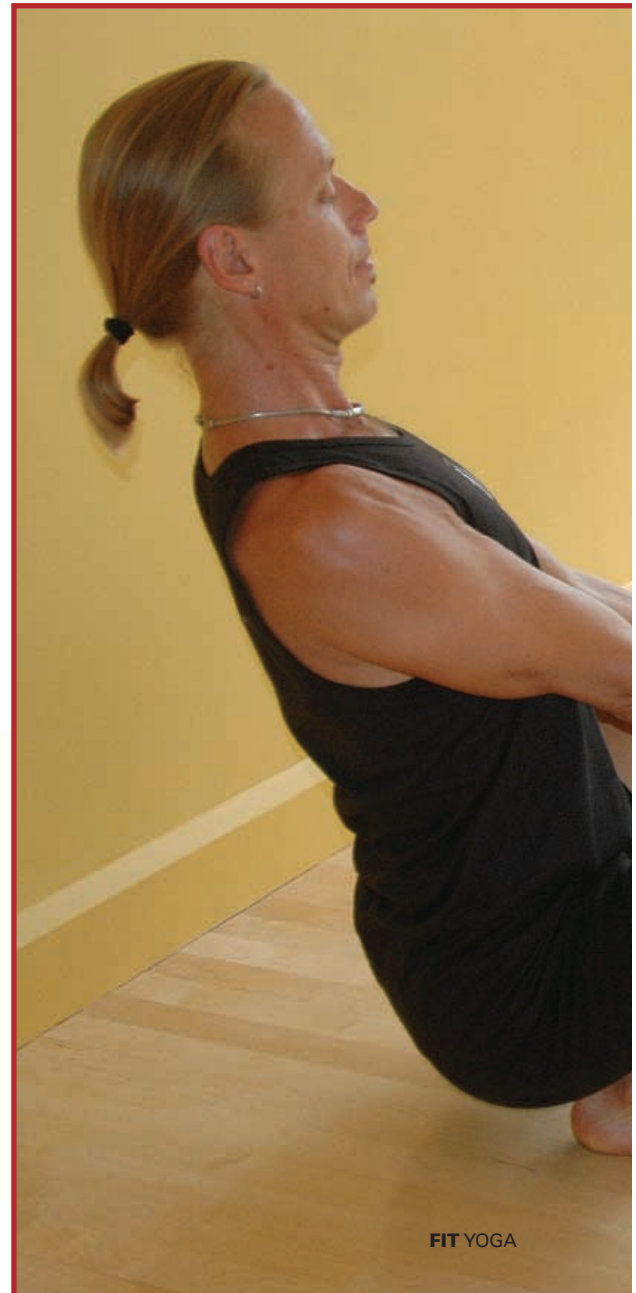
Due to its migration, Traditional Thai massage includes a fusion of multi-cultural healing disciplines such as yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhist meditation, traditional Thai medicine, and Traditional Chinese Medicine. From this fusion arises interactive bodywork that combines deep-tissue compression, acupressure, and reflexology, energy-line work, toning of internal organs, energy balancing, range-of-motion exercises, and assisted hatha yoga postures. These techniques address muscles, connective tissue, joints, and the more

2. Double Leg Traction and Rocking

- Squat at the receiver’s feet. Lift her legs, cupping her heels in your hands.
- Straighten your arms and slowly lean back, pulling the receiver’s legs toward you so that you see even her head moving slightly.
- Hold for 3 breaths before releasing. Repeat 3 times.
- Gently pulse back and forth, drawing the receiver’s legs toward you and then pushing them away, so that her whole body rocks gently from heels to head.

Benefits:

- Opens hip and sacroiliac joints.
- Creates space for disks of lumbar spine.
- Induces the parasympathetic nervous system’s relaxation response.



3. Straight Leg Hamstring Stretch

- Sit on your left heel with your right leg in a half-kneel at the outside of the receiver's hip.
- Bring the receiver's left leg to vertical and place your inside hand on her lower-left thigh and your outside hand on her left heel. (If you are smaller than the receiver, you can rest her leg on your right shoulder.)
- Push on the heel to straighten the leg as you wrap the front of the thigh slightly inwards. While keeping both of your arms straight, lean slowly forward until you feel the edge.
- Repeat this 3 times on this side.
- Repeat on her right side.

Benefits:

- Lengthens the hamstring and gastrocnemius [calf] muscles.
- Stretches the Achilles tendon.
- Stimulates the energy lines on the back of the leg.

Contraindication:

- A tear in the tendon where the hamstring attaches to the sitting bone



Jonas will be leading a study journey to Thailand from January 9-February 1, 2006, and a Thai Yoga Bodywork certification program at the New York Open Center in April and July of 2006. For a more complete schedule of workshops and certification programs, please visit www.shantaya.org.



ephemeral 10 major energy lines (or *sen*, similar to the nadis in the yogic system). A typical session runs around 2 hours, with a Thai therapist using her palms, thumbs, feet, elbows, forearms, and knees on a lucky recipient who is configured in some or all of five positions: supine, prone, side-lying, inverted, and seated. Relaxation, rejuvenation, and well-being ensue.

Today, Thai massage's migration persists, and, thanks to a handful of pioneers, has landed here in the United States, where it adapts without compromising tradition. Here, such adaptations assume the names of "Thai Yoga Massage," "Thai Yoga Therapy," "Traditional Thai Massage," and "Thai Yoga Bodywork." One pioneer, Jonas Westring, serves as the director of Thai Yoga Healing Arts/Shantaya in Northampton, Massachusetts and leads "Thai Yoga Bodywork" workshops and certification trainings around the world. A yoga practitioner and teacher, as well as a physical therapist, Westring finds Thai massage to be the perfect container for melding Eastern and Western perspectives. "I marry biomechanics and yoga into the Thai tradition," he says. While his clinical background compels him to keep safety a high priority, it's really about "yoga, yoga, yoga," Westring laughs. "By bringing in the yogic perspective for both recipient and giver, it's a great place to introduce people to yoga

and to maintain my own practice."

Using Thai Yoga as a self-help modality for the giver makes Westring's approach unique. Colleen Potter-Burton, one of his students, wakes up at 4:30 or

4. Cobra Pose

- Have the receiver roll over onto her stomach, with her legs slightly apart, feet turned in.
- Place your feet between the receiver's legs, your knees on the crease below her buttocks.
- Place her arms by her side with elbows slightly bent, palms facing up.
- Hold her wrists or forearms and, as she inhales, carefully lean back, pulling her arms towards you to lift her chest. Keep your knees resting lightly on the thighs. (If you are smaller than the receiver, you can lift your buttocks up to start, and as you pull the receiver back, you return your buttocks to your heels.)
- Slowly release by lowering her back to the mat. Repeat 3 times. Hold the final pose for 5 breaths.

Benefits:

- Opens the chest and shoulders.
- Brings more suppleness to the spine.
- Gently energizes the body and mind.

Contraindications/Precautions:

- Injury or sensitivity in the lumbar/sacroiliac region.
- Shoulder instability and rotator-cuff tear.
- Pregnancy.





6. Seated Fish Pose

- Have the recipient come up to a comfortable cross-legged position. Sukhasana, Half Lotus, and Lotus work well.
- Sit behind her in Navasana (boat pose) with the soles of your feet placed lightly on the receiver's back, just below the scapula (shoulder blade).
- Internally rotate the receiver's arms, bring them behind her back, grasp around her wrists, and straighten her arms.
- Lean back gently and pull her arms toward you so that her back extends by your feet. Keep your feet

soft, not pressing. Relax the pull and push her arms forward a little. Straighten your legs and pull again. Repeat 3 times.

Benefits:

- Strongly opens the heart region, shoulders, and upper-thoracic spine.
- Stretches the neck and throat region.
- Energizes and stimulates.

Contraindications/Precautions:

- Back and neck injuries
- Shoulder instability and rotator-cuff tears

5. Child's Pose

- Have the receiver come into Child's Pose, with her buttocks on her heels, knees slightly parted, arms outstretched, and forehead on the ground. (She can also have a cushion for support between her heels and her buttocks).
- Stand behind her with your arms externally rotated so that your fingers point away from her head. Apply a steady downward pressure through the heels of your hands on her sacrum for 3-5 breaths. Repeat 3 times.

Benefits:

- Provides a counter pose to a backbend.
- Creates more space in the lower back and is especially beneficial for the sacroiliac joint.
- Induces the parasympathetic nervous system's relaxation response.

Contraindications/Precautions:

- Pregnancy
- Knee injuries





7. Seated Meditation Preparation

- Have the receiver bend her head forward slightly.
- Kneel behind her with your forearms resting on her trapezius muscle, close to the neck. (If you are smaller than the receiver, kneel on a cushion.)
- Using the part of your forearm closest to the elbow, gradually sink your weight directly downwards into the shoulder muscles, not on the bones.
- Move out to 1-2 other points along the trapezius toward the shoulders, and then back along those same points toward the neck. Lean on each point for a few breaths.
- To complete, you can continue leaning down, shifting your weight from side to side in a rocking motion.

Benefits:

- Releases tension through the neck and shoulders, specifically the upper trapezius and levator scapula muscles.
- Helps the receiver experience the natural curves of the spine, necessary for a comfortable meditation posture

Precaution:

- If the receiver is unable to sit upright (without rounding the lower back) in a cross-legged position, you can also have her sit up on a cushion or blanket to help.

5 a.m., works up to nine hours a day as a physical-therapy assistant in Mattawan, Michigan, and still finds time for her Thai Bodywork practice in the evenings. What makes this possible? “Going back to diaphragmatic breathing and connecting your breath to the receiver’s,” she says. “By the end of giving a two-hour session, I feel really wonderful!”

And helping oneself does not negate helping another. Maggie Hopson, another of Westring’s students, is a physical therapist, yoga instructor, and co-owner of High Desert Physical Therapy and Sports Rehabilitation in Winslow, Arizona. Thai Yoga Bodywork, she says, has “added a new dimension to how I approach rehabbing patients. In the past, I would work on single joints, but this helped me to look at people more holistically.” Patients with injuries such as a torn ACL [anterior cruciate ligament at the front of the knee] and even those with

more severe movement disorders—such as Parkinson’s, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus—benefit from Hopson’s integrated approach. “These people feel great

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8. Namaste

- Come around to sit cross-legged, facing the receiver.
- Bring your hands to your heart in anjali mudra.
- Bow and offer wishes of health, joy, and freedom to one another.



Photographed by Vidura Barrios on location at Yoga Sutra Yoga Studio, www.yogasutranyc.com; Sara’s clothes courtesy Blue Canoe, www.bluecanoe.com; Jonas is wearing Verve, www.verveclimbing.com.


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afterwards," she says. "Other patients in the clinic see this and are saying, 'Why aren't you doing that to me?!' "

But Hopson knows that applying advanced body manipulation techniques to injured individuals can be dicey. While her studies with other Thai massage teachers have concerned Hopson due to their lack of emphasis on anatomy, Hopson appreciates Westring's mindful and scientific approach. "Jonas teaches safety first," she says, "and that you need to keep a clear mind so you can sense resistance in the tissues and joints."

As Thai massage's popularity soars, safety is a real issue. Some practitioners are more skilled than others, and the reality is that people are getting injured. And with so many people practicing, there is concern about maintaining the integrity of the traditional form. Bob Haddad, a practitioner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has responded to these concerns by creating the non-profit organization Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI), which aims to build more cohesiveness among practitioners and standardize certification. Basic membership requires a minimum of 30 training hours and evidence of an ongoing practice.

Yet beneath the techniques, certification requirements, and rapid growth, the irresistible magic of Thai massage lives on. What keeps an old pro like Westring still going back for more? He concurs with the masses: "It feels good." 

Sara Avant Stover is a freelance writer, yoga instructor, and Thai Yoga practitioner who lives in both Massachusetts and Thailand. For more info about Thai Yoga Bodywork, visit www.shantaya.org. For info on the Thai Healing Alliance International, visit www.thaihealingalliance.com.