

Thai massage & Ayurvedic healing:

The art of dosha-specific bodywork

by Patricia Kilpatrick

First appeared in New Life Journal, Feb-March 2002, www.newlifejournal.com

In Fifth Century BC India, the Buddha befriended Dr. Jivaka Kumarbhaccha, a famous Ayurvedic healer. Dr. Jivaka became the head physician for the original Sangha community of Buddhist monks and followers. This man is known as "The Father Doctor" of Traditional Thai Medicine. Dr. Jivaka traveled to Thailand, the crossroads for merchant trade between India and the Far East. Recognizing the value of China's ancient medicine, he combined it with his Ayurvedic knowledge and created the four branches of Traditional Thai Medicine: herbal remedies, nutritional medicines, spiritual practices and Nuad Bo'Rarn or Thai Massage.

The word "Nuad" means "to touch with purpose of healing" and the "Bo'Rarn" is Sanskrit for something that is ancient and revered. An integral part of Thai Massage includes the practices of yoga and meditation. The knowledge and training of Thai massage has been handed down through centuries by the monks of the Buddhist monasteries, or Wats. One of the most famous learning institutions for Thai medicine is Wat Pho in Bangkok where Thai massage is still taught today.

Often referred to as Thai Yoga massage, this style of bodywork is different from what most western people think of as massage. It is practiced fully clothed on a floor mat without oils or lotions. Thai massage techniques, using the thumbs, elbows, palms, forearms, feet, and knees include: rocking, rhythmic muscle compression, assisted yoga positions and stretching, working along energy meridians called Sen lines. Three of the Sen lines run along the same areas as the yogic nadis, the Indian version of energy lines, affecting certain chakras (energy centers) in treatment. A session is practiced very slowly (sometimes for more than two hours), in a choreographed "dance" as the practitioner moves the receiver around the mat, creating a relaxed, meditative state for both.

The purpose of Thai massage is to bring the body, mind, and spirit into a state of balance and harmony, providing an opportunity for self-healing. The practitioner always begins the session with "Puja", a moment of centering and connection, paying attention to Promwihan Sii, the Four States of Mind: loving kindness, compassion, vicarious joy, and equanimity. This practice helps therapist and receiver to enter a state of meditation, to be mindful of prana (energy and breathing), creating an empty vessel to receive healing

energy and to achieve freedom from attachment. During Puja, the practitioner recognizes and asks for assistance from the lineage of teachers (God, Buddha, Dr. Jivaka, her own personal teacher). The practitioner checks in with herself to make sure she is okay with doing the session and with working with the person on her mat. She asks for healing for the receiver, herself, anyone else she knows who needs healing, the world and the earth.

The benefits enjoyed from a Thai massage session may include the following: relief from stress, deep relaxation, warmed and stretched muscles, healing energy flow, greater flexibility, increased and focused energy levels, prevention of injury, relief from sore and aching muscles and joints, detoxification, and a feeling of confidence and well-being. This bodywork is perfect preparation for anyone in training for an athletic event, performance or any kind of physical or mental test. It helps one focus energy and attention on the task at hand. It is highly therapeutic for those in pain from tension, injury, or illness.

The yoga postures applied by the practitioner are intended to balance the receiver through the Ayurvedic philosophy of the tridoshas. Different asanas create this balance affecting the person's nature, whether they are kapha, pitta, or vata in their constitution. For instance, to assist a kapha client, the practitioner may assist the client into a plough asana. Or, for a pitta type, she may pull him into a cobra position. The therapist may choose to give a vata type person some palming on the shoulders. (For explanations of the doshas, see the article on page 3 of this issue.)

How the therapist conducts the massage session will affect the client, too. For a vata person, the therapist will calm him and create steadiness and grounding strength by using slow, meditative, gentle movements, releasing tension in the pelvis and lower torso. The pitta type client needs relaxing, cooling work to help him give in to healing energy, affecting the liver and other abdominal internal organs. The kapha type will appreciate an energetic and stimulating session with postures that increase the heart activity and aerobic conditions.

Self-healing is the foundation of Ayurvedic healing, and Thai massage facilitates that for anyone willing to experience it. It is healing for both the practitioner and the receiver.