

The Care and Feeding of Your Thai Massage Practice

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When we first begin to study Thai massage, we are often most concerned about memorizing the basic sequences that we learn from our teachers. As we become familiar with techniques and sequences, we settle into patterns that seem comfortable for us. Here is where problems can begin. Without continued guidance, ongoing study, and feedback from our colleagues and clients, we are prone to get stuck in the patterns we develop for ourselves, whether or not they are effective for our clients or healthy for us in the long term.

This essay presents ideas that may be helpful to deepen your work as you progress in your learning and practice. These include practical considerations such as maintaining your room and altar, using props, marketing and advertising ideas, and client maintenance tips such as record keeping, maintaining boundaries, and offering self-care recommendations. Finally, I offer suggestions about developing your work through ongoing study and refinement of techniques. Maintaining flow, moving gracefully, working slowly, supporting and locking clients in place, using sensing and intuition during a session – these are all signs of an advanced Thai massage practitioner. I hope the information offered here is interesting and helpful.

Tools for effective practice

Your practice room

Your Thai therapy room is a sanctuary – a sacred healing space for your clients and for yourself – and it should be equipped and maintained for that purpose.

It is best to use the room only for treatments, yoga, meditation, and similar activities, but if this isn't possible due to space limitations, try to carry out your Thai work in one area and allow for other activities to take place in a different part of the room. In large rooms such as yoga studios or in multipurpose spaces, a private area can be demarcated using a folding screen or a large piece of fabric hung from the ceiling. Privacy is important, so keep your space protected, secure, and comfortable.

Keep the room clean, always remove shoes before entering, and clear the energy from one session to the next by opening windows to allow air circulation, spraying a natural fragrance (see later in this section), and changing sheets and pillow cases regularly. An unscented candle can also help to burn away lingering odors.

The mat

A wide variety of mats may be used for traditional Thai massage. In many cases, your choices will be limited to space restrictions and the accessibility of materials. Naturally, you should choose a mat that is comfortable to work on and practical for your surroundings.

An important factor to consider is whether you, as the therapist, wish to work mostly on the mat or off the mat. The size and height of the mat determines your ability to position yourself in relationship to your client, and it also affects your balance. My preference is to work at the same level as the client, whenever possible, and I suggest that you try to work "on" the mat as much as possible.

I find that when I am sitting or kneeling even one inch lower than my client, I have to constantly adjust my balance and body posture in order to compensate for the difference in height. If the mat is too small, a therapist may have to keep one foot on the mat and the other foot off the mat. This can contribute to instability. In my opinion, most of the commercial Thai massage mats on the market today are too small for effective Thai therapy. Some of them are also quite expensive. If you have enough space and you generally don't travel to give your sessions, consider using a very large mat.

High-density foam rubber is a practical and economical mat substance. Depending on the density, 1–2 inches in height will be sufficient. High-density foam is often dark in color, and is used in furniture and automobile upholstery. An even harder variety is used to pad surfaces such as gymnasiums and recreational areas. It can be bought through foam distributors, upholsterers, or exercise companies. The surface should be comfortable but quite firm. If your room is large enough, use the widest mat possible, either queen size or king size (193 x 203 centimeters / 76 x 80 inches). The foam can be placed on top of a large rug or in a room with wall-to-wall carpeting and then covered by

a large cotton sheet with the ends tucked underneath. If you are working on a hard surface such as cement or ceramic tile, consider using gymnasium padding as a base; place a rug or a large piece of carpeting directly underneath, to keep the area as clean and warm as possible. On a medium-hard surface such as a wooden floor, a rug may also be used underneath, one that is bigger than the mat itself. If you are working in a room where there is plush wall-to-wall carpeting, you may be able to use a large “mattress topper” as your mat. “Memory foam” is now widely available, and it is reasonably priced. This type of foam adapts to the relative shape and weight of each individual, and it is extremely comfortable to lie on, but only when the surface underneath is fairly soft. If it is placed on top of a thick rug or on a sheet of high-density foam, it can work very well as a Thai therapy mat. If you travel to give sessions, a variety of fold-up and roll-up mats are available, and most of these are made of foam or cotton.



A comfortable and well-equipped practice room

Pillows

For supine position

Pillows of several sizes are important for your practice. Consider using small, thin pillows for the head, such as those that are supplied by airline companies for long flights. Generally speaking, it is best to not use a thick pillow for your client’s head in supine position. A thick pillow can raise the neck to an unnatural position and can minimize free flow of oxygen. It also gets in the way and crimps the neck when you perform techniques such as plow, or do leg compressions toward the upper torso. If your client doesn’t need or want a pillow for their head, don’t use one.

For side position

For working in side position, however, an extra large and very thick pillow for the head is important. The large width allows you to turn the client on her side, and still give her plenty of pillow support. The extra height provides natural ergonomic support when the client is in side-lying position, and it keeps the neck and spine straight. Many people need extra support in side position, so keep another large pillow in the room to wedge against the client’s stomach

and to keep him from slipping toward the floor. Tubular pillow rolls, such as those used underneath the knees in table massage, are also helpful to wedge into the stomach and to place between the client's extended arms while in side-lying position. Large oversized pillows and foam bolsters are important when you work with pregnant women.

For prone position

Most people can tolerate short periods with their necks twisted to one side in prone position, but a small pillow placed under the collarbone can lift the upper torso slightly, and allow the person to rest his chin or forehead on the mat without having to twist his neck to one side. For longer periods in prone position you might try using a “doughnut” pillow or a sloping foam pillow, which is specially designed with side air vents for the purpose of lying on the stomach. These are available at bedding stores and on the Internet.

For leg and knee support

After finishing leg and lower torso work in supine position, Thai therapists usually proceed to the abdomen, chest, and other parts of the upper anterior body. Before you begin working on the stomach, consider placing a pillow roll under your client's knees. This elevates the upper legs and the sacrum a bit, and it provides a more comfortable position for the client to receive work on the upper body. Tubular or half-moon-shaped pillows work well. Massage supply stores carry several varieties, but I find that the plastic-covered ones are sometimes too cold and rigid. I use cloth-covered tubular pillows that I stuff with cotton or fiber fill to the desired firmness. If you can't find a suitable tubular pillow where you live, roll up an extra-large bath towel and place it under the knees.

Keep several small pillows nearby to support your clients' knees when compressing and butterfly-pressing in “tree” position. Foam rubber bolsters covered with cotton work well. I also keep a few small round cushions, which work perfectly under the knees when extra support is needed.

Blankets and covers

I almost always use lightweight covers during my work. As we work in *nua* *boran*, we help to move energy from one part of our client's body to another, and this energy movement often results in extremities such as the hands and feet becoming cold. Because of this, and especially in colder climates and during the winter, it's important to keep our clients warm as we work. Light, natural fabrics such as rayon, silk, or light cotton, usually work best as coverings.

I keep a variety of rayon sarongs nearby, which I use to cover parts of the body that are not being touched. Since we begin Thai massage at the feet and

legs, it's often helpful to cover the upper torso until we start working there. Light sarongs provide a layer of warmth, and allow the client to keep their arms and hands under the cover, while feeling pampered and secure. When you finish working on the legs, and you move to the abdomen and upper torso in supine position, you can slide the cover down over your client's feet and legs. You may not be touching them there for many minutes, and they could easily become cold. In cold weather, or in drafty or damp locations, a heavier blanket may be more appropriate, but avoid wool or other materials that might cause itching or allergic reactions.

Tissues, towels, and clock

It's a good idea to keep a box of tissues in your treatment room for hygienic needs and for occasional emotional responses. Keep a small towel nearby to dry hands if they become sweaty. If possible, keep an electric clock in your room, or one that doesn't make a ticking noise, which could be distracting to you and your clients.

Accessory tray or bowl

Keep a small tray on the floor near the head of the mat, where your client can put jewelry, watches, and accessories. Keep a few elastic hair ties in the tray so you can tie back long hair, especially when you work with your client in sitting position.

Water and tea

Pour a fresh glass of water for each client and one for yourself before each session. Keep them nearby, but out of the way of the work area. Plastic, rather than glass, is best for the practice room.

I remember that I felt pampered when I was first served herbal tea immediately after a Thai session. If you have hot water handy, or if you prepare a thermos of herbal tea each day, your clients will probably appreciate a cup before they leave. Don't pre-sweeten the tea, but put a small sugar cube on the tray if you wish.

Balm, talc, and *nam ob Thai*

Massage oils are not generally used in *nuad boran*, but several types of balms and creams may be used on the feet, and at the end of the session while working on the shoulders, neck, and face. Thai analgesic balms, made of eucalyptus, peppermint, and camphor are excellent for applying to sore muscles,

problem areas, and even to the feet, but remember to wash and dry your hands immediately after applying them to your client's body and before you continue the session. Keep some water and a hand towel nearby, or use a commercial sanitizing gel from a pump bottle.

Unscented talcum powder can be helpful for sweaty hands, feet, and bodies. I sometimes find it helpful to sprinkle a little talc on my hands if I do an abdominal massage directly on the skin. If you have sweaty hands or feet, apply unscented talc to them before working.

A lightly scented herbal balm, made from a base of beeswax, is excellent for finishing touches on the neck, face, and forehead, when the client is in final supine position. Just a small dab on the third eye area of the forehead can help you work the entire face. Unscented or lightly scented cream or lotion may also be used.

After I finish working the face and giving a head massage, I like to anoint my client's face and head with a bit of *nam ob Thai*, a lightly scented perfume water. Sprinkle a few drops in your hands, and gently refresh your client's face and hair in a soft, stroking fashion before you offer your final *wai* and leave the room. If you can't find *nam ob Thai*, you may consider rose water, orange water, or iris water, which are available from food and baking distributors or ethnic grocery stores.

Your altar

An altar is an essential feature of your practice room, and it should hold items of guidance and spiritual focus. Thai massage altars in Thailand usually contain statues or images of the Buddha and Jivaka, candles, incense, flowers, and other spiritual items. Whatever you use as a stand, platform, or small table, place it at the head of the room or in a corner, away from the working area. The altar should be at eye level as you work on the floor (about 1–1.25 meters / 3–4 feet high), so you can gaze at it as necessary during a session.

It's important to have a statue or image of Jivaka on the altar. In Thailand, it is common to offer food and water to deities. If you wish, you may place a small amount of water or food (even just a few grains of rice) on your altar. Remember to freshen up the offerings on a regular basis. According to Thai custom, if you place a Buddha on the same altar where you have a Jivaka image, the Buddha should be in a higher position. Photos of teachers and your parents (especially if deceased) as well as other meaningful items may also be placed on the altar. In Thailand, many people also keep an image of a *reusi* (practitioner of esoteric sciences) on their altars.

It is good practice to light a candle for each client you see. A tea light placed inside a clear votive cup works well, because each candle lasts about three hours, and extinguishes itself neatly in its aluminum sleeve.

Take a few moments to focus on the altar before beginning your work, and bring your attention there for guidance during a session whenever necessary. After your client leaves the room and you are cleaning up and clearing energy, you might take another moment to connect with your altar.

Air and energy cleaners

Clients' energies can linger in your room long after they have left. Whenever you or your client have experienced a difficult session, or one in which there were energetic or emotional releases, it's a good idea to cleanse the room after the client leaves. Open a window to allow fresh air to circulate freely, and change the sheet and the pillow cases. Rather than incense, which can be unpleasant for many people, consider spraying a lightly scented neutralizing substance into the air. A few drops of essential oil mixed with water and a bit of clear alcohol works well. Avoid using strong scents, heavy incense, synthetic chemicals, or commercial deodorizers.

Donation bowl

If collecting money from your clients sometimes feels a bit awkward, you might leave a donation bowl in your treatment room, along with a pen for clients who pay by check. A donation bowl can be less intimidating, and sometimes clients leave little gifts and offerings there, too.

Clothing and hamper for clients

It's a good idea to keep an assortment of lightweight clothing for your client's use. Lightweight, baggy cotton or rayon pants such as Thai fisherman pants work extremely well. Keep a few shirts in different sizes for men and women. T-shirts and collared shirts restrict access to the neck and shoulders, but tank tops and V-necks work well. Keep a small hamper or basket nearby for used clothing.

Socks

Many people get cold feet during a Thai massage session. For this purpose, and especially when you work in colder climates, it can be helpful to keep clean socks handy. The half socks that are used for airline travel cover the soles and tops of the feet, without constricting the ankles. Consider wearing socks yourself when you have cold feet, so you don't transfer the cold temperature to your clients as you place your feet against their bodies. Also consider using socks if your feet or your client's feet are excessively sweaty.

Accessories for your practice room

Music

In the West, we often associate massage therapy and bodywork with candles, incense, and relaxing music. But in Thailand, music is hardly ever used to accompany a traditional nuad boran treatment. One problem with music is that it can attract the listener to a particular melody or rhythm, when one of the most basic ideas of giving and receiving this work is to be present and “empty” as much as possible. If the listener is drawn to a melody being played, his mind may become more focused on the song than on the session or on his breath. Music can also distract the therapist, and minimize his ability to hear the client’s breath, which is an all-important barometer for proper execution of techniques. Sometimes, silence is golden. This is not to say that music can’t be used during your practice. Before each session you might ask your clients if they want music or if they prefer silence. Some people who usually like music occasionally request silence. If you don’t ask, you won’t know what they want.

If you do use music, keep the volume very low – low enough that you can hear your client’s breathing or converse in a very soft voice when necessary. Rhythmic music is generally more intrusive than music with spaces of silence in it – soft acoustic instrumental music with an open and airy feel usually works best.

Foot washing bowl and supplies

In Thailand, before you receive a treatment, you are often handed a bowl and a towel and asked to wash your feet. Occasionally, your feet may be washed by the therapist. I remember the first time my feet were washed before a session – I felt so humbled and grateful. Immediately afterward, I decided to incorporate foot washing into my practice. In addition to the practical aspect of washing your client’s feet, it also affords a great opportunity to take a few moments to ask your client how they are feeling before you begin your work. Ultimately, it helps to create a mood of gentleness, trust, and peace.

Fill a small plastic bowl with hot water, and mix in a few drops of natural oil or essence. Peppermint essential oil works very well. Place a small towel under your client’s foot. Soak a washcloth in the solution, wring it out, and clean your client’s feet gently yet thoroughly. (Make the water as hot as possible without burning your client or your hands). Dry the foot thoroughly with the towel, and repeat on the other foot.

In cases where you have no access to hot water, you can spray your client’s feet with a solution of water and a natural essence.

Electric blanket for colder climates

For people living in colder climates, it can sometimes be helpful to place an electric blanket on your mat, under the sheet. This helps the client to remain warm and also keeps your own feet and legs warm as you work. If you use an electric blanket, make sure to ask your client if it is acceptable. Some people have objections.

Herbal compress steamer

Luk pra kob are steamed compresses filled with medicinal herbs and rhizomes. Compresses are applied before, during, or after a nuad boran session, and they are extremely relaxing. If you work with herbs, you will need to have a steamer handy.

Record keeping

In all major forms of medical treatment, physical therapy, and bodywork, keeping accurate client records and health histories is not optional; it is required. I am concerned when I hear of Thai massage practitioners who don't keep detailed notes of their sessions or maintain health histories of their clients. It's clear that more teachers and schools should stress the importance of record keeping for a professional practice in traditional Thai healing arts. Today's holistic health practitioner must take more responsibility for his clients' welfare and for his own professional development. Session notes and client intake forms are valuable tools that can take your practice to a new level of growth and professionalism.

Client intake form

The first time you see a new client, allow a few minutes to discuss their health history, and make sure they fill out a client intake form beforehand. The intake form should include your client's name and contact information, their health history, emergency contact information, specific medical conditions, medications, and other relevant information. Many therapists also take this opportunity to have the client sign a waiver of some sort, to address personal liability claims or declarations that Thai massage sessions are strictly nonsexual. A client intake form can help a therapist to work more effectively and address each client's needs more appropriately. If you don't already have a health history form, samples may be found on the Internet. Thai Healing Alliance has a form that may be downloaded by the general public and modified according to each therapist's specific needs. A sample client intake form appears on the next pages.

Confidential Client Information Form

name: _____ date: _____

home tel: _____ cell: _____ e-mail: _____

address: _____

date of birth: _____ profession: _____ referred by: _____

emergency contact info: _____

are you currently taking medication? _____

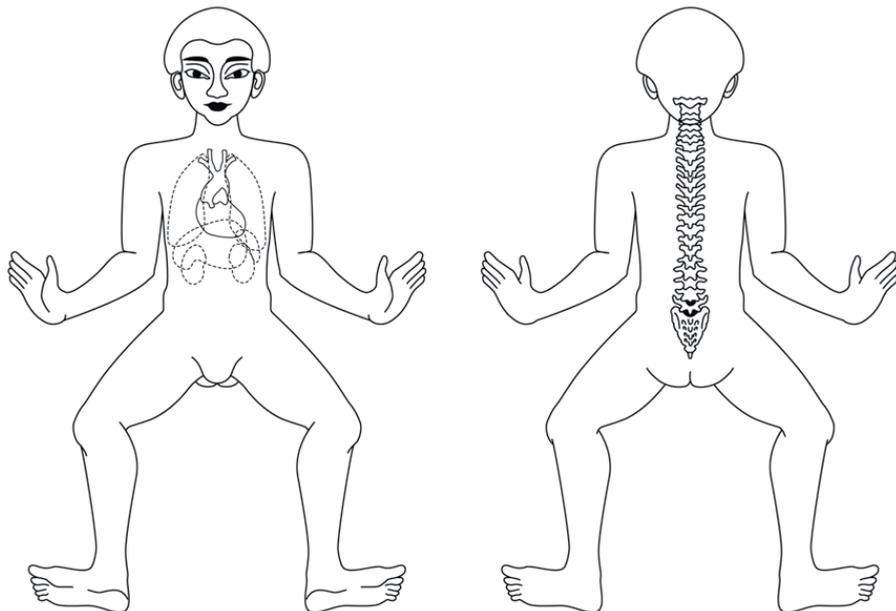
describe any special medical conditions: _____

indicate if any conditions apply:

- surgeries spinal/disc problems heart problems high blood pressure osteoporosis hernia
diabetes arthritis wear contact lenses pregnancy back pain neck pain
broken bones/fractures constipation diarrhea other

describe in more detail any of the above conditions:

On the diagrams to the right,
circle any problem areas,
and indicate as follows:
tension "T"
pain "P"
surgeries "S"



Do you have any restrictions in movement? _____

Are there any movements or stretches you think may be harmful? _____

Do you generally like to hear music during a session? _____

Is it OK to use lightly scented lotion or balm on your face? _____

Do you have any other comments or requests? _____

Client consent and agreement — Please read and sign below

- It is agreed and understood that Thai massage therapy is intended for relaxation, and that it is not meant to diagnose, treat or remedy any illness, disease, injury, physical condition or mental disorder.
- Except in cases of emergency, I agree to pay for all sessions that are not cancelled at least 24 hours in advance.
- Traditional Thai bodywork is strictly non-sexual. Under extenuating circumstances, either party reserves the right to immediately terminate the session.
- I understand that the practice of all forms of body therapy is subject to local laws and ordinances.

signature

date

date (d-m-y)

total session time

Session notes

date (d-m-y)

total session time

Session notes

Session notes

A practice log is a written record that describes a progression of treatment sessions. You may devise your own form, or staple a blank page to each client's intake form in order to record your notes after each session. Written records of each session provide invaluable information about the client's condition and about the therapist's work. They allow the therapist to track changes, and to note client preferences and responses to certain techniques and therapy routines. By keeping accurate session logs, the Thai therapist may quickly and efficiently review previous sessions, and therefore be better prepared to work with his clients from one session to the next. Written records can also be helpful if an insurance claim is ever made against the therapist, or if a client's treatment history must be shared with another healthcare professional.

Always keep a written record whenever you conduct a Thai session. As soon as your client leaves the premises, and while the session is still fresh in your mind, write your thoughts on paper. Don't just write short, simple descriptions. Describe things such as the client's physical and emotional states, which positions you used during the session (supine, prone, side, sitting), and how your client responded to what you did that day. Describe any special conditions that may have had an effect on the session today, whether positive or negative, and mention the techniques you used that you thought were beneficial. Take note of anything you could have done differently, and give yourself suggestions for the future. The next time you work with this person, review your notes from previous sessions so you can see the "big picture" of your ongoing therapeutic interaction with this particular client.

Samples of session notes, each of which was written by a different practicing Thai therapist about one of their own clients, are included on the next page for your reference.

Marketing and promotion

Mail and e-mail

We often don't like to do it, but most of us need to engage in marketing and promotional efforts to maintain the clients we have and to bring in new clients on a regular basis. Sometimes just following up with your regular clients is enough to sustain them, but an occasional e-mail or post card to advertise your services to regular and prospective clients can be a good idea. Printed materials such as brochures, flyers, postcards, coupons, and special offers may be sent by mail, but e-mail announcements are cheaper, faster, and easier.

You may choose to use one of the many html-based services to create your own e-newsletter, with announcements, photographs, and hyperlinks. The professional contact services that are available on the web for this purpose

Sample Client Session Notes

| | | | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|------|
| date (d-m-y) | | special conditions | | total session time | 1:45 |
| <p><i>session notes</i></p> <p><i>Good session, very flowing. Worked in supine, prone and seated position. I sensed that her mid-section was blocked, so I worked there as much as possible. Did compressions, spinal twists, cobras, and line work. Worked the hips with pulls and suspensions in side position, and also worked the back lines. Gave a fairly deep stomach massage to try to open her mid section; did blood stops. The rest of the session was based on a normal sequence. Next time, check the mid section, and continue to work there in different ways if needed.</i></p> | | | | | |
| date (d-m-y) | | special conditions | smoking support | total session time | 2:00 |
| <p><i>session notes</i></p> <p><i>Supine and seated position. He returned after two years because he recently stopped smoking and he wants some reinforcement to remain smoke-free. Used a compress especially on the chest, stomach and throat, and applied balm to the chest area and on the back in prone position. I had him breathe in the vapors and he coughed phlegm several times into a tissue. Lateral leg lines were blocked, worked them with feet. Shoulder and neck work in seated position, and face and head in final supine position. In the future, continue to use hot herbal compresses to help clear the lungs !</i></p> | | | | | |
| date (d-m-y) | | special conditions | | total session time | 1:50 |
| <p><i>session notes</i></p> <p><i>Three months pregnant, so I worked mostly in side position, with extra pillows. Avoided pressure points in feet, ankles and head. No blood stops! Her lateral legs were blocked, especially the right side, but she opened up with compressions on her calves and thighs, and she said she liked the work very much (do it again in the future). Did light circular stomach massage only, very little pressure. Worked sen kalathari and sumana down the center of the back of legs. Did some gentle back openings in side position. Worked her head and face and neck with large pillows to support her in semi-seated position. A good session.</i></p> | | | | | |
| date (d-m-y) | | special conditions | recent injury | total session time | 1:30 |
| <p><i>session notes</i></p> <p><i>Knee problem, right ACL injury. I avoided excessive bending and rotating but I did work the pressure points around the knee and worked the lines with thumbing on both legs. Complained of low energy due to menopause, so I worked at a steady pace to try to energize her. Used all 4 positions, focused on low and middle back in prone position, and shoulders and neck in sitting. She said she felt lighter and more open. Afterward, I showed her some yoga poses that she can do to help strengthen her back.</i></p> | | | | | |
| date (d-m-y) | | special conditions | shoulder pain | total session time | 1:50 |
| <p><i>session notes</i></p> <p><i>Mysterious pain in the shoulder, left side. Osteo-arthritis in right hip, severe pain so I was gentle with direct contact and compressions. Worked in all 4 positions, spent time on her feet (one at a time) and worked her leg lines with palming and then thumbing. All techniques on the hip required a slow, careful approach, and I used pillows to prop her up in seated position. I tried to be sensitive to her right side in general. She said she felt significant pain relief in her hip. It was good to see how the work helped her. Next session, take more time to examine and prevent occurrence of pain in right side, especially near hip.</i></p> | | | | | |

have a variety of templates to choose from, and prices vary according to the number of people on your list and the number of e-mails sent per month or per year. For the purposes of a professional Thai massage practice, a quarterly newsletter (four times a year) is usually enough.

Print advertisements

Advertising in local newspapers and health digests may also be an effective way to attract new clients. With print advertising, it's almost always better if you run a small advertisement over a long period of time rather than a large ad only once or twice. Research shows that it is the frequency of exposure that helps to "brand" a product or service of any type. For the most part, classified text advertisements work well, and sometimes you can add a graphic or a logo for a bit more money. If you decide to advertise in local publications, think of your total investment as occurring over a period of time, say for six months, and make a commitment to pre-pay for your advertisement for the entire trial period. After several months of exposure, you'll know if your investment is a good one, and then you can decide to continue advertising in that publication, to try a different publication, or to discontinue the advertising altogether.

Local exposure and word-of-mouth

Grass-roots types of marketing are always helpful, and they are often free, or cost very little. You can print flyers to post on bulletin boards at community centers, yoga studios, and other places that are visited by health-minded people. You might offer to give a free demonstration or a discussion on Thai massage to community centers, libraries, yoga studios, or other public gathering places. Personalized color postcards from online printing services are inexpensive, and brochures and business cards can often be left at local businesses.

The best way to get new clients is by personal recommendation. Your clients will recommend you to others if they are happy with your work.

Client maintenance

It's a good idea to ask first-time clients to contact you a few days after their first session, and to tell you how they are feeling, and if they've noticed any changes in themselves as a result of the treatment. If they forget to do so, you can send them an e-mail or leave a phone message inquiring about their health. This shows that you care, and may also encourage the client to contact you for another session. If the client reports a strong response, whether favorable or unfavorable, add it to their session notes for future reference. If you let your clients know that you are there for them, they will often volunteer infor-

mation to you that can be helpful for future sessions. If you don't ask for feedback, many people will not offer it.

Inquire about their state

Before you begin a session, take a few minutes to ask your client how she is feeling today. You might do this while you're washing her feet. Inquire about her physical condition, if she has any tension, pain, or soreness, and if so, how it came about. You may ask to view, touch, or even gently manipulate and explore the affected area, so you can better understand your client's physical condition on that particular day, and so you can adjust your work accordingly.

If your client has previously confided in you about a difficult situation she is going through, whether emotional, psychological, or otherwise, you might ask about it to show that you care. Be careful not to pry, however, or to invade your clients' privacy, or tell them what you think they should do. You are not a counselor; you are a Thai therapist trying to serve your clients in a more holistic way. Be there for your clients, with all your compassion, with all your *metta*.

It's important to develop a professional rapport with clients, and to help sustain them from session to session, but it's usually best to not become close friends with your clients or to socialize with them frequently outside the context of your services. When that happens, the professional relationship and boundaries between client and therapist can easily become altered, and this may have adverse effects on the therapy itself.

Client self-care

An important element of holistic healing arts is the underlying concept of self-care. You may occasionally recommend certain activities or exercises to clients, for example. For clients who consistently exhibit "holding" in certain areas, you may suggest yoga exercises to do at home that you feel could help the client to release those pockets of tension. For people with lower back problems, you might suggest a series of plows, cobras, or spinal twists, or exercises to strengthen their core. Clients who have shallow breathing might benefit from a *pranayama* (yogic breathing) exercise. If you are knowledgeable about diet and herbs, you may suggest that they modify their eating habits in a way that might benefit them. Be careful to only recommend or suggest things that lie within your scope of practice, however. You may also refer clients to acupuncturists, specialized bodyworkers, or Chinese and Ayurvedic doctors, if you feel they could be of help. Ultimately, it is our responsibility as therapists to encourage and help our clients to maintain optimal health.

Keeping your client comfortable during the session

It's important to keep your client comfortable at all times during the session. Nuad boran is most effective when the client is fully relaxed, with open energies and deep breath, and when a strong sense of trust and confidence has been established with the practitioner. Physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues come into play during a typical Thai massage session. Try to be aware of the following:

Work at an appropriate level of pressure

As we work with our clients, it is extremely important to maintain even, steady pressure, whether through point work, palming, thumbing, compressions, or yoga stretches. As you work, look at the person's face on a regular basis. It may seem difficult to do, but actually it is quite easy, and it serves as an excellent exercise in metta, or focused compassion. Pour your metta into your clients as you work with them, and while you do, watch for any signs of physical discomfort such as wincing, raised eyebrows, or other facial expressions or body movements.

You don't want to give an overly soft session, but you never want to make your client uncomfortable with your pressure or movements. It's best to always work at a level just below the client's threshold of discomfort. Usually, you will get a good sense for the right amount of pressure within the first 5–10 minutes of a session. This is a good time to check in with your client, ask how they feel, and inquire about the depth of your pressure.

Once you establish the correct depth, continue uniformly in this fashion, keeping in mind that various parts of the body can withstand more pressure than others. Watch your client's face and body throughout the session, and ask whenever you are in doubt. This way, you'll have a good indication of how your pressure is being received.

Don't cross boundaries

This means all boundaries – physical, emotional, sensual, and psychological. Watch your client's face and body language in response to your techniques and body contact. If a client tenses up unexpectedly, it could be a manifestation of physical discomfort, emotional uneasiness, or both. If you sense at any time that what you are doing is violating that person's private space, you should immediately stop, or at the very least, you should ask the client if you can proceed. Sometimes, just gently asking "Are you okay?" or "Is everything alright?" will allow your client to tell you something that you may not have suspected. If they say all is fine, then you may proceed with caution.

Watch your own boundaries, too. Sensual triggers work both ways. Don't allow your mind to be drawn into lustful thinking when you are working. If you catch yourself being sexually attracted to a person you are working on, immediately calm yourself, gaze at your altar, and refocus your energies. You might silently recite in your mind the Thai massage *wai khru* or any other mantra or prayer. If you ever encounter a case of sexual stimulation, whether initiated by the client or by yourself, it is best to immediately cease physical contact with your client. Simply remove your hands from that person's body. If the stimulation came from you, you might excuse yourself and leave the room for a moment in order to compose yourself. If you sense that the stimulation was directed at you by the client, move to another technique or body position, or stop your work and discuss the issue before you continue any further. In severe cases, you should simply terminate the session without accepting compensation.

Encourage silence

I have witnessed Thai massage sessions by Western therapists who talk to their clients quite a bit, comment on their condition, and coach them about when to breathe and what to do during a session. This is not recommended, and it is not in keeping with the traditions of Thailand or with the spiritual nature of the work. Try to be as silent as possible when giving a treatment. This work is, after all, a form of meditation for both parties. There are ways to flip a person from one body position to another without saying a single word. Learn and practice those moves, and learn how to be as silent as possible when you work with your clients.

Sometimes clients can be chatty at the beginning of a session. Try to avoid engaging them in conversation, and simply allow the nervous tension that is manifesting in speech to subside. If it becomes necessary to calm someone down a bit, ask them to take a few long and deep breaths. You can even ask them to take three deep breaths simultaneously with you. This will often stop the talking.

Allow for a bathroom break when necessary

Some people are shy about having to use the toilet. After you finish working on the lower torso, and when you're ready to begin on the abdomen and upper torso, you might gently ask if they need to use the restroom. If you need to use the restroom, simply excuse yourself, and do so.

Cultivate good flow in your practice

Flow might be described as the fluidity with which you move from one posture to another as you work with your client. True mastery of flow is when we support our clients' bodies as we work, and when we integrate breath, good body mechanics, rocking movements, and effortless transitions from one posture to another.

Move gracefully, and integrate rocking and alternating movements

In your work as a Thai massage therapist, you will find that moving gracefully helps to maintain focus during a session. It can also help conserve your energy and keep the session moving along at a comfortable pace. Each one of your graceful movements transfers directly to your clients. It feels good to have one's body moved gracefully, and feeling good encourages relaxation and well-being.

Try to integrate more rocking and alternating movements as you work. In many ways, *nuad boran* is a healing dance that we perform together with our clients. Stay loose, but stay focused as you work. Allow your inner self to move and sway and make gentle rocking movements as you apply pressure. Pivot and rotate from your *hara*, and lull yourself (and your client) into a peaceful dance of healing movement and pressure. Many palming and thumbing techniques can be executed with slight alternating or rocking movements. If you keep your body too rigid as you apply pressure, the muscles in your shoulders, arms, wrists, and hands will probably work harder than they need to. If you allow your weight to sink into the body of your client, and you engage with that person in gentle rocking movements whenever possible, it will feel better to the client and will require less effort on your part.

Develop easy transitions

The way in which a Thai therapist transitions from one posture or technique to another can have a profound effect on the outcome of the session, for both the therapist and the receiver. Try to maintain physical contact with your client as you move from one posture to another, and whenever possible, don't abandon one part of the client's body until you make contact with another area. Be creative, and structure your sequence based on easy transitions. Use your own body – whether your hands, arms, chest, legs, or feet – to move your client into the next position in a flowing and graceful fashion.

Lock your clients in place

One of the most valuable lessons you can learn in your Thai massage practice is to understand the importance of gently locking your client in place against your body before you execute certain maneuvers. Try to stay aware of ways to keep your client's appendages and body gently interlaced with your own body before you begin to execute a specific technique.

Support your client as you move

Try to support your client's body as you move from one position to another. Making contact with an extra hand or a foot can help the client to relax and to stay open to movements and energy flow. When you release a client's arm or leg to the mat, support the elbow or ankle with your other hand as you let it down softly. Client support is important in all four body positions: supine, side-lying, seated, and prone.

Work slowly and allow for moments of rest

One way to remain composed and deeply focused in nuad boran is to work slowly. Take your time as you work with your partner, and proceed from one part of the body to another at a relaxed pace. When you apply pressure, always begin lightly at first and then deepen your touch progressively until you reach the person's first point of resistance. You might choose to move on from there, or to remain at that depth. If you remain there, hold your pressure firmly but gently until she yields more space to you. Then, on her exhale, move in a little deeper. As she inhales, release your pressure just a little, so she knows you are aware and listening to her body. Proceed in this manner throughout the session.

Work slowly

In many cases, it's better to work slowly and to target key areas rather than to move quickly through a full-body sequence. Try to never begin a Thai massage session with a pre-determined course of action or outcome. That kind of pre-planning may color your mind and diminish your sensing and intuitive abilities. It's not necessary to work with your client in three or all four body positions in order to achieve good results; an excellent session can be carried out in only one or two positions. With women in advanced stages of pregnancy, for example, an entire treatment should be given only in side-lying position.

Work slowly. Work slowly as you apply acupressure, and move slowly as you stretch your client into assisted yoga poses. Whenever it is appropriate,

gradually increase and decrease pressure in repeating cycles of three or five, and always try to coordinate your pressure with your client's breathing. For the client, the rewards of slow, progressive work are deep relaxation and a heightened sense of self. Working slowly also helps the therapist to remain focused, and it reminds us that traditional *nuad boran*, in essence, is meditation in movement.

Resting poses

I believe it's very important to allow yourself and the client to experience moments of stillness during a Thai session. Silence and stillness are sometimes necessary for a client to fully assimilate the work and for a therapist to remain calm and focused. Imagine the power of a deep *savasana* (corpse pose) at the end of a yoga workout. There you are, lying motionless on your back, yet you can feel energy surging through you. Your relationship to time and space in that motionless pose allows you to relax, to unwind, to assimilate positive energy, and to become renewed. I am not suggesting that we should allow our clients to rest motionless for long periods during a Thai massage session. But short breaks of up to 90 seconds, especially after strenuous movements or emotional releases, can be very beneficial to the client. We, as therapists, also need to take some moments to relax during our work. There are many concepts and techniques you can use to calm things down during a session. Here are a few of my favorites:

Sacral squat in child's pose

At some point during the course of a Thai session, we usually get our clients into a version of the traditional yoga "child's pose." Child's pose is especially important after you have been stretching the back in the opposite direction, with assisted cobras, bridges, locusts, and reverse leg pulls, for example. By the time you have reached this point in the session, you have probably been working at a steady pace. Rather than the traditional palm-pressure techniques for child's pose that are taught in most Thai massage courses, here's a way to take a few moments to relax while your client benefits from a wonderful compression to the sacrum and back. After helping your client into child's pose (remind her to inhale as she gets up from the floor), turn around with your back facing her head, and gently sit on her sacrum. Support about 50 percent of your own bodyweight with your feet, and sink your weight down gradually to the first point of resistance. Keep your back straight, and breathe in and out as you feel your client's body expand and contract.

A variation to remaining still is to slowly shift your weight slightly downward at a 30-degree angle toward the mat. Slide toward the mat by releasing

some of the pressure in your supporting legs and shifting your body weight forward. Then gently release the downward pressure as you re-engage your legs and pivot back up to the starting position. The movement of your client's body should be minimal, perhaps only a few inches. Repeat this slow rocking movement several times.

When you are ready, release your weight gradually as you come to a standing position, preferably on your client's inhale, and while you are also inhaling (30–60 seconds for this technique).

Shoulder compression using feet in supine position

For many people, few things are more relaxing and therapeutic than deep shoulder and neck work. If during the course of your session, you haven't spent much time with your client in sitting position, or if you haven't addressed the shoulders and neck on a deep level, you can try this technique. It's best to use toward the end of a session, in final supine position, right before you begin to work on the face and the head. By this time, your work is coming to a close, and it's a perfect time to slow things down. Make sure your client's arms and hands are close to the sides of his body. Sit behind your client and place the middle of your soles on the fleshy part of his shoulders, in between the shoulder bone and the base of the neck. Your feet should be straight, with toes pointing upward. Don't fully extend your legs; keep your knees upward. Allow sufficient space so that your legs are comfortable, and so that you can press forward and maintain steady pressure.

When you're ready, press forward simultaneously until the first point of resistance, and hold with even pressure. Try to press each foot slightly in the direction of the client's opposite hip, toward the center of his body. Wait for your client to relax in the position, and when he exhales, move in just a little deeper. Continue in this fashion, and always release a little bit of pressure as your client inhales. In addition to working simultaneously with both feet, you may also alternate the pressure with your feet. First push on the right side, then, as you release, press forward on the left side. You may move closer to the neck area

Shoulder compression using feet in supine position



too, but be careful to only use the fleshy center of your feet, and take care to not touch the sides of the client's head with your calves or ankles. Avoid rubbing the skin at all costs. Move slowly, and always work with the client's breath, pressing as he exhales and releasing as he inhales. End with simultaneous pressure to both shoulders and then release slowly with the client's inhale (60–90 seconds for the entire technique).

Sen sumana in supine position

An effective way to calm things down during a session is to lightly work *sen sumana* while the client is in supine position. This can be done after working on the abdomen and chest, and before finishing in supine position. The therapist exerts practically no effort at all, and the client lies motionless; however, the effect of this technique can be extremely powerful.

Sit alongside your client with your dominant hand near the client's upper torso. Lightly touch the hara with two fingers of your hand, locate *sen sumana*, and try to sense the energy within. With your index finger and third finger, press down and maintain light to medium pressure against her body for a few seconds. Release gently and slide your fingers upward to the next spot. Continue in this way upward along the line, passing the upper abdomen. Work slowly and send metta to your client through your fingers. Take note of her breathing patterns, and time your pressure and your releases accordingly. When you reach the rib cage, you can begin to make slight and slow circular movements with your fingers, as you maintain the pressure. Don't remove your fingers from the body as you circle; maintain contact as you transmit subtle rotating energy to your fingers. Then release and move to the next spot. Continue slowly upward, to work the entire center of the rib cage and the sternum. When you reach the neck, use your thumb on one side and your second and third fingers on the other. Continue pressing very lightly against the throat as you ascend toward the chin, working slowly and gently. When you reach the chin, gently grab hold of it with your thumb and two fingers, and slowly rotate or move it up and down to make sure the jaw is relaxed. You may work downward and upward with light finger pressure once again, if you feel it's necessary, but try to always finish upward, at the chin. Work slowly and meditatively (60–90 seconds for this technique).

Open the wind gate in side position

In elementary Thai massage training, students are taught to use their palms to execute "blood stops." In Thai, this technique is called *bpert lom* ("open the wind"). Opening the wind gate may be done more than once during a treatment when necessary.

Wind gate openings may be carried out using palms, fingers, knees, feet, forearms, elbows, and also by sitting. When we use arms and legs to balance our body weight, we risk transmitting shaking or trembling feelings from the therapist to the client. A sitting blood stop, however, applies solid and steady pressure, and it is also a convenient resting pose for the practitioner.

Make sure your client is resting comfortably in side position, with her head on a pillow and with her spine straight. Turn around, so that your back is facing the client's head, and squat down in position. With several outstretched fingers of your hand, locate the pulse area in your client's upper thigh, below the buttocks. Then lower yourself into position with the focused weight of your sit bones right over the pulse. Don't let your entire weight fall into place, but instead, use your arms and hands to lean on the floor as you settle into position. Allow your thigh to rest directly on your client's thigh. Your other foot should be half standing and slightly outward for good balance. Your inside hand should rest on your outstretched anterior thigh, and your outside forearm should rest and dangle over your opposite knee. Make sure your back is straight, and sink as much weight as is necessary into your client. Make sure you can feel your client's pulse beneath you. Hold the pose for 60–90 seconds and then slowly release your weight as you inhale and move out of position. I find it's best to slide off gently by rolling your body toward one side of the mat.

These are just a few of the many resting poses that may be integrated into a Thai massage session. Don't deviate too much from Thai tradition, but when you feel a need to slow down, or if you feel your client is being stressed, treat yourself and your client to one or more brief periods of rest during a session.



Opening the wind gate with client in side position

Sensing and the intuitive nature of nuad boran

As Thai massage therapists, we utilize specific postures, techniques, and acupressure as we go through routines with our clients. These sequences can become quite mechanical and commonplace if we allow ourselves to get stuck within them. Since every client is different, and since each person has specific needs, we need to maintain awareness of our clients' bodies and energies, so we can constantly adapt and modify our work according to each person we

touch. As we become more experienced practitioners, we learn to change the ways in which we work with our clients. We shake ourselves free from the all-purpose fixed routines that we learned as beginning students, and even from the routines that we ourselves may have developed. Two important vehicles for this important and necessary change are sensing and intuition.

Sensing

One of my most influential teachers, Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme, has been known to say: “*Farang* (Westerners) always do, do, do. But *how* to do?” In other words, how do we treat each person in accordance with his needs? We’re all human beings, but each of us is different, so Thai massage therapists cannot treat each individual in the same way. We need to utilize sensing. We do this by listening to and staying aware of our clients’ bodies and energies as we work. We work “with” them, instead of “on” them. Rather than working mechanically, we pay attention to subtle differences in each individual and allow those differences to guide us effectively through each session.

From the very moment you touch your clients – for example with your hands on their feet in supine position – try to utilize sensing to detect any tensions or blockages. As you progress through the entire session, take note of what you feel (or what you *think* you feel) as you focus on the sen lines and on the energy flow within them. Try to calm your mind and be free of thoughts, and send metta to your client. Here are just a few hypothetical scenarios in which our innate abilities for sensing might guide us as we work:

- When you put their feet in your hands and open their legs to start palming techniques, what do you feel? Is one leg heavier than the other? Is there an energy restriction or blockage of some sort, or is what you’re feeling on the physical level? Are you drawn to a particular place? If so, should you go there now to investigate, or should you come back to it later, when you’re working in a different body position? If you do feel an inconsistency, is it coming from the ankle, the calf, the thigh, or the hip? Could it be symptomatic of something farther up, say at the upper lateral leg, or at the lower back? How might these sensations help to guide you through the session?
- As you press their feet laterally to the ground, does one foot sink farther or more easily to the floor than the other? Is one foot more erect than the other? If so, what could that mean? To where might you trace the problem?
- As you palm or thumb the leg lines, do you sense a slight shaking or vibration at one point along the line, but not at other points? Do you think that vibration is the epicenter of a blockage, or could it be a radiating point? Are you sensing that you should stay there for a while and try to dissipate it?

Or would it be better to work up and down that sen line a few times to see if you can detect a corresponding point that needs your attention?

- As you lift a client's legs to do leg presses, leg pulls, rotations, or plows, can you feel any resistance? If so, where is the resistance: in the hips, in the legs, the lower back, the abdomen? Can you do anything to soften it? How can your perception of what you feel help to guide you through the rest of the session?
- Is your client unconsciously "holding" a particular part of her body? Can you identify that part of the body and direct your work in ways that might help to release the holding?
- Is your client trying to "help" you, rather than remaining fully relaxed? If so, are you okay with his reactions, or has he begun to annoy you? Should you work in that area for a few minutes to try to dissipate the tension and help him relax more deeply? Should you stop doing the technique that is causing that particular reaction? How are all of these feelings influencing the direction and the quality of your work today?

Sensing should be going on throughout the entire treatment session. Simply put, the more attuned we are to our clients and to ourselves, the more effective our work will be, and the more rewarding the experience will be for all concerned.

Intuition

I once asked my teacher Asokananda if intuitive abilities could be taught. Here's what he said:

Only to a certain extent. You can teach people how to develop their sensitivity, but intuition has to come by playing with the energy lines and feeling the energy. Ultimately it comes from within, and most people have the ability to tap into it.

So what is intuition, and how do we use it? How do we know when to linger and when to move on? What does energy feel like? How do we know where to work, and which techniques to use? This intuitive sensitivity comes from within, and flows out of each person, and naturally, it becomes stronger the more we practice and study. However, there are some basic guidelines which can help to encourage the development of strong intuitive abilities.

Try to stay present at every moment during the session

This is easier said than done, and it is a life-long lesson. But as we go deeper in the practice of Thai healing arts, we must learn to detach from outside stimulation and distractions and be more present and in the moment. That means we must always be listening to and sensing our bodies and the bodies of our

clients. Just as in meditation, it's important to bring ourselves back to inner stillness whenever we become distracted.

Don't get stuck in the usual sequences and routines

As mentioned earlier, each person is different, and not all techniques work the same way for all people. A tall practitioner working on a short client may need to modify his approach to a particular technique, and not simply do it the way it was taught in a classroom. Try to not follow the same basic routine for each client. Be as aware as possible about what your client needs at each moment, and don't be afraid to deviate from a routine that you were taught in order to serve your client in the best way possible.

Trust your judgment

Rely on your senses and your instincts. If, when you pick up your client's legs, you feel that she is holding in the upper lateral thigh, consider going there to see what you find and make a quick assessment before you continue your work. It's important to work consecutively from the bottom of the body to the top, and to follow the running of the sen lines as you work, but you don't need to spend a lot of time working in an area that you sense is already "open." If you sense that one area is more blocked than another, you might decide to spend more time there, rather than moving on to another position or technique. If necessary, check in with your client to get their feedback, direction, or approval, if you sense a blocked area. If you allow yourself to follow your instincts, your sense of intuition will naturally become sharper and deeper.

Seek guidance and study with a variety of teachers

Nuad boran is a living art form, and it has never been stagnant. From the earliest influences based in Indian and Buddhist healing principles, through its development in Thailand, traditional Thai massage has continued to evolve to the present day. One teacher does it one way, and another prefers to do it differently. How will you know which way works best for you? I've known students who have studied almost exclusively with one teacher or at one school, and even after years of practice, their view of nuad boran can be a bit narrow, and their range of techniques and applications may be somewhat limited. It certainly is important to have an anchor, a mentor, a home base; but it's equally important to study with a wide range of teachers who integrate and utilize different styles, techniques, and concepts.

Summary

A professional practice in traditional Thai massage involves much more than helping people relax by performing assisted yoga stretches. Traditional Thai massage is a complex blend of physical, energetic, and spiritual healing, and dedicated Thai therapists should practice ethically, professionally, and in accordance with Thai healing traditions.

Maintain a clean and well-equipped practice room, and keep records of your clients and notes of each session you perform. Try to not get stuck in usual sequences, be as empty of thought as possible, cultivate graceful transitions from one movement to the next, and always listen to the body to help guide you through each session.

A true master never refers to himself as such. He knows that there is always something more to learn, and that humility is one of the most important virtues of true mastery. As you continue in your study and practice of traditional Thai massage, always seek guidance from teachers, colleagues, and clients, and remember that the study of this marvelous healing art is an enriching, enlightening, and lifelong pursuit.