

# The Meditative Art of Thai Massage

by Michael Eisenberg

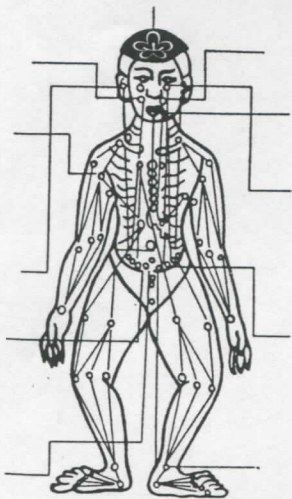
*"Massage is one of the precious arts of Thai Medication. It is the custom of taking care of each other when getting sick."*

— *Dr. Pennapa Subcharoen,*  
*director of the National Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine,*  
*Department of Medical Service, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand*

**T**hai massage is a form of bodywork that has been practiced in Thailand for over 2,500 years. It is a therapeutic procedure that balances the body's centers in many ways, and helps to maintain health, vitality and flexibility. Thai massage is used today in Thailand to help heal common ailments like low back pain and headaches, as well as for more serious conditions ranging from asthma to schizophrenia.

## A pressure point system

Although in English the word "massage" usually refers to manipulation of muscle and soft tissue in a variety of ways, the essence of Thai massage is very different. Thai massage works on pressure points and energy lines, depicted in the graphic below, and stretches the entire body—which all together produce a highly therapeutic effect.



Working the energy lines is the most basic aspect of Thai massage. Thai people believe (as do those of other Asian cultures) that a life force circulates throughout the body to create health and vitality, and that when that life force is blocked or restricted it will create sickness or disease. One of the main purposes of Thai massage is to clear blockages so that this energy can once again flow freely throughout the body.

During Thai massage the entire body's energy lines are worked with pressure from the palms and thumbs and then the palms again. Palm pressure is applied in a firm but gentle manner to both loosen and warm up the body and as a way to say "hello" to the part of the body as it is approached. Thumb pressure is applied specifically to do the bulk of the work on the energy lines. This is followed by palm pressure again, to relax and say "goodbye" to each part of the body. Slow pressure is applied to each pressure point for up to five seconds and then slowly released. In this way, a lot of attention is given to each part of the body (a Thai massage should last two to three hours to get the full effect).







## Thai massage benefits client and therapist

One of the outstanding qualities of Thai massage is the constant rocking motion involved—a motion that becomes hypnotic to both client and practitioner. Students of Thai massage are taught that rocking back and forth with straight arms and a straight back makes for very effective use of body weight and leverage, and is the way to use their bodies most efficiently. Strength and balance come directly from the center of the practitioner's body, helping to conserve energy and use that energy most efficiently.

Combining these movements and posturing with the slow, meditative, flowing Thai massage "dance" around the client's body makes it easy to give a three-hour massage. Therapists of Thai massage believe in long treatments, often saying "one hour is good, two hours are better, three hours are best." Thai massage is traditionally a form of meditation—actually, two kinds of meditation: a *metta* meditation of loving kindness and compassion; and a *vipassana* meditation of insight, with the focus being the body of the receiver.

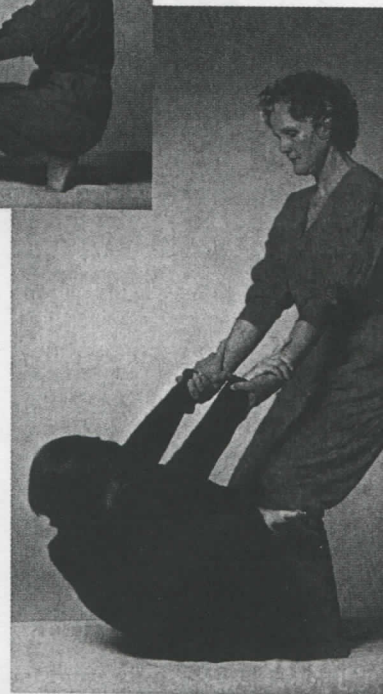
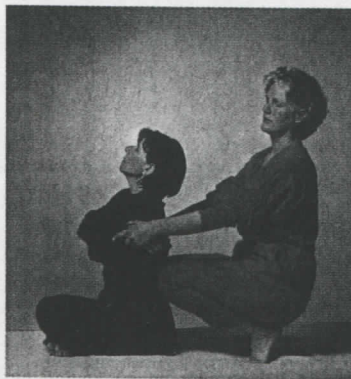
Thai massage is done on a floor mat with the receiver in loose, comfortable clothes. Practiced in this way the practitioner can also easily use his or her feet, knees, forearms and elbows. No oil is used, nor are long, effleurage-like strokes. Thai massage does incorporate a technique similar to petrissage where muscles are pulled away from the bones. Stretching the body in many different ways from many different positions allows joints to be opened up (Thai massage could be described as applied hatha yoga, or yoga massage). Therapists are trained to respect each client's level of flexibility and can therefore benefit the limber athlete, as well as those who are less flexible.

The receiver might experience whole-body relaxation and a more tranquil state of mind, and will sometimes experience deep relaxation; this trance-like state often stimulates a mild euphoric state of being. Other clients might fall asleep during Thai massage, to wake later feeling more energized and invigorated. As with any other massage, blood and lymph circulation are increased and internal organs are stimulated—all of which help strengthen the immune system.

Thai massage also greatly benefits practitioners, because it allows them to stretch their own bodies while working on clients, thereby strengthening their bodies and entering into a meditative state of mind. **M**

*Michael Eisenberg began his study of Thai massage at the Foundation of Shivago Komparpaj, at the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai. He continued his advanced studies and received teacher training with Master Chongkol Setthakorn at the Institute of Thai Massage, in Thailand. Eisenberg has studied privately with teachers of Thai massage on his various trips to Thailand, and is also certified in the southern style of Thai massage from the Wat Po Temple in Bangkok. He has returned every year since 1993 with a group of massage therapists on an annual study tour.*

A Thai  
massage  
session  
includes a  
variety of  
stretches.



PHOTOS BY JONAH SUTHERLAND



## Traditional Prayer of Thai Massage Therapists

We invite the spirit of our founder, the father doctor Shivago, who comes to us through his saintly life. Please bring to us the knowledge of all nature, that this prayer will show us the true medicine of the universe. In the name of this mantra, we respect your help and pray that through our bodies you will bring wholeness and health to the body of our client.

The Goddess of Healing dwells in the heavens high, while mankind dwells in the world below. In the name of the founder, may the heavens be reflected in the earth below so that this healing medicine may encircle the world.

We pray for the one whom we touch, that he will be happy and that any illness will be released from him.

Practitioners of northern-style Thai massage offer this prayer before beginning a massage.