

Tradition with a Twist

by Sara Avant Stover

Like most of the best things in my life, Thailand and Thai Yoga Bodywork arrived as surprises. On a May afternoon in 1999, I sat with a friend and a few cappuccinos at a Hungarian pastry shop in New York City's Upper West Side. I was a senior at Barnard College at the time, catching up with a former high school teacher who was in the neighborhood. That fall he would be heading to Chiang Mai, Thailand to serve as headmaster of an international boarding school. He told me that one of his teachers had unexpectedly backed out. Knowing my thirst for travel and that my graduation was imminent, before the last sip of coffee he had offered me the newly vacant teaching position. "I don't mean to rush you," he concluded, "but I need to know your decision within forty-eight hours."

As an African Studies major, the only things I associated with Thailand at the time were rice fields and elephants. Clearly I had some research to do. A visit to the travel section of the Barnes and Noble on 86th street led me to the Lonely Planet guide. Turning to the 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 mere \$6. With that, I closed the book, and that evening I accepted the job. It was no mistake; this decision led me to an unexpected love affair with Thailand and its healing art, traditional Thai massage.

Upon arriving in Chiang Mai for the first time, I caught onto a few things very quickly: Thailand's cuisine is mind-boggling delicious; everyone seemed to be smiling; and Thai massage is ubiquitous. Within my first 72 hours as an expatriate, I experienced Thai massage for the first time. Having only received Swedish and deep tissue massages, I didn't quite know what to expect: but as I am never one to decline an adventure, I succumbed willingly. What ensued were two glorious 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 after practicing yoga: grounded and bright. Amazing! I was hooked—and puzzled, I left wondering, "What *was* that?!"

I soon learned that traditional Thai Massage (known as *nuad boran* in northern Thailand) began to evolve in Thailand approximately 2,200 years ago. In its earliest stages of development, this healing art thrived in Buddhist temples, where lay people would come for healing. It also spread to rural villages where children treated their elders at the end of a long day working in the fields.

Traditional Thai massage is a fusion of multi-cultural healing disciplines such as yoga, Ayurveda, Buddhist meditation, and traditional Thai 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. Thanks to an initial handful of pioneers, Thai massage began to be known in the West about twenty years ago, and today it assumes the names of "Thai Yoga Massage," "Thai Yoga Therapy," "Traditional Thai Massage," and "Thai Yoga Bodywork." An early student and teacher, Jonas Westring, serves as the director of Thai Yoga Healing Arts/Shantaya and leads workshops and trainings around the world. Westring, a yoga teacher and a physical therapist, spent much of his life traveling and studying in Asia, and considers Thai massage to be the perfect container for melding Eastern and Western perspectives. "It's a great medium to introduce people to yoga and also to maintain my own practice", he says.

Colleen Potter-Burton wakes up each morning at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m. and works eight to nine hours a day as a physical therapy assistant in Mattawan, Michigan. But she still finds time for her Thai Bodywork practice in the evenings. “When you’re going back to diaphragmatic breathing and connecting your breath to the receiver’s, by the end of giving a two hour session I feel really wonderful!”

Maggie Hopson is a physical therapist, yoga instructor, and co-owner of High Desert Physical Therapy and Sports Rehabilitation in Winslow, Arizona. Traditional Thai therapy, she says, has “added a new dimension to how I approach rehabbing patients. In the past I would work on individual joints, but now I look at people more holistically.” Patients with injuries such as a torn ACL-- and even those with more severe movement disorders like as Parkinson’s disease, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus-- benefit from Hopson’s integrated approach. “These people feel *great* afterwards,” she gushes, “Other patients in the clinic see this and say, ‘Why aren’t you doing that to *me*?!’ ”

But Hopson knows that applying advanced body manipulation techniques to injured individuals can be tricky business. While her studies with some Thai massage teachers have concerned Hopson due to their lack of emphasis on anatomy, Hopson believes that safety should come first. “You need to keep a clear mind so you can sense resistance in the tissues and joints.”

On a larger scale, safety is a real issue as Thai massage’s popularity soars higher today than ever before. With so many newcomers and novices now beginning to practice, there is concern about maintaining the integrity of the traditional form. A new non-profit organization, the Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI), is responding at least in part to these concerns. THAI aims to build more cohesiveness amongst practitioners and bring about minimum levels of standardization. There are five advancing levels of membership in THAI, and entry level membership requires a minimum of 30 training hours and evidence of an ongoing practice.

With ancient techniques, new standards for practice, and rapid growth, the irresistible magic of Thai massage lives on after thousands of years. And what keeps veterans like Westring going back for more? He concurs with the masses when he states simply: “It *feels* good.”

Sara Avant Stover is a freelance writer, yoga instructor, and Thai Yoga practitioner. She divides her time living between Massachusetts and Thailand.