

Traditional Thai Massage: An Overview

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Traditional Thai massage is a unique and powerful healing art that combines acupressure, stretching, and assisted yoga. As Thai massage has grown in popularity around the world and in Thailand, it has taken on many names. The terms *nuad boran*, Thai yoga massage, traditional Thai massage, Thai yoga therapy, and Thai yoga bodywork are used interchangeably, since they all refer to the same healing art that has been practiced in Thailand for many years.

Nuad boran is not massage as it is known in the West, and the term “Thai massage” is somewhat of a misnomer, since the human energy system, not only the physical body, is affected during treatment. Elements of nuad boran have been incorporated into modern forms of massage, bodywork, physical therapy, and yoga, but there is no real substitute for the mind/body healing process that unfolds during and after an effective Thai session.

History and origins

Thai massage traces its lineage to Jivaka Kumarabhaccha, a legendary doctor from early Buddhist scriptures. Thai people refer to him as Shivagakomarapaj or Gomalapat, and throughout Thailand he is honored as the father of Thai medicine. Statues and images of a bearded Indian man in flowing robes, sitting in cross-legged position, may be found throughout the country. Protection amulets bearing his image are worn by healers and also by those who seek healing. Thai massage teachers and practitioners say prayers each day to honor Jivaka as an ancestral teacher, and as an intercessor for healing.

Epigraphs at Wat Po showing energy lines and pressure points



It's not clear exactly how and when nuad boran developed in Thailand, but its origins almost certainly may be traced back to Indian Ayurvedic principles and early Buddhist traditions. The exact origins have remained obscure, and this is partly due to the fact that for centuries Thai medical knowledge was passed down orally from teacher to pupil. In addition, early Thai medical documents that were kept on palm-leaf manuscripts were destroyed during a war with Burma in the eighteenth century.

Thai massage today

A general revival of Thai massage took place in Thailand during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the popularity of Western medicines, combined with government efforts to modernize Thai society, had greatly diminished the roles of traditional healing arts, including massage and herbal medicine. In rural areas, however, traditional teachings were kept alive by healers who followed the traditions of their ancestors. Westerners, seeking knowledge of alternative forms of healing and spirituality, began to arrive in Thailand in the 1980s, and treatment centers such as Wat Po in Bangkok and the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai played major roles in keeping these healing traditions alive. The influx of foreign students seeking knowledge of Thai healing arts also encouraged a resurgence of Thai massage among Thai people in Thailand. Since then, traditional Thai massage has continued to increase in popularity, both in Thailand and all around the world.

Those people familiar with traditional Thai massage recognize that it is highly effective in the treatment of many ailments. It can benefit stroke vic-

tims by returning mobility and sensitivity to their limbs, and it is effective in treating frozen shoulder, asthma, back pain, and many other conditions. Today, a variety of teachers and schools throughout Thailand offer courses in nuad boran, and storefronts offer massage treatments on the streets of major cities. Because of the lack of regulated standards of study and practice, however, the quality of treatments varies greatly. All around the world, it's difficult to know if you'll get an experienced and sensitive therapist, or someone who has had little training. It's often best to choose by personal recommendation, to receive a session from a teacher at a Thai massage school, or to seek out a traditional healer.

In many Western countries, licensed table massage therapists may legally practice Thai massage if they have studied only at the most elementary level, and even sometimes if they have never studied Thai massage at all. Knowledge of table massage doesn't automatically qualify someone to give an effective Thai treatment. As with any discipline, one must be adequately trained before offering professional services. Local and national governing boards, seeking control and revenue, may one day attempt to regulate traditional Thai massage under the aegis of another modality, such as table massage. This is a matter of great concern for Thai massage professionals and also for the general public.

Nevertheless, there are many dedicated and experienced Thai therapists and teachers around the world today who aspire to high standards. The Sunshine Network, established under guidance of the late Asokananda, is a loosely woven network of teachers trained under shared guidelines. Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI) is an international nonpartisan network of students, therapists, teachers, and schools that adhere to and promote basic standards of study and practice of traditional Thai massage around the world.

Styles and variations

It is often said that there are two general styles of Thai massage: Northern and Southern. The principal school to promote southern-style nuad boran is based at Wat Po in Bangkok. What is known as the northern style was largely developed at the Foundation of Shivagakomarpaj (Old Medicine Hospital) in Chiang Mai. Today however, a wide variety of schools and teachers promote northern, southern, or a combination of these two styles.

Whether studying the northern or southern approach to nuad boran, you will encounter great diversity in techniques, and many therapists and teachers currently incorporate a mixture of styles and techniques into their work. As you travel from place to place in Thailand, you will rarely receive the same form of treatment twice. Some practitioners concentrate on energy lines, working in a slow and methodical manner; some incorporate extensive stretch-

ing techniques; while others pluck the tendons with thumbs and fingers, a style sometimes known as *jap sen*. Length of the sessions varies, and some therapists and schools use hot herbal compresses for every session.

Rather than making distinctions between northern and southern styles, some argue that there are only two legitimate forms of Thai massage: Royal (*ratchasamnak*) and Folk (*chaloeyesak*.) As the name implies, royal style was developed long ago in order to treat Thai kings, queens, and other members of the royal family. There are strict rules covering protocol for working in a respectful manner, and only hands may be used. In addition, the practitioner must take care to maintain extra distance from the receiver, and prone position (face down) is never used during the course of a treatment. Royal style is still used in some places to treat the general public, and because it utilizes strong thumb acupressure, it can bring about good results in a short period of time. The more common folk style disregards the etiquette reserved for royalty, and instead utilizes hands, feet, elbows, knees, and other parts of the body to execute postures and techniques. The overwhelming majority of practitioners around the world and in Thailand practice in the folk style.

Thai massage theory

Thai yoga massage is based on a belief in a life force that circulates through energy pathways in the body. Indian yoga philosophy calls this life force *prana*, the Chinese refer to it as *chi* or *qi*, and in Thai medicine it is called *lom*. It is said to be absorbed into the body from the food we eat, from the air we breathe, and from the living energy all around us. In Thai massage, these pathways comprise an energy system of pathways or lines (*sen*). A blockage in any line may impede or prevent the free flow of *lom*, and therefore may lead to aches, pain, and disease on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Thai yoga massage focuses on ten major lines, called *sip sen* (ten sen), and a thorough Thai treatment usually affects these ten sen lines.

The Indian origins of Thai yoga massage are clear from its basic theory. The link becomes even more obvious if we compare the names of three of the main Thai sen lines with their Indian equivalents, known as *prana nadis*. The Thai energy line called *sumana sen* is known to Indian yogis as *sushumna nadi*. Similarly, the two *sen* known in Thai as *ittha* and *pingkhala* are derived from the Indian nadis called *ida* and *pingala*.

Some people claim that Thai sen lines are the same as the meridians in Chinese medicine and, by extension, other modalities such as Japanese shiatsu. This is definitely not the case. The sen lines and Chinese meridians do intersect at important acupressure points along the body, but they follow different pathways. Also, *lom* in Thai medicine is believed to flow in both directions within individual *sen*, whereas *chi* in Chinese medicine is believed to

flow from one point to another in only one direction. Whatever the differences in form, technique, and theory, however, Thai, Chinese, Indian, and other ancient Eastern healing systems are all concerned with locating and diminishing blockages so that the free flow of energy may be restored, balanced, and fortified.

Spiritual elements

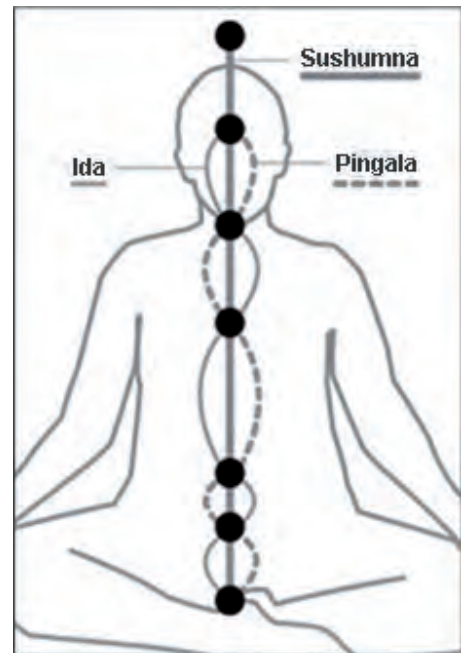
It's important to understand the spiritual nature of Thai massage, and to work in a spiritually focused manner. Traditionally, *nuad boran* was offered on the grounds of Buddhist temples and was an extension of spiritual practice, particularly meditation. Accomplished therapists strive for a sense of awareness of each moment as they work on the receiver's body. The effects of Thai massage are greatly enhanced through a practice known as *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation. When we send *metta* to our clients as we work, we offer them unbridled compassion through our healing touch.

An important aspect of Thai massage is the intention with which we carry out a treatment. A session given with awareness, *metta*, sensitivity, and care will feel totally different from one given in a mechanical or technical way. Performing the work in a meditative way also engages the relaxed parasympathetic state in the nervous system of the receiver, allowing the heart rate to slow down, intestinal and glandular activity to increase, and the muscles to relax. Practicing in a calm, meditative way allows both parties to feel balanced and peaceful, and it helps the therapist to develop intuitive abilities and to sense blockages in the *sen* lines.

East and West

Without an understanding of the Eastern thought process, Thai massage can become stuck in a Western field of perception, one that is more limited in scope. Systematic and analytical Western viewpoints can make it difficult to understand and experience the intuitive and spiritual healing that takes place in *nuad boran*.

In the West, we often seek out one absolute truth, one solution, and one answer to each issue. Eastern thought, however, allows for many ways to deal with matters, and personal intuition, inclination, and spiritual direction are very important. The Eastern mind searches less for final answers, and works with what is available at each moment in order to fulfill an immediate pur-



The Indian nadis sushumna, ida, and pingala lend their names to three important Thai *sen* lines

pose. Since there is not a single, standard solution to every problem, one must be intuitive and creative during a Thai massage treatment. If what we do doesn't work, we might try something else. In the Western medical approach, most patients who see a doctor for symptoms that point, for example, to a stomach ulcer, will be given the same treatment or prescribed the same type of medicine in almost every case. In Eastern medicine, if several people go to a traditional doctor, each one might receive slightly different treatments. By extension, the same holds true for Thai massage. We cannot use the same sequence or routine for every person we treat.

Another difference between the two approaches is that unlike Western massage, *nuad boran* has little relationship to anatomy and physiology. In ancient Thai society, human dissections were probably not performed, and healers did not systematically study the basic structure of the body under the skin. Instead, they studied the workings of the human energy system, and how massage, point pressure, and manipulation bring about healing by releasing blockages in the body's energy channels.

These days, many students wish to apply their knowledge of anatomy and physiology to Thai massage, but anatomical knowledge doesn't necessarily improve the effectiveness and quality of Thai treatments. It is important that the Western analytical approach not interfere with our innate abilities to sense blockages and to feel energy. Learning to be still and aware enough to feel energy is crucial to practicing Thai massage in an intuitive, creative, and effective way. At an advanced level of practice, intuition, mindfulness, and spiritual focus are the most important elements of our work.

Effects and benefits

Many benefits may be gained from a Thai massage session. Properly balancing the energy systems of the human body can have a profound effect on the receiver. One often feels an immediate sense of grounding and openness, and perceptions such as taste, touch, smell, and vision may be dramatically enhanced. It can sometimes take several days for the energy rebalancing to take full effect, and clients often continue to feel positive effects for many weeks after the session.

Two common responses to a Thai massage session are tiredness, or a dramatic spike of energy. Whatever the initial reaction, energy is in the process of being rebalanced, and even if we feel tired immediately afterward, once the lethargy passes we will usually feel much more energetic, alive, and aware. Other benefits of Thai massage include greater flexibility in the joints, enhanced blood circulation, improved body alignment, straighter posture, deeper breathing, and stimulation of internal organs, which helps them to function at an optimal level.

General conditions for practice

Before and during a Thai massage session, it's important to take into consideration a number of factors related to health conditions, environment, body positioning, breath, flow, and pressure.

Know your client's health history

Before you begin a session, make sure to ask the receiver about their current health and their health history. It's important to know about any condition that could make your work unsafe or cause harm in any way. If you practice Thai yoga massage professionally it's essential to keep a health history for each client, so that you have a permanent record of their information. You can find samples of professional intake forms on the Internet, you may create your own, or you may download the client intake form from the Thai Healing Alliance website.

Maintain good posture

The most common postural mistakes in Thai massage are bent arms, a hunched back, tense shoulders, and using muscle strength to apply pressure. Working in this way is bound to leave you feeling achy, tired, and drained after giving a massage. You may also be more likely to absorb the receiver's tension and be more sensitive to negative energies released during the session. Always keep your back and arms straight, and apply pressure and stretches using your body weight. If you remember to do these two things, you should feel energized, relaxed, and pain-free after giving a treatment.

Due to relative body size, there may be a few exercises where it may be difficult to keep your arms straight or to use your body weight effectively. If you're attempting to do a stretch that requires muscle power, or if you anticipate straining of any type, simply eliminate that exercise or technique. While performing Thai massage, stay aware of your posture, and especially notice if your shoulders begin to creep upward. If they do, take a breath, relax, and let your shoulders release downward.

Breath awareness

Once you become aware of your own breath, you can tune into the rhythm of the receiver's breath. Breath awareness helps you to stay calm, concentrated, and relaxed in your own body. Being aware of the receiver's breath helps you to relate more deeply to him during the treatment. This, in turn, allows you to tune into his energy body, and to be aware of his needs in a more intuitive way.

During the massage, try to bring your attention to your breath as often as possible. If you're feeling tense or frustrated, bring your focus back to your breath and you should immediately feel calmer and more connected to the receiver.

Applying pressure

Thai yoga massage is a strong and vigorous bodywork treatment. The pressure you use shouldn't be painful, but generally it should be right on the threshold of pain – just before it becomes painful. The amount of pressure needed to reach this level varies from person to person, and it is vital that you apply the correct amount of pressure for each individual. This is not only important for the well-being of the receiver but also for the effectiveness of the treatment itself. If you work too gently, your pressure may not reach the energy body. If you work too strongly, you may cause the receiver to feel tense and be closed to the work.

Discovering the right amount of pressure for each person is an art in itself, and it takes practice and experience. At first, you may need to ask your clients for feedback. As you practice, don't hesitate to occasionally ask about the level of your pressure. If you don't ask, many people will not say anything at all, even if the pressure is too strong for them. It is even more common for people to remain quiet if the pressure is too gentle.

There are particular points or areas on the body that are usually more painful than others. These are mostly therapeutic pressure point areas, where it is normal to feel a certain degree of pain. This is sometimes referred to as "good pain." Good pain is generally beneficial, as long as it is bearable, and as long as the receiver can breathe into the pain and stay relaxed and open. Good pain usually disappears as soon as the pressure is released. "Bad pain," on the other hand, lasts after the pressure has been released. This usually indicates that pressure was applied in the wrong place or in the wrong way. Don't press too hard until you are confident that you're in the right place and that you aren't pressing on bone. Your confidence and sensitivity will increase with practice and time.

Maintaining a connection with your client

Establishing and keeping a constant connection to the receiver is vital for a good, healing massage. Even without speaking at all during the treatment, you can still develop a silent form of communication that gives the receiver a sense of trust and a feeling of being nurtured. This helps clients to relax more deeply and to surrender on physical and emotional levels. Watch the receiver's face, and look for signs that may indicate if your pressure is too strong, if an area is painful, or if the client isn't comfortable with something you're doing. Listen

to the receiver's breathing and to your own breathing, and try to harmonize them with each other as the treatment progresses.

Rhythm, flow, and balancing energy

An important meditative aspect of Thai yoga massage is gentle rocking. Constant rhythm is very relaxing and nurturing for both the giver and the receiver. Ideally, your pace should be established at the beginning of the massage and continue all the way through to the end. It takes practice to hone your ability to develop a vision for the entire session. This means being totally present in each moment while at the same time holding a vision or intention of the next step. Continued practice is what helps the massage to flow as smoothly as possible. Think of Thai massage as a painting. As you gain more experience and knowledge, you understand better how to use shape and color. Sometimes, when you look at a blank canvas, you immediately have an idea of how your painting will take shape; other times, you simply start painting and see what develops. When you first touch the receiver, you may or may not have a long-term idea for your treatment, but it's important to stay present, and to maintain a good flow and a steady pace that will carry you through the entire session.

A good system to follow throughout the treatment is to begin work on the dominant side of your client. A woman's dominant side is the left, and a man's is the right. Try to always work the dominant side first. If you work on a woman with strong male energy, you may start on the right side, and if you work on a man with strong female energy, you may start on the left. The idea is to begin on the same side first during the entire treatment. When you work with one foot at a time, for example, work on the dominant foot first. When you work on one arm at a time, go first to the dominant arm.

Intimacy and body space

Although the receiver is fully clothed, Thai massage is an extremely intimate form of bodywork – a close dance between two bodies and energy systems. Awareness of body space is essential to allow the receiver to fully relax and let go. Many people have experienced some type of invasion or physical or emotional abuse in their lives. This makes it important to be extremely careful to not overstep physical boundaries. Watch the receiver's face when you are near sensitive areas, and don't go any further if you detect any signs of discomfort. Working in this way provides the receiver with an experience of a wonderfully nourishing, safe, and intimate form of nonsexual touch.

A lifelong pursuit

Only so much can be said about Thai massage in an introduction such as this. After all is said and done, we are shaped by our own personal experiences, by individual learning experiences with our teachers, by feedback from our colleagues and clients, and by a sincere and humble dedication to the work. The practice of Thai massage is a lifelong pursuit. Only after many years of practice and ongoing study can the sensitivity and skills required to give effective healing treatments begin to develop.