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# Varieties of Thai Massage

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As with any form of bodywork, there are different versions or styles of Thai Massage which emphasize different aspects of the work. Some people claim there are two styles in Thailand: Northern style and Southern, though they are hard pressed to define the difference. In my experience, that is not a useful distinction. I encountered several styles just in the north and styles in the south that look like the north and vice-versa. But now with the burgeoning of spas and massage schools in Thailand that cater to Westerners, Thais are standardizing a version that they think we westerners want.

Westerners want schools with set curricula, so now there is a Thai Massage school on every street corner in Chiang Mai. Of course traditionally, Thai Massage was NOT carried on for hundreds of years by schools or printed texts, but passed down in the oral tradition from master to apprentice. There was great variety around the country (just as there was more variety in the forms of Buddhism and meditation practices before the central government took over.) Even after the establishment of two now-famous schools, Wat Po in Bangkok and Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai, that is NOT where most Thais learn the trade. There is some difference between the official styles taught in those two schools which is probably why westerners think there are just those two styles, but it is more complex. There are these school versions and also the various folk versions, and now a *farang* (what Thais call westerners) version.

Add into the mix, the American penchant for throwing several things together, making up a cute name, and marketing it, and there is now an explosion of Thai-like bodywork forms out there, in addition to the ones that claim to be "authentic" Thai.

Elements of Thai Massage. So how can we identify, classify, or evaluate what people are doing with Thai? I propose that we talk about the various elements that practitioners might include or emphasize in what they do. Then we can more accurately and usefully make comparisons. Here are the elements I know:

1. Stretching and range of motion: This is the most characteristic and observable element of Thai that all practitioners do. There is not a standard set or sequence of these moves, but when comparing any two Thai practitioners, at least half the moves would be similar, though maybe not in the same order. Practitioners regularly trade moves and invent variations. So listing moves and sequences is interesting but not a good way to define a style because there would be as many styles as there are practitioners. There is however a useful difference in the manner of doing the moves which the other elements below will identify.

As mentioned, the collection of moves used in Thai has always changed. One source is borrowing from other modalities. Thai culture has always been very adaptive. When they see Westerners doing something they like, they incorporate it, putting their own spin on it. Even though Americans like to call Thai Massage "Thai YOGA Massage", yoga asana practice was NOT practiced in Thailand until recently when Thais saw Westerners doing it. Thai Buddhist monks do not do yoga. So the moves in Thai do not come directly from yoga asanas as Americans now know it.

But ironically, now the collection of Thai moves – and the way they are done – is being influenced by a re-interpretation of the moves by Western yoga practitioners. Practitioners who were trained in yoga asanas before coming to Thai massage naturally interpret the Thai moves in light of their yoga training and make the moves look more like yoga than they originally were. So a new style is emerging in America that turns Thai into "yoga massage" and even into a form of "assisted yoga".

2. Whole-body & four positions: This is another unique characteristic of Thai Massage that we can expect of all practitioners if they are really doing Thai massage. They will not just do one part of the body but treat the whole, usually from feet to head. And usually in more than one position, preferably all four: supine, side-lying, prone, sitting. There is a difference in the order of positions worth noting. One style is to do each position in order, finishing with one position before going to another. Another style is to start in one position, e.g. supine, and at some point change to another, e.g. side lying, and then return to the first position.

There are interesting variations in preference for using one position or another to treat a certain part. For example, some like to treat arms in supine position while others treat them in side lying. This is simply a difference in preference rather than style since practitioners probably know how to treat the arms in both positions but prefer one.

3. Sen line treatment (energy lines or meridians): Probably only half of practitioners do this, so it is a good distinguishing element for defining a style. There are differences as to where the sen run as well as a variety of ways of treating them. Some use a light touch and others are more forceful, but they would have in common the characteristic Thai way of treating the whole line rather than just specific points. This distinguishes Thai from Shiatsu. So specifically treating sen lines in some way can distinguish one style of Thai Massage from styles that do not treat sen lines.

4. Jap sen: We can expect all practitioners to do 'palming', 'thumbing' and 'compression' and to use feet as well as hands and occasionally elbows, knuckles, and knees. But one technique is only done by a minority: It is a cross-fiber technique called in Thai jap sen, literally, "pluck the line". Some call it "nerve touch." When it is used extensively over the body throughout the treatment, it is a defining characteristic of one style of Thai Massage.

5. Meditation: Practitioners generally make a respectful gesture before giving a treatment called wai, and many will say that Thai traditionally incorporates metta "loving-kindness", but very few actually do metta meditation throughout the treatment and make the whole treatment into a meditation. How much emphasis is given to the spiritual aspect and how meditative the treatment is for both client and practitioner is a less observable element but can have a huge effect on the experience and on the healing effect of the treatment.

6. Subtle energy work: Treating the sen is a form of energy work which involves physically touching the body. But a few practitioners do more subtle energetic/spiritual work aimed at affecting the over-all flow of energy/prana/chi around and through the person or sending it to certain areas. It may involve projecting energy through their hands or with their breath or some other mental/heart action. This is not as observable as the sen work, but one definitely feels something else is going on beside the physical work.

7. Breath work: A few practitioners use specific breathing techniques along with each move to facilitate the delivery. This is barely observable, but it can make a big difference in the quality of the touch and effectiveness of the moves.

8. Pace & rhythm: There is a big difference in pacing among practitioners. Some work quickly/vigorously doing multiple repetitions of moves and compressions up and down limbs. Others move slowly, deliberately, stopping and holding moves. For many, the treatment is a collection of individual moves chosen to treat the particular client's conditions, the focus being on each move. Others deliberately use the rhythm and sequencing of the moves to create an effect as part of the effectiveness of the treatment. So there is a style that is fast & energetic and a style that is slow & methodical and a style that is rhythmically flowing.

9. Pressure. Thai Massage gives practitioners a lot of leverage as they use their whole body, so they can easily apply a lot of pressure in their touch and movements. Probably the majority of Thai people who do Thai Massage use that leverage to the maximum and work with the notion of "no pain, no gain". But a few masters use a light or gentle touch that never-the-less has a deep effect. Often accompanying this gentle touch will be more use of energy work and rhythm to make the effect deeper. So there is a gentle style of Thai that differs noticeably from the common forceful style.

10. Herb packs: Thai massage does not use oil as in Swedish massage, but it does use steamed herbal packs to accompany the work. These can be applied before or during the rest of the treatment.

11. Effect: Most Thai treatments increase flexibility and as a consequence of this opening one often experiences more energy. Traditionally in Thailand, relaxation, as Americans have come to expect it from massage, was not an intended effect. The treatment was considered like medicine, and pain and bad taste were accepted as part of traditional medicine. But in the hands of some masters, Thai can give deep relaxation and even impart a psychological sense of well-being. So I think there is a style or manner of doing Thai that actually aims at deep therapeutic relaxation and feeling of nurture and well-being in addition to the usual flexibility.

12. Western Physiology: Another influence that is changing Thai Massage today is western massage technique with its focus on anatomy and physiology. In Thailand and other Asian countries there was NO science of dissecting the body and naming the muscles. So the moves in Thai Massage were not originally thought of as affecting specific named muscles in the way western massage therapists are trained to think. But now when western massage therapists learn Thai they naturally want to know which muscles each move treats and which moves will treat specific muscles, like the piriformis. So now Thai moves are getting adjusted to target certain muscles as western anatomy considers them. This does make Thai more precise from the standpoint of physical anatomy. But it also keeps the focus on the physical level and can make the treatment mechanical. So a style of Thai massage is developing that is more physiologically focused.

13. Foot Thai: In America when peanut sauce is added to any dish it gets the label "Thai" in the menu (even though peanut sauce is rarely used in Thailand and there are so many more distinctive elements in Thai cuisine). Similarly, use of the feet in doing bodywork seems to make it "Thai" in popular thinking – and the more use of feet, the better, or more "Thai". Thai massage does use feet, but not more than hands are used, and it is certainly not about doing everything with the feet. (Thai culture is sensitive to the showing and use of feet, so there is a polite limit to how much feet would be used in Thai massage.) There are other modalities of bodywork that use feet more than Thai, such as "Barefoot Shiatsu." So there is some confusion as to the origin of so much foot work, whether it is from Thai or other modalities or just practitioners making up things to do with their feet. But it seems that a new style of bodywork is developing that makes feet the main thing, replacing hands, and this style may get labeled "Thai".

14. Table Thai: The massage table is a western invention. A traditional Thai house has very little furniture and almost everything is done on the floor. And they prefer it that way. There is a simplicity and even elegance to sitting and doing things on the floor – which is of course kept clean, as shoes are left at the door. Giving and receiving Thai massage on the floor has a certain feel, groundedness and connection that is missing on a table. However, it is possible to do a variation of at least half of the moves on a massage table, and western therapist can easily incorporate many Thai moves and elements into the other modalities they do on a table. That could be called "Swedish with Thai flavoring". It is also possible for Thai practitioners who do the regular floor Thai to transfer their work with some adaptations to the table. In this case the intention is to do Thai, but adapted to a table. "Table Thai" will not have the same quality as Thai on a mat, but it could be called a new version of Thai.

After receiving a number of treatments from a variety of practitioners, one does have the impression of qualitative differences. Some treatments are very physical with a lot of movement and forceful pressure while others are more gentle with perhaps fewer movements but the sense that more is going on at an energetic level. So there is a range from the very physical to the meditative or esoteric.

Using the above elements we can now identify what makes the difference between various styles, and we can see that many variations are possible. It would take a big chart to show all the possibilities. The main ones are these:

- A. Physical or yoga style: elements 1, 2, 9 (forceful)
- B. Physical plus sen work: elements 1, 2, 3
- C. "Jap Sen": 1, 2, (3), 4, 9 (forceful)
- D. Meditative energy work style: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 (rhythmic flow), 9 (gentle), 11 (relaxation)
- E. Herb packs can be used with any other style but is common with "Jap Sen" (C).
- F. A variation to any style can be made by changing the pace & rhythm (8), or the pressure (9), or adding Jap sen (4), meditation (5), breath work (6), or herb pack (10)

Individual background & experience: In the end, no matter what style a Thai practitioner is originally taught, what one gets is an individual who comes to the work with a particular background that effects the way they see, understand, and apply the Thai modality. Furthermore, the experiences they have with their clients will also shape the way they practice Thai and can change their whole approach.

We can learn a set of moves in school, but then it is our clients in actual practice who teach us what we can and cannot do with those moves and sometimes stimulate us to adapt or invent moves. Our experience with our clients – what issues they bring to us and what we find works and doesn't work with them – is our biggest teacher and shapes the personal style we develop.

For example, a young Thai Massage therapist who comes to Thai with a strong background in yoga *asanas* and whose clients are mainly young yogis and athletes will have a very different approach to Thai Massage than an older therapist who has a strong background in Buddhist meditation and whose clients are middle aged and older with serious conditions. Speaking personally as the second person in that example, my style has changed over 20 years to become more gentle and simple with more emphasis on energy work. I'm learning to be more efficient in my moves to achieve a deeper effect with a lighter touch or when needed to use stronger pressure without hurting myself in the process.

There is a natural tendency, born of necessity for bodyworkers as we get older to "work smarter rather than harder". This is true for Thai people as well. I was impressed by the older masters I knew in various fields, music, crafts, farming, construction, and sports, as well as bodywork to have an elegance, gracefulness, efficiency in the way they did everything. To me, when that style is applied to Thai Massage it becomes a smooth flowing dance.

So, there is NOT one original, authentic Thai Massage (Nuat Boran). And I'm not sure how appropriate it would be for Americans anyway. In Thailand there is no boundary line between Massage Therapist, Chiropractor, MD, and Pharmacist, and therapists there do not have to be as safety conscious as we do. On the other hand, in the ancient tradition, students apprenticed with master teachers for a lot longer than therapists go to school in the west, and teachers were true masters with a lifetime of experience. But unfortunately that system is rare now in Thailand and Westerners are now the driving force in the continuation, development and change of Thai Massage.

I hope this attempt to identify elements and styles of Thai Massage shows how rich with possibilities the Thai modality is. I believe good Thai practitioners should be adaptable and be able to use effectively a number of different techniques so they can adjust to the various needs of different clients. We should be able to shift between firm and light, between vigorous and soothing, to give the stretches a young athlete needs and to wisely select and sensitively apply moves appropriate to an older client with back problems. There is enough variety within the Thai family of styles to fit most conditions if therapists will learn them.

This attempt at describing the varieties of Thai Massage is still a work in progress. But let this be a stimulus to your own observation and exploration of Thai Massage.