

Thai massage on an amputee client

By Bob Haddad

I am currently giving regular Thai sessions to a leg amputee, and I'd like to share my experiences with the THAI community. The client, a sixty year old man, had suffered from leg pain over a period of years and his cancer went largely misdiagnosed until it had already metastasized. The entire left leg and part of his pelvis were eventually amputated in 2007 in a procedure called hemipelvectomy, and flaps of skin from his buttocks were folded over each other and grafted over the stump. Currently on chemotherapy, he walks on crutches, and he has begun regular Thai treatments to aid in his recovery and to increase his mobility.

For our first session I wanted to get comfortable with the afflicted area and to be aware of any residual soreness or pain. A thorough visual inspection of the stump and the incision and skin graft areas helped me to feel more confident. I tried to feel where the sen lines were residing in the stump, and at which point each of the major lines had been interrupted. I tried to imagine how his energy might be stuck there, and which types of Thai manipulations I could use to increase energy flow to the affected area. As I thumb-pressed the stump, I realized that I could apply quite a bit of pressure to the area, and that helped me to relax, knowing I would not be hurting him. I covered up the stump, knelt at his feet and prayed silently for his well-being. As I rubbed my hands together and opened my eyes, suddenly I was faced with a dilemma. How should I begin my work? I couldn't palm press both feet. I couldn't even touch both of his legs at the same time.

If I worked only on the remaining leg, how would I balance the energy on the other side? After a few seconds, I decided that somehow, someway, I had to work with both of my hands. I needed to do my dance on his body, whether or not his leg existed in the physical realm. I rationalized that his energy existed on a metaphysical level in that truncated leg, and that it needed to be addressed, not neglected. I had often heard about phantom sensations in amputee victims - in fact, he had told me several times about strange sensations of tingling, pain and even itching at various points along the missing leg. I was curious and excited... and a bit apprehensive.

As if by natural impulse, I began to palm press both feet; one visible, one not. I started with simultaneous palm pressing, but I began to alternate at one point. My usual sense of rocking and movement helped to fuel me forward as I focused and imagined the missing leg there in front of me, needing to be touched and healed. As I proceeded upward, one hand on his right inner leg lines and the other hand on the floor, I had a strong sensation that something was wrong. I wasn't feeling connected to the energy on his left side. I reasoned that if his left leg were actually there in physical form, that his medial sen lines would not be lying flat on the floor... they would be about 6 inches upward and at an inward angle. I lifted my right hand off the ground, and I began to "feel" for his leg in the air, at the same height of his other calf. My palm presses suddenly became balanced, and my shoulders fell into alignment. I was actually palm pressing in the air, and the thought of it brought a smile to my face! Only a few days earlier at the THAI Council meetings in the mountains of Colorado, we were joking about making THAI t-shirts with the words "What Would Jivaka Do?" That thought made me focus on my Jivaka altar, and gazing at his bronze image and at the photos of my teachers Asokananda and Pichest, I felt a validation that helped me through this unusual session.

I began to work the phantom leg in exactly the same way I worked on the physical leg. When I palm pressed the real leg, I also pressed the phantom leg. And then, as I was walking up the physical leg, I felt a strong vibration midway up the medial thigh. As is customary in Pichest-style work, I stopped and directed all my energies to that area and located a big energy blockage with my thumbs. The energy was very strong, and it was rapidly intermittent, sending waves of vibrations through my hands and into the ether. I felt *sen kalathari* melting under my fingers, and I eased my pressure a bit in order to be more sensitive.

As I released the pressure and focused inward, my client spoke. He had begun to feel his phantom leg come alive. It was tingling, he said, and it felt very good. There was no pain, no soreness, no itching, just a sense of presence that he hadn't felt since the amputation. As he said this aloud, his entire body immediately relaxed, and he began breathing deeply. His facial expression changed from apprehension and sadness to peacefulness and ease. Aside from the obvious physical restrictions, the treatment proceeded normally, and I felt much more at ease, knowing that his entire energetic body was being affected by our work together.

As I continue to work with him, I have felt much more confident, and he continues to open up to the work. I have also learned how to modify my techniques and to improvise in order to work with him more effectively. We've done assisted cobras in prone position, spinal twists with my leg draped over his stump, I've worked both sets of his back lines in side-lying position, and I've been using my feet and toes in creative ways to attend to his needs.

I am excited to be exploring *nuad boran* with him and to be sharing this time in our lives together. Although I feel much more confident than I did during that first session, I suspect that from time to time a recurrent thought will come to mind when I work with him What would Jivaka do ?