

# Self-Protection Techniques for the Thai Therapist

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As beginners in traditional Thai massage, we follow the initial sequences that we were taught by our first teachers. Sequences are important when we first learn Thai massage, but they become less relevant as we sharpen our intuition, focus on the human energy system, and learn to listen to the body. As we mature in our practice, we learn to respond to what we sense our clients truly need, and the more we practice, the more aware we become of our clients' energies. Our intuition sharpens, and we learn how to work more effectively in order to diminish or eliminate blockages in the *sen* lines. As we become better at releasing this blocked energy, it becomes more important to protect ourselves as we work.

The Buddhist principle of *metta*, or loving-kindness, is a cornerstone of the healing power of traditional Thai massage. As we work, we send love and compassion to the person we are touching. Because of this, it is important to keep an open heart. But when we facilitate or witness physical releases of tension and stress, and emotional releases of grief, sadness, or anger in our clients, then our heart energy must become more self-serving. It is important to not ingest the "negative energy" that our clients release as we work. To accomplish this, we can strengthen ourselves by visualizing and holding in place a shield of protective armor, and by engaging in one or more techniques described in this essay.

As experienced practitioners of *nuad boran*, we must understand the value of preparation before we work, and the need for self-protection during each session. It's also important to know when and how to detoxify ourselves after

a stressful session. The techniques and practices described in this chapter may be helpful tools as you progress in your work as a Thai massage therapist.

### **Preparing for the session**

Preparing for a Thai session is an important step in the therapeutic process, both for yourself and for your client. Both the therapist and the client should avoid eating heavily for at least 1–2 hours beforehand. For the same amount of time prior to the session, both parties should avoid consumption of foods that can bring about edginess, such as sugar, caffeinated coffee or tea, and soft drinks. Remove all jewelry before a session, and try to wear loose clothing made only from natural fabrics.

### **Focusing on the client**

Make sure to take at least a few minutes to focus on the client you are about to receive into your space. For returning clients, review their session logs and recent treatment history. Remind yourself of any physical restrictions that are indicated in their health history form, review their personal likes and dislikes, and read through your logs from the previous one or two sessions to see what you did and how you felt the client responded to your work. Take a moment to think about what you might do today with this person, based on your previous work and based on their current mood and energy. For new clients, present a brief verbal introduction to traditional Thai massage, and make sure they feel comfortable and welcome from the moment they walk through your door.

## **Physical and spiritual preparations**

### **Yoga**

Before your client arrives, and after you have reviewed your client information, take some time to prepare yourself on the physical and spiritual planes. Take note of any tensions you are carrying in your body and address them by stretching and doing yoga. Performing 5–10 minutes of yoga before a session is often enough to help you physically relax and bring about focus. Concentrate on those poses and postures that address your specific weaknesses. We all know where those points are in our bodies. Bring awareness to them as you warm up your body, and try to feel strengthened and at peace.

## Reusi dat ton

If you prefer to stay within the traditions of Thailand, you can practice *reusi dat ton*. This type of stretching and focused breathing was practiced by Thai ascetics who lived in caves and mountainous areas of Thailand hundreds of years ago. These days, basic reusi dat ton courses are taught in Thailand, and there are several books and other written materials on the subject available in print and on the web.

## Meditation and centering

A short period of silent meditation can be very helpful in strengthening the protective energy layer that is believed to exist outside the edge of our physical bodies. Centering can be achieved through meditation and breath awareness. If you're centered and focused as you work, it will be easier to distinguish between your own energies and the energies of your client. If at any point during a session you feel that you have absorbed an external energy, bring breath awareness to that point. Inhale with the intent to purify yourself, and exhale with the intent to purge the negative energy.

## Pranayama and breath awareness

Indian Ayurvedic breathing exercises (*pranayama*) can also be extremely helpful in preparing for your session. Long ago in India, pranayama was developed as a self-healing art to induce states of meditation, relaxation, and inner strengthening. Two important pranayama exercises are presented here. They may be used by the therapist prior to a session, and can even be recommended as homework to clients who have shallow breathing patterns.

If you don't have the time or the physical space to engage in drawn-out pranayama exercises, then any type of protracted deep breathing can be useful in preparing yourself for a session. Sit in cross-legged position, or lie on your back. Stay still, and take long deep breaths into your body. As you breathe in, notice any places where you feel tension or unrest, and as you breathe out, imagine that tension is leaving your body through the force of your exhalation.

## Preparation checklist

Before your client arrives, it may be good to keep these things in mind:

- Do yoga exercises that strengthen your *hara*.
- Practice meditation or breathing techniques to bring about a strong sense of self.

- If working with a sick or emotionally stressed client, consider a self-protection exercise such as “prana eggs,” described later in this essay.
- Review your client’s session logs.
- Wash yourself well.
- Take a moment to focus yourself before you touch your client.
- Be ready to engage in a self-protection technique when and if your client has a physical or emotional release.

## Protecting the Thai therapist’s energy system

As a Thai massage therapist, you are involved with intensive energy work, so it’s important to take great care to prevent your clients’ energies from entering your system during the course of a session. When you give a Thai massage, you act as an agent for the release of your patient’s tension, stress, and anxieties. If you don’t maintain a strong sense of self and take the necessary precautions, these negative energies may easily enter your own body, thereby bringing about tension, headaches, stomach problems, or even prolonged illness. It is no secret that many Thai massage therapists and teachers have become seriously ill from their clients’ energies, or from their inability to prevent external energies from entering their systems. Sometimes the deeper we go in our work, the more difficult it is (and the more important it is) to protect ourselves. When we work in *nuad boran* we should work with great compassion and *metta*, but this doesn’t mean we should allow ourselves to be vulnerable!

## Protecting yourself before the session

### Washing and cleansing

Make sure your session room is clean, and that there are no lingering odors or residual energies from the previous session. If there are, open a window or cleanse the room as mentioned previously. It’s important to wash your hands and feet before each session. If possible, take a shower. If you are congested or have allergies, consider cleansing your nasal passages with a *neti* pot and warm salt water. You may also brush your teeth. Make sure that your client washes her feet, or even better, wash them yourself with some warm water and peppermint oil.

### Prana eggs

One of the most powerful visualization exercises you can perform before beginning a Thai massage session is called “Prana Eggs.” The objective of this exercise is to surround yourself in a field of protection, and to minimize the

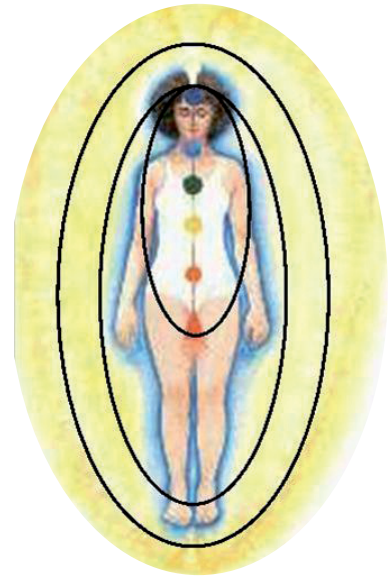
transference of your client's energies to your energetic field. Allow a minimum of 10–15 minutes for this exercise:

**Outer egg:** Lie on your back with your head preferably pointing north to make use of the polarity of the earth. Use your mind like a pencil. As you inhale, imagine drawing half of an oval on the right side of your body, beginning about 6 inches below your toes and ending 6 inches above the center of your head. As you exhale, draw the other half of the egg on the left side of your body, starting at the head and ending below the toes. Imagine that you are lying now in the middle of a large protective egg. Repeat this sequence with coordinated breathing nine times. This part of the exercise protects you from negative external energy influences.

**Middle egg:** Then start directly at the toes, and on the in-breath, draw the oval closer to the body, intersecting the head. As you exhale, close this new egg on the left side, running from the head and touching the toes. This part of the exercise creates self-confidence, equanimity, and balance. Repeat this cycle nine times.

**Inner egg:** Finally, draw a small egg starting at the pelvis and ending at the “third eye” in the middle of your forehead. Visualize drawing the oval up on the right side as you inhale, and down on the left side as you exhale. Repeat this part nine times. After the exercise, remain on your back in *savasana* (corpse) pose for a minute or two, and visualize a field of protection around your body.

Prana eggs provides you with a strong protective energy field, and allows you to be fully relaxed before you begin your session.



Prana eggs

### Breathing exercises before the session

As Thai therapists, it's important to be relaxed with our breath and energetically composed before we begin working with clients. Focused breathing can be attained through meditation, yoga, reusi dat ton, and pranayama. Many breathing exercises are done in the typical sitting meditation pose, but effective deep breathing exercises can also be done in supine position, lying comfortably on your back.

During deep breathing exercises, we charge the blood with extra oxygen, and by extension, we also take in more *prana* (energy), which is equivalent to *lom* in the Thai medicine system. I have found that deep breathing exercises can be very helpful when used in conjunction with traditional Thai massage. It can be helpful to prepare for a Thai session or to de-stress from a difficult session by saturating the body with fresh *lom*. Here are two basic exercises to consider.

### Contiguous breathing

**Description:** This exercise incorporates three levels of breathing: from the abdomen, through the chest, and into the collarbones. The three parts are meant to flow sequentially from one area to another, as one complete breath.

**Technique:** Begin by exhaling slowly through the nose. At the end of the exhalation, pull the abdomen in slightly. Then begin to inhale by slowly releasing the abdomen and allowing it to expand. Continue your inhalation as you direct the air to expand your rib cage, and then, as you continue to inhale, allow your upper chest to expand until your collarbones rise slightly. Avoid lifting or tensing the shoulders. To exhale, reverse the order of the inhalation. First release your collarbones, then contract your chest, and then your stomach. Each section should flow into the next, in one continuous breath.

Total time for this exercise is 3–5 minutes. It can be practiced lying down or even sitting or standing, and may be done at anytime during the day.

### Sectional deep breathing

**Description:** I developed a variation of the above exercise that is very effective and brings about a deep state of relaxation. I use it to prepare for a Thai massage session when I feel I need extra composure and protection, and I also do it whenever anxious. Whenever I experience insomnia, it usually puts me right to sleep. If, during the process of a Thai massage I notice that my client is restless, or if his breathing is shallow and soft, I may sometimes guide him through this exercise in a soft voice while I am positioned near his middle section in supine position. For people with extremely shallow breath, it can be helpful right before doing deep stomach work. I find that it brings about expansive breathing and a sense of relaxation and surrender.

**Technique:** Lie on your back and imagine that your upper body is divided into three sections; your abdomen, your middle chest/rib cage, and your upper chest from the sternum to the neck. Now take a deep breath, and as you do so, notice which one of these three sections inflates most deeply. Are you predominantly a belly breather? Or does your middle section or upper section inflate the most as you breathe in? Do you breathe mostly into your middle chest or into your upper chest? Once you understand your dominant breathing zone, take a moment to relax before you begin the exercise.

First, take a few deep breaths through your nose, and try to inflate only your dominant breathing zone. In other words, if you've determined that you breathe mostly into your belly first, breathe only into your belly. Breathe slowly and fully into your dominant breath area, pause for a moment in a state of rest, and

then exhale slowly and fully only from that area of your body. Pause again after your exhale, and take another breath into that same section, so that you understand the feeling associated with directing air into and out of that area only. Now choose another zone, and repeat the process of acquainting yourself with the sensation of breathing only in and out of that area. Finally, breathe in and out of the remaining area once or twice to get acquainted with it.

Now change a different section every time you breathe. Constantly change the order, and try to not think about which section you will inflate until the very last second before you change zones. Breathe in and out through the belly, then the collarbones, then the mid-section; in and out through the mid-section, then the belly, then the collarbones; in and out through the collarbones, then the belly, then the mid-section, and so on.

After you play with your breath in this way for at least 3–4 minutes, and when you feel you are ready to close the exercise, take a full and complete breath into all three sections at the same time. Take note of how expansive this feels, and what it is like when we breathe fully into our entire upper body. Take several more complete breaths, languishing in the relaxation that this complete breathing brings. You may feel tingly and experience a deep calming sensation. Slowly wind down the exercise, remain in resting position for a few more sections, and then, when you are ready, slowly come to a sitting position.

## Protecting yourself during the session

### Washing during the session

It may sometimes be helpful to wash your hands during a session. If, for example, you have just facilitated or witnessed a major release of energy, tension, or emotion from your client, it may be wise to wash the part of your body that was in contact with that person at the time of release. Obviously, we can't excuse ourselves to wash after every reaction our clients may have. But if you have a strong premonition that you may have been affected by your client's release, then by all means, take a moment to cleanse yourself before you proceed. If a bathroom is nearby, excuse yourself and quickly wash your hands with soap and cold running water. Sometimes I time my washing to go along with a client's requested bathroom break, but whenever I feel the need to wash for any reason, I excuse myself and quickly wash myself.

Ajahn Pichet Boonthumme always keeps a bowl or cup of water nearby with a piece of sour tamarind in it. The antiseptic water is acidic and is believed to be a major cleansing agent for "bad energy." Water with lemon or lime juice can also be effective. If you can't remove yourself physically from the room, you might keep a bowl of water and a washcloth nearby, or spray yourself with a neutralizing solution. Neutralizing solutions are made by combining essen-

tial oils or extracts with a transmitter, and some water. See the “clearing energy” section ahead for a few recipes for neutralizing solutions.

### **Visualization techniques**

A number of visualization techniques may be helpful for self-protection during a Thai massage session. Here are a few:

- A simple but important way to maintain strength is to focus attention on your hara. When your client becomes stressed, upset, or emotional, bring more attention to your hara, and imagine it as strong and unwavering. If necessary, you may even touch it lightly to bring focus to that area as you continue to work with your client.
- Utilize a “mental wash” when you sense something is uncomfortable or negative in your client. To do this, imagine clean fresh water running down through the top of your head and then continuing through your entire body. The water should be at a comfortable temperature, and it should run through your body from your head to the bottoms of your feet, where it exits. As the water passes through you, imagine it cleaning each section of your body, including particular areas or organs that you feel need to be cleansed.
- Visualize a strong, mental shield of positive energy around your body, and hold it there. Imagine gathering all the energy from different areas of your body and bringing it together slightly outside your body to form a protective shield. Now flood the shield with sunlight or golden light, and imagine that this boundary is permanently in place around you as you work.

### **Burning energy at the source**

One way to prevent or minimize unwanted energy from entering your system is to imagine “burning” it at the source. As you feel or sense energy, shaking, or tension emerging from your client’s body, while you’re palming, for example, imagine a bright flame of fire between your hands and their body. As the energy comes out, visualize that it is being burned at the source, and that there is no way it can enter your body.

### **Acting as a conduit**

An alternative to burning the energy at the source is to imagine it entering through one side of your body and exiting the other side. If you are facilitating a release using your left hand or foot, for example, imagine that the energy is entering your body there and exiting through your opposite hand or foot. If



you're in a sitting position using one hand, extend your other hand, palm upward, and imagine the energy running through your body and exiting through your outstretched hand. If you're in a standing or kneeling position and both hands are engaged, move or lift one of your feet, and imagine the current exiting through the sole of your foot. Be creative with this technique, but make sure you focus on the exit point, and that you imagine the energy completely leaving your body.

### **Utilize resting poses when necessary**

During periods of emotional release, it can be important to engage yourself and your client in a resting pose; a technique or posture that requires little or no movement. Silence and stillness are often necessary for a client to calm down and for the therapist to stay relaxed and focused.

In supine position, if an emotional release is emerging, you may gently rest your hand on your client's heart and remain still. Establish a protective shield around your body, try to be as "empty" as possible, and wait. You may also gently work *sen sumana* with two fingers of one hand. This requires very little effort on the part of the therapist, and can be quite calming for the receiver. More information on resting poses can be found in the earlier essay entitled *Care and Feeding of Your Thai Massage Practice*, but only you can determine when and how to modify or stop your work when a short break is needed.

## **Protecting yourself after the session**

### **Washing**

I can't overstress the value of post-session washing. Use cold or room temperature running water and plenty of natural soap. Make sure the water runs freely over your hands, and keep your fingers pointed downward as you wash. If the session was stressful or emotional for your client or yourself, try to take a vigorous shower as soon as possible after the session. After a difficult session, if I know that a particular client always takes a lot of time to emerge from the treatment room, I sometimes take a quick shower and then I return to say goodbye to the client.

If running water or a shower is not available, use salt water or water infused with something tannic, like sour tamarind, or the rind of lemons or limes. You can keep a bowl or jar of liquid nearby, and pour it over your hands and arms, and brush it across your face and your head. With all post-session washing, the sooner you do it, the better.

### **Physical de-stressing**

Deep yoga stretches, such as sun salutations, back bends, plows, and cobras, can be very effective for the therapist immediately following a session. Try to always incorporate deep inhalations and exhalations into your exercises, and imagine bringing clean energy into your body with your inhale, and releasing the stale energy with your exhale. Any kind of forward or backward bending can be helpful, and even dangling your back on an exercise ball while expelling air deeply as you do sit-ups may result in energy release.

If you feel unwanted energy residing in a certain part of your body, such as your stomach, chest, back, or arms, focus on those parts of the body as you do yoga and utilize creative visualizations to attempt to expel the negative energy. If your client had a strong emotional response in her session, or if you sensed an energetic release through her body, or if you feel you may have absorbed negative energies from your client in any other way, consider doing one or more of the post-session exercises described on the next pages.

### **Clearing energy**

Even if the therapist hasn't directly absorbed energies from a stressed client, the mood of your practice room can be altered by lingering, stale energy left over from your client's session. Open a window (two if possible for cross-ventilation), and let the room breathe a bit. Light a fresh candle at your altar, change the sheets and pillowcases your client was lying on, and make a deliberate effort to bring new, cleansing energy back into your room.

Neutralizing solutions can help clear the energy from the session room after a deep or stressful session. You can prepare your own solutions using an essential oil, a transmitting medium such as alcohol or witch hazel, and some water. My favorite blend is to mix equal parts of rosewater, witch hazel, and water. Another effective blend can be made by combining clear grain alcohol such as vodka or gin with some water, and adding as many drops as needed of a cleansing essential oil such as cedar, sage, lime, lemon, or peppermint. You may use sour tamarind soaked in water or diluted lime juice, plus a bit of alcohol. No matter which combination of essential oil and transmitting agent you choose, send healing energy into the room as you spray high into the air after your client has left. Imagine the negative energy being lifted as you treat the room.

### **Kaya kriya**

The *kaya kriya* exercise is a wonderful way to release negative energies and to detoxify after any Thai massage session, but it is especially effective after a

difficult session, that is, whenever you work with someone who is holding a lot of tension or going through difficult times or emotional or physical stress.

This traditional yoga kriya was popularized for use in Thai massage by Asokananda. The routine is comprised of four parts, and each part should be done seven or nine times to ensure deep relaxation. In Thailand, odd numbers are believed to be more auspicious than even numbers.

Lie on your back, preferably with your head pointing north. Open your legs, and keep your arms away from your body, as in the illustration below.

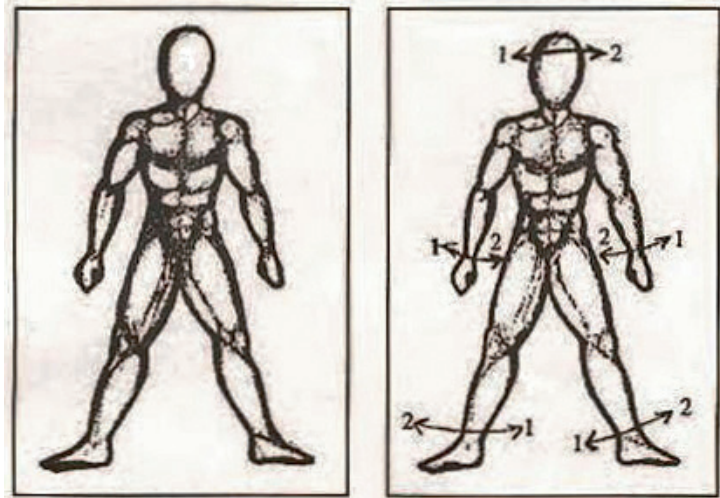
Remember, each of the four sections should be done seven or nine times in succession.

**Part 1:** Inhale only into the lower part of your lungs, near the diaphragm, and turn your feet and legs inward with as much pressure as possible. As you exhale, roll your feet and legs outward again.

**Part 2:** Breathe only into the middle part of the lungs, at the mid-chest, and roll your arms and hands outward with strong pressure. Your back may slightly lift off the ground as you inhale and hold your breath. When you exhale, roll your arms and hands inward again.

**Part 3:** Breathe into the upper part of your lungs, near your breastbone. Turn your head to the right as you inhale, and then to the left as you exhale.

**Part 4:** Now take a full deep breath as you perform all of the above movements at the same time. Repeat many times. It can be confusing at first, but it becomes easier with practice. After you complete this final section, return to your normal breathing pattern, and stay relaxed on your back for as long as you like. You will often feel a powerful release of tension.



Kaya Kriya

### Additional post-session exercises for Thai therapists

Although the kaya kriya is an efficient way to de-stress and purge negative energies, completion of the exercise requires a private space and a fair amount of time. Since you may not always have the space and/or the time necessary to perform a full kaya kriya, do whatever you can right after the session, and then follow through with a more vigorous de-stressing later in the day, at a more convenient time. Here are some other ideas for cleansing and detoxifying yourself after a difficult session.



### Brushing and breathing

#### Brushing and breathing

This exercise involves “brushing” the stressful energies from your body. It can be done as soon as you leave the treatment room, even as the client is still resting or getting dressed. First wash your hands. Then, using the outstretched palm of one hand, vigorously brush the other side of your body with a downward sweeping motion. With every downward stroke, rotate your wrist slightly away from your body, and vigorously sweep away negativity from your energetic field. You can begin at your head and then work downward to your face, neck, shoulders, arms, and hands on one side of your body. Then work your chest and lower back with both hands. Start again from the top of your head on the other side of your body until you reach your groin. Then finish the rest of your body with two hands at once, covering the front of your body, your legs, and as much of the back of your body as possible, until you end at your feet.

This exercise can be even more powerful if you combine strong exhales with every downward stroke. Keep your cheeks slightly rounded, and exhale deeply with every brushing stroke. Imagine that you are removing traces of bad energy, both with your hands and with your breath.

#### Rapid diaphragmatic breathing

This is a classic pranayama exercise, in which only the abdominal area moves and the chest remains still. Make sure you don’t slump your posture because it’s easy to strain your chest muscles if you’re in the wrong position. Sit on the floor in half-lotus posture. Place your hands on your knees, and make sure your body is straight, but relaxed and not stiff.

The exercise is composed of a series of rapid breath expulsions, which are done in quick succession. After every breath expulsion, the air naturally flows back into your lungs, and you immediately proceed naturally to the next expulsion.



Shaking and draining

The first few times you do this, place a hand on your abdomen, so that you can feel how it contracts as you forcibly exhale. Quickly and forcefully contract your abdomen by snapping it inward, and allow the air to forcefully exit through your nose. Your abdomen will relax very briefly between contractions, and before the air automatically flows back into your body. Make sure your shoulders don't bounce up and down, and that only your abdomen moves during the exercise.

Take at least fifteen breaths, as described above, in rapid succession. You may do more expulsions, as long as you don't get too dizzy or bring about excessive strain to your system. You can easily feel light-headed after this exercise, so make sure to relax and reintegrate yourself before you stand up.

### Shaking and draining

This is a Chinese *qi gong* exercise that may also be helpful. To clear yourself of negative energies following a difficult session, vigorously shake your hands for 30–45 seconds while you focus all your energy on your hara. Imagine the negative energy rising through your body and gathering at your hands as you shake them. As you are doing this, take deep, prolonged inhales, and long, protracted exhales. After a minute or two, your hara and your hands will become warm. Then immediately place your outstretched hands on a rock or a brick wall, or a tree, or a drainpipe, or anything that runs directly into the ground. This allows the “sick” energy that just surfaced through your body to drain into the ground. Try to sense the energy exiting your body as you make contact with the drain that is connected to the earth.



Tighten and release

### **Tighten and release**

This exercise is helpful for tension release if you don't have a lot of time after the session. As you inhale, tighten all the muscles in your body with maximum tension. Squeeze them as tightly as possible, with all your strength. Hold your breath as you maintain the tension for a few seconds. Exhale, and then completely release all the tension, as you allow your body to unfold on the mat. Repeat this cycle at least five times, even more if desired, and then resume normal breathing.

### Sun / Moon visualization

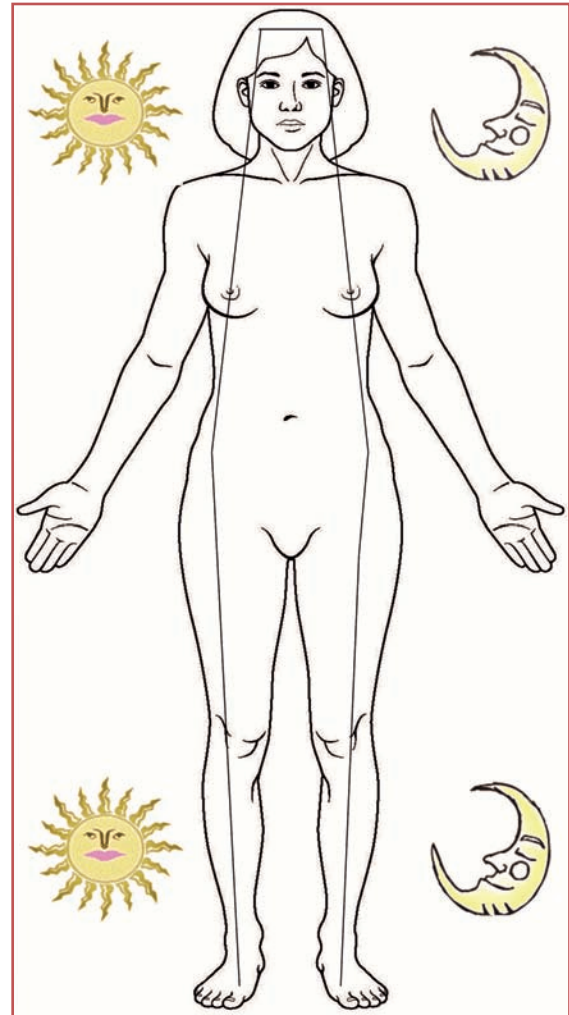
This is a creative visualization intended to restore peace and balance. Do it after you have engaged in any of the more physical exercises for tension release mentioned above. Inhale slowly, and imagine golden sunlight entering the toes of your right foot, moving up the side of your body, and leaving your head. After you finish inhaling, hold your breath for a few seconds. As you exhale, imagine a silvery moonlight moving downward from your head, down the left side of your body, and exiting through your toes. Repeat this visualization until you feel a deep sense of relaxation, at least seven to nine times. Then continue to breathe normally.

### Meditation

If you have time, and after you have done one or more de-stressing exercises, you may take a short period to meditate silently, in order to balance yourself further and bring new healing energy into your system. Any type of silent, focused meditation will do. Remember to utilize as much breath awareness as possible while you meditate.

### Protect yourself

I hope that this essay helps to bring about a greater awareness of the need for self-protection among traditional Thai massage therapists. With a little bit of practice, the concepts and techniques presented here can help you protect yourself against outside energies, and can fortify and maintain your own energy system so you can be a more effective healer.



Sun and moon  
visualization