



# Traditional Thai Medical Massage

By Nancy Sheehan

*Thai Massage has been steadily gaining popularity in the West in recent years as a practice that lies somewhere between the worlds of massage and yoga. It seemingly combines the best of these two worlds: the passive body manipulation and muscle release of massage and the asana-like poses and spiritual core of yoga. In the story that follows, one local practitioner, who herself combines the best of these worlds as a yoga teacher and massage therapist certified in Thai Massage, gives her account of her trip to Thailand to study what is actually a very ancient practice.*

Three years ago I was sitting in a hostel in Singapore reading a fabulous article in Yoga Journal about the healing art of Thai Massage. I had just gotten my land legs back after eight months of cruising the South Pacific and Eastern Asia as an on-board Massage Therapist and Yoga Teacher. I was intrigued to learn that this

one technique helps people to achieve a variety of hatha yoga positions and also includes aspects of shiatsu and active meditation. After reading the article I decided to travel to the Institute of Thai Massage in Chaing Mai, Thailand, a school noted by the author

for their intensive Thai Massage training.

I took the overland route: a bus to Malaysia, a train to Bangkok, and another bus to Chaing Mai, a northern hill city. I found the Institute of Thai Massage, which

The Thai therapist uses a series of passive stretching exercises to energize and increase range of motion.



sat just outside the gates of the old city. I decided upon my arrival to try a massage. In Asia things move slowly and the pace of massage is no exception. My first massage was great: three hours of pure bliss. In Thailand they have a saying that a one hour massage is good, a two-hour massage is better and a three-hour massage is best! My massage left me feeling completely relaxed, energized and revitalized. I enrolled in the training program the next day. There were twenty other students in my class including travelers from all over the world who had benefited from Thai massage and wanted to learn its secrets.

Every morning we washed our feet and dedicated our prayer to Dr. Jivaka Kumar Bhacca the founder of Thai Massage. This legendary figure, who lived about 2500 years ago, is believed to have been a doctor from northern India and a contemporary of the Buddha. Thai practitioners traditional-



ly recite a mantra to this enlightened soul before each session. My teacher, Chongkol Setthakorn, has translated the prayer from the ancient Pali language as follows:

“We invite the spirit of our founder, the Father Doctor Jivaka, who comes to us through his saintly life. Please bring to us the knowledge of all nature, that this prayer (mantra) will show us the true medicine of the universe. In the name of this mantra, we respect your help and pray that through our bodies you will bring wholeness and health to the body of our client. The goddess of healing dwells in the heavens high, while mankind stays in the world below. In the name of the founder, may the heavens be reflected in the earth below so that this healing medicine may encircle the world. We pray for the one whom we touch, that she will be happy and that any illness will be released from him or her”

Thai massage was originally considered to be a spiritual practice of metta, or loving compassion, and until recently was only practiced in the temples by Buddhist monks. If one traces the evolution of the Thai Massage techniques, one discovers that it has influences from Indian Ayurvedic medicine. In Thai Massage relaxation is only a secondary goal. The primary focus is on balancing the network of unseen energy meridians called Sen. These channels are similar to the nadis, or energy channels, of Indian Ayurvedic medicine. It is believed that the Sen distribute life energy throughout the body and if any of the Sen become blocked, then illness will manifest. Like Ayurvedic medicine, some Thai Massage incorporates herbal treatments and steam baths. To this day Dr. Jivaka Kumar Bhacca is venerated as the “Father of Thai Medicine” and religious ceremonies (called pujas in Pali) are conducted to remember him.

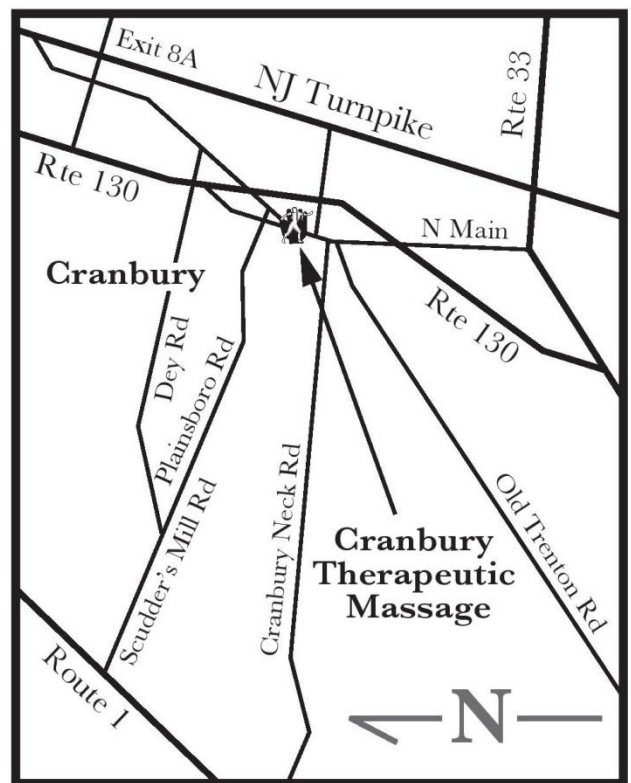
A session of Thai Massage begins with the client on a mat on the floor in a space suitable for relaxation. Except for the feet, the client is fully clothed. The Thai therapist uses a series of passive stretching exercises to energize and increase range of motion. Often thumb, palm, elbow, and foot pressure are used to release blockages and balance internal energy flow. Drawing on passive yoga therapy, this massage also incorporates acupressure and reflexology. This results in loosening of the joints through manipulation and peripheral stimulation, stretching of the muscles, toning of the internal organs, and an increase of vitality and relaxation. The treatment is rhythmic and meditative providing a unique experience for the giver as well as the receiver.

The benefits of Thai Massage can be greatly enhanced when combined with a regular program of yoga practice. Good health depends on a balanced flow of vital energy in the body. Both Thai Massage and yoga assist in the free flow of vital energy and help build a high level of vitality and fitness. 🙏

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