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YOGA

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Any serious student of yoga knows how deeply this wonderful practice can affect us; and change us. Certainly as a philosophy it goes back many thousands of years, so there must be something endearing about it. Developed in India in Vedic times, over 5 000 years ago, today yoga is an important tool for physical and mental therapy, helping to maintain well-being and health in an increasingly stressful society. Helping us to connect with our true selves: Hatha yoga represents the third limb of yoga, asana - or physical postures - over 200 of which are described in modern textbooks. These asanas have evolved over the centuries so as to exercise every muscle, nerve and gland in the body; thus bringing the different bodily functions into perfect harmony so that they work for the good of the whole body. Through practicing the asanas we see an awareness develop of the interrelation between the emotional, mental and physical levels.

Thai Yoga Massage combines rhythmic motion, palming and thumbing along the body's energy lines, with gentle stretching and breathwork

Over the last few years a traditional healing discipline has gained popularity in the West that combines the principles and postures of Hatha yoga with the Buddhist spirit of loving kindness and mindfulness. Thai Yoga Massage (aka Thai Massage or Yoga Massage) is an ancient form of massage derived from the wisdoms of yoga and is considered to be the physical application of loving kindness. In receiving Thai Yoga Massage the recipient is also receiving the benefits of Hatha yoga, which is why Thai Yoga Massage is often referred to as assisted Hatha yoga.

Origins

The origins of Thai Yoga Massage go back 2,500 years to India and the spread of Buddhism. Its founder, Jivaka Kumarbhaccha, was a well-known yogi and Ayurvedic doctor who is known to have attended to the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. From its earliest beginnings, Thai Yoga Massage, has had strong links with Buddhism as well as being heavily influenced by Indian culture and Indian medicine, or Ayurveda. In turn, Buddhism has early origins in yogic traditions: the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) arose from the Brahmanical-Upanisadic traditions of yogic contemplation and are seen as a valuable clarification of yogic traditions.



Illustrations by Kam Thye Chow and
The Lotus Palm School of Thai Yoga Massage



Traditional Thai massage developed over centuries in the Buddhist temples in Thailand. It became widely practiced in the temple environment when Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia. However, whilst it is culturally integrated in Thailand today it is difficult to talk about a standard form: most Thai Yoga Massage practitioners have developed an 'interesting' indigenous approach which has no set system. Often it is part of a shamanic tradition where the teacher uses his own spiritual experience to create a theory. For this reason, over the last ten years Western practitioners have travelled to Thailand to study Thai Yoga Massage, bringing back a fusion of new styles, resulting in a new system that has gained rapid popularity across Europe and North America.

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The Practice Today

Thai Yoga Massage combines rhythmic motion, palming and thumbing along the body's

energy lines, with gentle stretching and breathwork, so that a slow flowing dance is created around the recipient's body. The practitioner uses their thumbs, hands, elbows and even feet and legs to gently guide the recipient into various yoga postures whilst remaining focussed and centred. It is applied with the recipient fully clothed on a futon mat, and the therapist works along important energy lines whilst moving the body through sequences of yoga based stretches. The masseur typically starts at the feet and works up the body in a flowing rhythmic manner, dissolving energy blocks and creating a deep sense of relaxation and physical well-being.

As in yoga, posture, breath and movement are the key components. In addition, Thai Yoga Massage is seen as an extension of the practitioner's spiritual practice – through the application of loving kindness or metta. Metta is unconditional love and compassion and is a universal principle, not confined to Buddhism. To be performed to best effect, Thai Yoga Massage is given in a meditative state. Meditation is about being fully

alive in the present moment, it brings a centering and balance, and this is essential to establish a healing space and harmony with the massage.

the benefits of yoga stretching, Buddhist philosophy of loving kindness, massage, spirituality and Ayurveda

So every Thai massage begins with a meditation. Following on from this the core practice is a sequence of movements and postures that become a meditative dance, the aim being to achieve a consistent, rhythmic pressure, using the weight of the body, that is deeply relaxing. Various rocking movements combined with a number of working stances, help the practitioner move their body well, with graceful transitions. The practitioner takes between 1.5 and 2.5 hours, moves through a series of between 40 and 60 postures, applied to the recipient either seated or lying down. The massage starts at the feet, moving to the legs, back, abdomen, chest, arms hands and face as well as the head and neck. Some of these will be familiar to yoga students; the locust, cobra, half plough are amongst them.

Theory

Thai massage draws upon several theoretical foundations, the key of which is energy. As humans we are energy as well as form, and in the 21st century the scientists know this as surely as the ancient yogis. Whether this is referred to as chi or prana, the state of our energy system plays a large part in determining our state of health. In the yogic tradition, prana is the breath of life, which circulates along 72000 channels (nadis) in the body, feeding all the organs. This energy line system forms the basis of Thai massage, where ten of these energy lines are of key importance, the sip sen, and are all connected to pressure points known as marmas. Massaging the sen results in free flow of prana; and stretching and massaging the sen network releases tension, opening up the entire body. This enhanced energy flow helps alleviate common problems such as lower back pain, arthritis, headaches, digestive and menstrual problems and stress related conditions. As well as generating a deep state of relaxation, Thai massage promotes centredness and well-being for both client and practitioner.

Along the sen pathways are concentrated points, energy centres where the prana flows. These energy centres, or marmas, act as vortices of pranic energy and control the circulation of energy around the body. Often when we fall sick it is because of energy blockages or imbalances in these marmas. Of the 108 marmas in the body, 13 are worked on in a full Thai massage bodywork session. Seven of the major marma centres, situated along one of the main sen lines, are more commonly known as chakras, and are associated with major nerve plexuses and endocrine glands in the body. These chakras are regularly worked on during yoga practice: many yoga students will recognise the strong pressure exerted on the thyroid gland during sarvangasana (shoulder stand) - at the throat chakra or vishuddi chakra. This posture massages the thyroid thereby greatly improving its functioning.

The therapeutic basis of Thai massage lies in the ancient Indian system of medicine, Ayurveda. Ayurveda means 'knowledge or science of life' and is the oldest natural healing system in the

world. Ayurveda and yoga have heavily influenced each other during their long history, although the connection within Thai massage has been all but lost in Thailand. Fortunately today, one school of Thai massage is reconnecting these two systems, the Lotus Palm School in Montreal. Kam Thye Chow, the school's founder and director, explains, "Lotus Palm has chosen the way of Ayurveda because of the historical connection with Thai Yoga Massage, but also for the sheer logic of it. It just makes sense. The two systems are a perfect match."

The Lotus Palm method works with the Ayurvedic principles of the three humours in the human body, known as the tridoshas: vata, pitta and kapha. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, each person's natural constitution, or Prakruti, is made of one or more of the tridoshas. Therefore vata, pitta or kapha make up our individual constitutions in a certain, specific combination which reflects our physical build, characteristics, physiological functions, beliefs and emotional tendencies.

The Lotus Palm School works with the postures in Thai massage, all of which have strong Ayurvedic potential, to apply Ayurveda to the client in accordance with his or her constitution. Thus someone who is predominantly vata (an ether/air person) has a strong need to be grounded, and the Thai massage practitioner will work to 'earth' this person. At Lotus Palm practitioners are trained to understand and work on the client's Prakruti, this can be achieved using techniques such as body type analysis and character reading questionnaires.

Thai Yoga massage has started to gain prominence in the West in the last five years, and the reasons are clear. It has much in common with yoga. And with the explosive growth of yoga in recent years, more and more people have had direct experience of its benefits, and can easily understand why Thai Yoga Massage makes so much sense. It is a superior form of massage, perhaps the king of massages. Combining the benefits of yoga stretching, Buddhist philosophy of loving kindness, massage, spirituality and Ayurveda, it creates a spiritual dance that can heal both practitioner and recipient.

For more information on Thai Yoga Massage teachers/practitioners contact:

Kam Thye Chow is the founder and director of the Lotus Palm School of Thai Yoga Massage in Montreal. Web: www.lotuspalm.com He has taught massage in Thailand and throughout Europe and North America. He is author of 'Thai Yoga Massage: A Dynamic Therapy for Physical Well-Being and Spiritual Energy'. His new book 'Ayurveda and Thai Yoga Therapy' is due out in early 2005, published by Healing Arts Press: www.InnerTraditions.com

For details of Thai Yoga massage in the UK:

Cath Waller at Earthways Institute regularly runs workshops and courses in London. Web: www.earthways-thaiyogamassage.com or Tel: 02077 207 381

Amy Ku Redler at Metta, the College of Traditional Thai Yoga Massage also runs courses in London. Web: www.yogamassage.co.uk or Tel: 02072 673 382.

