

หลักวิชา

The Principles of Thai Bodywork

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Thai Massage can be fun for therapists to do. But it can also injure clients if done too forcefully, incorrectly, or on the wrong client. A good Thai therapist knows how to adjust to each client and has learned that just because some moves are fun for him/her to do and receive doesn't mean they are good for their clients.

Massage therapists must be able to work on all types and ages of people with all kinds of conditions. A good therapist is discerning of each client's needs, has the experience to know what works and doesn't, and is skilled in a variety of "tools" to work effectively with each client.

Over my 25 years of practicing Thai Massage, I have developed a form of Thai Massage that is safe and deeply effective for most clients. Now I distinguish two versions or styles of Thai massage which I call "Thai Yoga" and "Thai Bodywork".

Thai Yoga is more like assisted yoga and is usually done forcefully. It consists mainly of stretching and pressing all parts of the body. It is fun to give and can be stimulating for the right clients. Young, healthy yoga students and athletes often enjoy it. However, it can injure clients or make conditions worse, and clients may feel sore afterward.

Thai Bodywork is a form of massage and energy work. It uses conscious touch, stretches, range of motion, and other techniques, done more gently, to affect the whole energy and nervous system to relieve pain and restore balance. It is safe and effective for the majority of people, from strong athletes to frail or elderly clients. Clients usually leave pain-free, or greatly reduced, with a pervasive sense of well-being.

In Thailand the common street form is very forceful stretching and pressing, done in a one-mode-fits-all style, often pushing everything to the limit, maximizing every move. It can be brutal and has given Thai the reputation of being a harsh modality. This form works in Thailand because the cultural expectation is that massage is supposed to hurt – "no pain, no gain;" "good medicine taste bad." But that does not work for the majority of clients in America – and I have discovered that Thai Massage does NOT have to hurt to be effective.

In fact, the work of the real masters is more nuanced with more going on than just stretching and pressing. They also use different forms of energy work and have the wisdom to know which moves are the most effective, where to press, and how far to go. There are a number of different styles and techniques, but what characterizes Thai elders is gracefulness and efficiency, which is also noticeable throughout Thai culture. My form of Thai Bodywork combines several of these styles and techniques which I have found work well for Americans.

I started with a forceful style of Thai Yoga, and during 25 years of practice and feedback from clients I developed Thai Bodywork. I am amazed by the effects I now get with much less effort and half the time. In an hour of Thai Bodywork I can now do more for the client than I used to do in two hours of Thai Yoga. And I feel as good as the client!

What makes the difference?

The Principles. These are the principles I have learned that have changed my work and that transform what appears on the surface to be a strong physical modality into a deeply effective therapy for the whole person. These are the foundation of Thai Bodywork.

1. It ain't what you do, it's how you do it.
2. Work smarter, not harder. A deep effect does not require forceful pressure.
3. The "Goldilocks touch" is just right for each client, firm but gentle.
4. Intentionally connect with the whole body in everything you do.
5. Use the healing power of smooth-flowing rhythm, conscious breathing, and loving-kindness meditation.
6. It's a dance, and it's the whole sequence/choreography that does it, not just certain moves or trying to get the maximum out of each move.
7. It's energy work, and it's completing the circular flow from feet to head that does it.
8. It's a meditation for the practitioner the entire time.

Deep Effect. Everyone says they want so-called 'deep tissue' work. But effective deep tissue work does not come from just adding more pressure. It's not the amount of pressure, but how the pressure is applied and where. Effective deep tissue work comes from working smarter not harder. The Goldilocks touch gives just the right touch and pressure to fit the individual. What the client experiences as 'deep', 'satisfying', 'effective' does not come from pressing harder but from making a deep connection. Deep connection comes from the whole manner of how the therapist works: using intention,

using the principles of the Goldilocks touch, conscious breathing, and meditating. The deep effect comes from always working with the whole body, doing a flowing rhythmic dance that engages the whole body, opening all the energy meridians, and completing the natural circle of energy flow.

Choreographed Dance. The best way I've found to put all these principles together is to think of Thai Bodywork as a choreographed dance. What makes a particular dance work is a consistent rhythm, and the Thai Bodywork dance is a smooth-flowing rhythmic sequence of moves. It is not a solo dance where you can do anything you want; it is a couple dance where you must connect with your partner/client and stay connected for the whole song. The dance has a beginning, middle, and end and one must do the whole dance for it to be effective.

In good partner dancing the sequence of moves is important. There must be a natural progression of moves that your partner can easily follow. If you jump around or don't connect the moves together it will feel disjointed and the client won't relax into it. It is not just the separate individual moves but the combination of all the moves that makes the dance expressive and healing. And the 'lead' must be just right, not too light or too forceful, or the client won't come back to dance with you.

Another applicable characteristic of dance is continuously moving without stopping till the end. One can slow way down at certain points or do multiple repetitions of a move for emphasis, but there is always a sense of momentum leading to the end of the song, the final result of the session. So it is more in keeping with the dance flow to do multiple repetitions of a stretch, going progressively deeper, than to do it once and hold it. And it is more effective too.

The Thai Bodywork dance that I teach has built into it everything that clients generally need. It covers every area of the body, all the joints and muscle groups and all the energy meridians and it does it in a sequence that completes the flow of energy throughout the whole body. So it is necessary to do the whole choreography from feet to head to be complete. And if you do the whole dance as choreographed it will have a deep, healing effect. You can trust the whole dance to work.

Learn from the Form. Asian modalities of martial arts and healing often teach a set form that one learns and practices over and over. The form then becomes the teacher. Doing it teaches you how to work. As it becomes engrained in your body you develop a deeper understanding than you ever could by intellectual learning and analysis. Once you have mastered the

form, then you can do anything you want, because you will then be automatically using the principles imbedded in the form. But that usually takes years of practice, which Asians are willing to devote, but Americans are too impatient.

I say Thai Bodywork is a choreographed dance; so do I always do exactly the 'same thing' with every client? -Yes and No.

I do the same overall structure but may make variations within it to better fit individual needs. I can add or subtract moves but keep the same sequence. For example, for low back pain most of the routine from feet to head is beneficial in one way or another. But if there is a possibility of a more severe condition then I would not do some moves, such as twists, and do all the other moves more slowly and cautiously. I would emphasize some things like working the energy lines in the back and repeating moves that affect the main muscles in the area. I would also do variations of some moves that make them more gentle or effective for this condition. So the sequence and flow would remain basically the same but it might be a slower, more focused dance with some variations.

On the other hand, if there is no pain and the client is just tight, I may do more repetitions of relevant moves, going progressively deeper, and add in other moves that specifically work certain areas. But in both cases it is still essential to do the whole routine from feet to head because the body is an interconnected system. All the moves in the choreography will contribute to the relaxation and releasing of the target area by working on the whole system at a deep level.

Goldilocks Touch. I prefer to demonstrate and explain the Goldilocks Touch in class because there are a number of parts to it and it is best to experience it as I work on everyone and lead guided exercises. I can point out some specific aspects of the technique and give things to practice, but in the end it is an art which only develops with experience and practice. I expect most long-time therapists develop some version of it.

Just as Goldilocks found the potage that was not too hot or too cold, so this touch feels 'just right', not too light or too hard. The experience for the client is that it feels firm but also gentle and it feels like it effects the whole body at a deep level. Other qualities are 'nurturing' and 'comforting' in a way that invites the person to relax and holdings to release. 'Gentle' does not mean a light touch; it refers to the manner in which the pressure is applied. The speed, smoothness, and intention are important factors. Likewise, the sense of 'firmness' is not achieved only by the amount of

pressure but also by how much of one's hands and body are engaged in the delivery and one's intention.

To make the touch, the pressing and stretching, 'just right' for each client, one must be sensitive to subtle responses to notice where a stretch begins and how far the comfort range extends, instead of just pushing until one is stopped at the end. Working in this way one can notice more precisely and work more effectively with the tensions and imbalances throughout the body.

Energy Work. There is more going on in Thai Bodywork than meets the eye. One can see the stretching and pressing but probably not the energy work. There are several aspects to it. One is the meridian system called 'sen' which must be opened. Another part is the sequence itself which works systematically to complete the direction of flow from feet to head and back down in a circle. Intention is also a big part of it as one 'sends' energy to certain areas while 'holding' the whole body in awareness and keeping track of where the dance is going. One's own breathing can affect the energy, so it is important to breathe consciously in a rhythmic way, which I explain in class. So again, energy work is not something mechanical that one does; it involves one's whole manner of working, including how much awareness one can bring to the present moment.

Meditation. For me, a Thai Bodywork session is both a dance and a meditation. It is the time when I am the most focused and aware in my day. Doing a session helps to center and energize me. So I approach each session with gratitude for the gift. In the Thai Buddhist tradition giving bodywork is considered an act of compassion and generosity. There are also some specific meditation techniques, which I learned in my years of study in Thai temples, that I have found can be done DURING the whole session to enhance the deep healing effect of the treatment. I will guide the class in these meditations and their application during the work.

These are the main principles of Thai Bodywork which I always enjoy sharing with anyone who is willing to try them out. I think these principles can easily be applied to most other forms of massage and bodywork to enhance their effect as well as benefit the practitioner.