

Traditional thai massage: unveiling the misconceptions and revealing the health benefits

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Abstract

Traditional Thai medicine is an integral part of the culture of Thailand and more importantly the healthcare system. Until recently traditional healthcare had lost its popularity due to the introduction of Western therapies, but fortunately once again is seeing a revival of interest among Thai people. By prescribing traditional Thai medicines in conjunction with Western medicines there is a wider variety of treatment options for the practitioner thereby, optimizing patient health. One powerful, yet misunderstood, therapy is traditional Thai massage. Very obvious and reproducible health benefits are known by patients and practitioners of Traditional Thai massage, yet still there are very few scientific studies to back these claims. This paper focuses on the history, theories, treatment, and health benefits of traditional Thai massage in order to foster a better understanding of this ancient therapy.

Scientists of western medicine do not tend to study and treat the human body holistically as traditional healers do, but rather as diseased parts. Little is known about the causal relationship between traditional treatments and the health benefits largely due to lack of scientific research. However the benefits are quite obvious and reproducible. More research about Traditional Thai Massage needs to be undertaken to demystify and to legitimize this powerful therapy.

Key words

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INTRODUCTION

Thai traditional massage is an ancient form of healing that has been practiced in conjunction with other traditional medicines in Thailand for thousands of years. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions about traditional Thai massage. In the last century the validity of traditional Thai massage has been questioned due to the number of illegitimate Thai massage parlors operating throughout Thailand. The tarnished reputation of Thai massage has caused the validity of the practice and its health benefits to be questioned (3).

Traditional Thai Massage is an important aspect of the Primary Health Care system in Thailand. The foundation of Primary Health Care System emphasizes the role of the individual and his responsibility for his health. By utilizing Traditional Thai Massage as a means of preventive and curative care the Thai community can inexpensively and actively take responsibility for their own health. Traditional Thai Medicine is an effective treatment for many different ailments used in conjunction with other treatments and also alone. This paper focuses on the history, theories, treatment, and health benefits of traditional Thai massage in order to foster a better understanding of the therapy.

Theoretical Foundation of Thai Massage

Western medical doctors and scientists still are baffled by the apparent relief of pain and cure of diseases brought on by the eastern methods of energy manipulation, including traditional Thai massage. This concept of an energetic life-force is not unique to Thailand and is found in many other eastern countries (3).

In traditional Thai massage the Indian influence is unmistakable because the concept clearly originates from Yoga philosophy. Theoretically, traditional Thai Massage focuses on an invisible energy body that surrounds the physical body. Yoga philosophy contends that this energy body is the energy that sustains life. The energy of life is absorbed through the air breathed and the food eaten by the individual. Traditional Thai massage is

based on this concept of an invisible energy body surrounding every individual being (ibid).

An individual's energy body may be comprised of over 72,000 individual energy lines. The individual's energy body is divided into ten main energy lines called Sen that supply the organs with vital energy, the life force. Traditional Thai Massage focuses on manipulating the energy on the 10 main Sen Lines, which are similar to the meridians of the Japanese and Chinese. Because the energy body is an invisible extension of the physical body, it can not be verified by sight and the energy lines also can not be seen (ibid). Anatomically, the Sen lines do not correspond with the paths of the blood vessels or the lymph vessels. Though several Thai traditional medical theories feature many parallels with India's Ayurvedic healing tradition and Chinese medicine's accupressure, in practice, Thai diagnostic and therapeutic techniques may differ to some degree. (5).

Traditional Thai massage is known by several different names, Ancient Massage, Passive Yoga, and Yoga Massage Therapy. The latter names are more descriptive and illustrative of an actual Thai traditional massage. Thai traditional massage is a compilation of Hatha Yoga postures and energy work (3).

The practitioner applies Yoga poses, asanas, and simultaneously manipulates energy along the energy lines of the patient. Several main accupressure points are found along the Sen Lines. By working the accupressure points located on these lines, manipulating the energy on these lines, stagnated energy and energy blockages are released, restoring balance and creating energetic harmony (6).

Diagnostic Approach of Thai Health Practitioners

The approach of traditional Thai Medical practitioners towards an individual patient's health is generally more holistic than the more conventional ideology subscribed to by western allopathic doctors. Western science typically encourages diagnoses to be focused more on the individual diseased parts of the body rather than the whole patient – body, mind, and spirit. Similar to health practitioners in the west, traditional Thai medical

practitioners also perform the diagnoses of their patients by evaluating the pulse, heartbeat, skin color and texture, body temperature, abnormal physical symptoms and bodily excretions. However, unlike their western counterparts the approach of traditional Thai medical practitioners towards their patient's health encompasses internal, external, and psycho-social conditions as well (5).

Due to the broader scope of patient healthcare provided by Thai medical practitioners, a wider variety of treatment options are available to them. They tend to use a combination of indigenous medical treatments and western allopathic treatments. Three broad treatment categories encompass the many different traditional healing therapies. Once a patient is diagnosed, healing therapy can be prescribed from any of the following categories of traditional Thai medicine: traditional Thai massage, herbal medicines and psycho-spiritual healing. Treatment aspects from each of these categories often are used alone, in conjunction with each other, or in conjunction with Western technologies, depending on the diagnosis. Thereby, the range of treatment options are increased (ibid).

Medical diagnoses made through traditional Thai Medicine also reflect the deep-rooted beliefs in the supernatural, astrology, and the principles of equilibrium of the four basic elements—earth, water, wind and fire. The four basic elements are generally found in the teachings of Buddha (4). Medically, each of the four elements refers to specific parts of the physical body. When the internal elements are out of balance with each other and with external environmental elements, disease and injury of the physical body, mind and spirit can result (7). Earth, *di*, refers to all solid parts of the physical body including: skeleton, muscles, blood vessels, flesh, tendons, organs, skin, and nails. Water, *nam*, refers to fluids present in the physical body including: blood, tears, perspiration, urine, and other bodily secretions. Fire, *fai*, represents processes that warm the body including: digestion system and the metabolic system. Air, *lom*, also refers to invisible systems in the physical body including: the respiratory system and the circulatory system. By using a variety of techniques to release energy blockages, the goal of Traditional Thai Massage, also known as *nuad*

phaen boran is equilibrium of the four elements leading to optimal health (5, 7).

Treatment

The focus of traditional Thai massage is completely different from a western style of massage, like the Swedish massage. In traditional Thai massage the attention given to the physical body is secondary; therefore, the kneading and intense stroking characteristics of Western massage are noticeably absent (3). In a traditional Thai massage the main focus is on the energy body creating harmony and balance.

Traditional Thai massage incorporates soothing massage techniques, including gentle muscular stretches of Hatha yoga, which is energizing, and thumbing techniques similar to accupressure, which is stimulating. Patterns of gentle rocking, thumbing, and rhythmic palm-ing ease the body into a deeply relaxed meditative state (6). However, it must be noted that the experience of traditional Thai massage is not altogether pleasant, and it can be quite painful.

By pressing various points along the Sen Lines, the massage stimulates and restores the natural flow of energy throughout the body. By manipulating the energy body, energy blockages are removed balancing the essence of life, earth, air, wind, and fire. As these elements of the invisible energy body become balanced, pain, discomfort, illness, and disease are reduced and eliminated (3,5,7).

In traditional Thai massage the practitioner uses almost every part of his own body to achieve this equilibrium in his patient. He uses his hands, feet, legs, forearms, knees, thumbs, and elbows to apply the needed pressure to release blockages that are impeding flow of energy (6). The practitioner should ask the recipient of any health problems or concerns before the massage is given. This is important for several reasons. The practitioner needs to tailor his massage to each recipient according to his ailments and because some of the positions in a traditional Thai massage have counter-indications that could be detrimental to the health of the patient(3).

Though there are certain conditions that must be considered, traditional Thai massage can be given to virtually any patient. Initially, the masseuse must modify the treatment depending on the patient's health status making it more or less intense depending on the patient's age, health status, and sex (6). Additionally, giving the same massage to every patient could potentially be counter-productive because every patient is different, each having unique individual healing needs. Several variations of almost every pose exist in traditional Thai massage with some being more suitable than others for different people (3). For example, some patients are extraordinarily flexible and others (especially Westerners) are extremely stiff. The practitioner must be able to adjust the intensity of the massage to compensate for the different levels of flexibility of the patients.

The Indian influence in Traditional Thai Massage is evident in the various yoga stretches that are administered to the patient during the massage (3). The practitioner manipulates the energy field and muscular-skeletal system of the patient passively into yoga positions (6). Passive Yoga refers to the practitioner's gentle stretches where various muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments are stretched smoothly and not forcibly. They are not stretched beyond their natural capacity; therefore, there is little resistance to the natural passive stretching. The effect of slowly, rhythmically stretching the body has a calming effect on the nerves. Subsequently, as the nerves become tranquil the emotions do too further alleviating stress and tension (8). The stretching movements affect the entire body. By releasing both superficial and deep tension, the patient's body is re-educated and ultimately the patient's posture improves (6).

Because balance of the four elements of water, earth, air, and fire is the ultimate goal of traditional Thai massage, neglecting certain parts of the body could lead to imbalance in other areas possibly resulting in illness or disease. Though there is no strict order to follow, most traditional practitioners begin the massage with the patient's feet moving upward towards the head.

Beginning with the feet creates a meditative, relaxed state for both patient and practitioner. The feet have many accupressure points that affect other parts of the body. Following the feet, the energy lines and thus the corresponding accupressure points of the legs are massaged with palm pressure and deep thumb pressure. They are also passively stretched to their natural resistance point with Hatha Yoga positions applied by the practitioner. These single and double leg stretches in coordination with the palming and thumbing increase mobility and encourage the hips to open alleviating lower back pain (6). Because many people harbor emotional energy and tension in the abdomen in or near their internal organs, which can negatively affect their functioning leading to illness like constipation or indigestion, an abdomen massage is also performed. The next area massaged is generally the chest followed by a massage of the arms and hands. The chest is home to the heart chakra, which is a large energy body that holds emotional energy blockages. The hands have many accupressure points that can have a positive impact on health, including elimination of symptoms associated with migraine headaches, menstrual cramps, and insomnia (3).

The shoulders, upper back, and neck also harbor energy blockages leading to tension and stress. By stimulating the flow of energy on either side of the spine along the Sen Lines and through the gentle Yoga poses, Thai massage has numerous effects on the back and shoulders. Smooth energy flow in this area can strengthen and lengthen the spine and alleviate lower back pain. Traditional Thai massage and Yoga postures like the spinal twists help to release blocked energy (6). The head and face massages are generally administered lastly to the patient. Not only does this feel exceptionally nice for the patient there are many therapeutic powerful accupressure points located on the face and head. The entire body should be massaged in order to experience the health benefits of massage. Unfortunately, time restraints often do not allow each person to receive the entire massage from head to toe. Should this be the case, massages have to be modified.

Physiological Affects

Traditional Thai massage offers many physical and mental health benefits. Traditional Thai massage stimulates all organs of the body and balances all systems of the body making it a powerful therapy for physical and emotional problems (6). During a traditional Thai massage gentle pressure is applied to the internal organs of the abdomen with the different Yoga postures and the abdomen-massage. Studies done on Hatha Yoga positions have shown this stimulation to cause the internal organs to begin functioning at their highest capacity. This will cause an improvement in digestion, nutrient absorption, waste elimination, and the circulation of blood and lymph (9).

The slight pressure changes in the abdomen and internal organs (stomach, colon, urinary bladder, etc.) during Yoga poses result in a stimulation of the visceroreceptor cells, which are sensitive to stretching. These receptor cells send sensory impulses to the autonomic nervous system and bring about a stretch reflex. The stretch reflex is initiated in the lower portion of the hypothalamus and is involuntarily regulated through a proprioceptive feedback mechanism. The higher mind is not being stimulated and therefore is inactive. Due to the autonomic effect, balance is achieved in this way and emotions are unable to bring about their usual effect. Thus, emotional balance is also established. The emotional activity of the individual decreases and deep relaxation begins. This has an important effect on health. Emotional imbalance due to emotional conflicts, stress, fickleness and instability is thereby corrected by the passive stretching and gentle massage given to the patient (8).

The increased circulation and pressure changes brought about in the pelvic region also promote and preserve the health of the endocrine glands. When common cold, abdominal pain, digestive disorders, headache, stiff neck, shoulder pain, back pain, fever, urinary tract problems, liver disease, diseases of the gall bladder, hernia, leg and arm paralysis, knee pain, jaundice, arthritis, shock, sinusitis, epilepsy,

cardio-respiratory centers are calmed down there is no extra demand for energy and oxygen from the muscles. With Traditional Thai massage there is no undue stress on the cardiovascular, skeletal, respiratory systems as there is in some western therapies. Because of the restoration of the parasympathetic predominance in the body instead of irritation, ego-inflation, and tension the patient feels calm quiet, pleasant, exhilarated, euphoric, and relaxed. This can have long term effects on the individual patient in stress reduction (ibid).

The static and passive stretching of the spinal column, the muscles and the ligaments increases blood circulation around the joints in these parts of the body. Due to the improvement in circulation, the body receives better nourishment assisting the periosteum, the covering at the end of the bone, in effective and easy removal of toxic waste products of the joint (ibid). A good massage after strenuous activity will help the muscles rid themselves of these waste products reducing stiffness and soreness. The blood has more oxygen dissolved in it, bathing the internal organs in oxygen rich blood, boosting the immune system, allowing the body to fend off more disease (9). These applied exercises also improve flexibility, joint mobility, elasticity of the spine, and posture. The range of freedom of an individual and the coordination are also improved (6).

Although traditional Thai massage has long-term health effects, the patient may become aware of several immediate reactions after the release of energy. Some of the more common experiences following massage therapy include bouts of depression, sleeplessness, exhaustion, and extreme happiness. It is not uncommon for patients to have more physical ailments as well like diarrhea or nausea. Although some symptoms are uncomfortable, they are actually necessary for balance, equilibrium, and ultimately healing (3).

The following partial list reveals the wide variety of ailments a traditional Thai massage could improve upon: asthma, bronchitis, heart disease, angina, nausea, nasal obstruction, eye problems, throat problems, shock,

schizophrenia, hysteria, various mental disorders, manic depression, diseases of the urogenital system, appendicitis, deafness, ear diseases, frequent urination, impotence, precox ejaculation, irregular menstruation, uterine bleeding, facial paralysis, hypothermia, and diarrhea (ibid).

CONCLUSION

More extensive research in the area of health benefits of traditional Thai massage therapy is needed. Research has not been conducted in the past for several reasons. Western studies tend to study causal-effect relationships with relation to morbidity and mortality without due consideration to the effects of mentality and spirituality on the body. Often scientists who are not students, practitioners or patients of traditional Thai medicine do not know how to interpret their findings. With traditional Thai massage, along with other

traditional therapies, the healing effects may not be as immediate as with a pill. There is also the crucial element of obtaining funds for a long research period which could prove difficult or even impossible given the general lack of interest in research in this area (8). Because many treatments are based on spirituality, scientists have left this field of research virtually untouched. However, the health benefits are quite obvious and are reproducible. Still, little is known about the causal relationship between traditional treatments and the health benefits largely due to lack of scientific data and the ignorance of the western scientist. Some reluctance and doubt exists about the validity of traditional medicines. The health benefits of traditional Thai medicine including traditional Thai massage are numerous and it is unfortunate that traditional medicines are not utilized to their fullest capacity as an inexpensive tool for both preventive and curative care.

บทคัดย่อ

ยาแผนโบราณของไทยจัดว่าเป็นส่วนหนึ่งที่สำคัญของวัฒนธรรมไทย และที่ยิ่งไปกว่านั้นคือยังเป็นส่วนสำคัญในระบบดูแลสุขภาพอีกด้วย เมื่อการรักษาตามแบบตะวันตกเริ่มเข้ามาแพร่หลาย ระบบแพทย์แผนไทยจึงได้รับความนิยมลดน้อยลง อย่างไรก็ตามเป็นโชคดีที่ขณะนี้แพทย์แผนไทยกำลังกลับมาเป็นที่นิยมในหมู่คนไทยอีกครั้งหนึ่ง การรักษาโดยใช้ยาแผนโบราณควบคู่ไปกับยาตะวันตก ทำให้มีทางเลือกของการรักษาเพิ่มมากขึ้นและยังช่วยให้สุขภาพของคนไข้ดีขึ้นอีกด้วย วิธีการรักษาแบบแผนโบราณวิธีหนึ่งที่ได้ผล แต่มักจะถูกมองกันอย่างผิด ๆ ก็คือการนวดแผนไทย ทั้งคนไข้และทั้งผู้นวดต่างรู้ดีว่าการนวดแผนไทยนั้นมีผลดีต่อสุขภาพแต่ก็มีหลักฐานทางวิทยาศาสตร์ที่ช่วยสนับสนุนข้อกล่าวอ้างนี้น้อยมาก บทความฉบับนี้จะมุ่งเน้นที่ประวัติ ทฤษฎี การรักษา ตลอดจนผลดีต่อสุขภาพของการนวดแผนไทย ทั้งนี้เพื่อช่วยให้ผู้คนเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับเรื่องการนวดแผนไทยดียิ่งขึ้น

แพทย์แผนตะวันตกมีแนวโน้มที่จะไม่รักษาคคนไข้ในองค์รวมเหมือนดังที่แพทย์แผนไทยปฏิบัติ แต่จะรักษาเฉพาะส่วนที่เป็นโรคเท่านั้น การนวดแผนไทยมีผลดีต่อสุขภาพอย่างไรบ้าง ยังเป็นที่รู้กันน้อย ทั้งนี้เพราะยังขาดการศึกษาวิจัยเชิงวิทยาศาสตร์ อย่างไรก็ตามผลดีของการนวดแผนไทยนั้นมีอยู่แน่นอน เราจำเป็นต้องทำงานวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการนวดแผนไทยเพิ่มมากขึ้น ทั้งนี้เพื่อให้เกิดความรู้ความเข้าใจที่ถูกต้องและเพื่อให้การรักษาโดยใช้วิธีนวดแผนไทยมีความถูกต้องชอบธรรม

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