

The difference between Thai Yoga and Thai Massage

Thai Yoga is the practice of connecting to others and the world around you. As you each focus on your experience, you expand your understanding of your mind-body relationship.

By Gabriel Azoulay

In 2003, I was working at Miraval Resort and Spa in Tucson, AZ. During our fall yoga intensive, I had an opportunity to stay on property and receive a complementary bodywork session. When I called to schedule my appointment, I was informed that I could come in for a Thai Massage.

What is Thai Massage? I asked the cordial voice on the other end of the phone line.

It's like yoga, she answered. Only you don't have to do anything. The therapist will stretch and move your body around.

Yoga? I replied with a surprise. But I do yoga everyday. I don't need someone else to do it for me. Is there no *real* massage available?

Up until then, my only experience with bodywork was a deep tissue massage I received when I was living in California the year before. I associated massage with squeezing, sliding and pressing on my bare muscles, not stretching or manipulation.

It is a great experience. The voice on the other end was trying hard to win me over. Unfortunately, that is the only session we have available.

After a moment of hesitation, I answered, Oh well, I guess I won't get a massage.

The following day, when I shared my disappointment with the yoga director who invited me to lead the yoga week, she laughed at my experience. Thai Massage is like someone adjusting you in a yoga pose. They take your body further than you can take it on your own.

Intrigued, I spent the rest of the afternoon on the Internet researching the subject of Thai Massage. What I discovered was an ancient system based on the principles of yoga and Ayurveda, where through pressing and stretching, the physical body is invigorated, relaxed, and healed. Developed in India almost two thousand years ago by the personal physician of Siddhartha Guatama (commonly known as The Buddha), it has been the primary physical healing system throughout Thailand. Practiced by monks in the temples, it combines energetic understating with physical enhancement. This physical-to-spiritual connection continues today at the start of each Thai Massage with a prayer to its founder, Dr. Shivaga Komparaj, an ayurvedic healer and accomplished yogi.

Thai Massage is experienced fully clothed, with the practitioner leading the client's body through various positions where limbs are stretched, muscles compressed, and specific points pressed. Many of the postures resemble traditional yoga

asanas, which inspired my own desire to master this form when I realized I could apply many of the āmanipulations for the benefit of my students.

That day, I purchased a few books on Thai Massage and signed up to take a Thai Massage course offered at the prominent Desert School of Massage. I soon became friends with the Thai Massage therapist at Miraval, who encouraged me to go to Thailand and study with her Thai Massage guru. At the time, I was planning my first trip to Mysore, India, so I arranged to spend a month in North Thailand, hoping to enhance my weekend Thai Massage course.

In the winter of 2005, I found myself at the home of Thai Massage master Pichest Boonthume, sitting among 15 other students. It was Monday morning, and our setting resembled a spiritual center, compared to the traditional classroom in the West. A large portion of the space was transformed into a large altar populated with statues of the Buddha, various Rishis, and revered monks. Flowers, incense, strings and pictures enhanced the feeling that this was a sacred space, rather than just a learning environment.

Though we had recited the prayer to Dr. Shivaga in my Thai Massage course back in the U.S., Pichest spent the first two hours reciting from memory chants and prayers in a language I had never heard before. Some of the students followed along, unlike most Westerners who are unaccustomed to prayer and often uncomfortable with the ritual. For Pichest, the practice of Thai Massage is a spiritual practice, where prayer opens the gateway to the Energy that is all around. Tension, pain, stiffness are all expressions of how energy is not flowing in the body. The primary goal of Thai Massage is to free the flow of energy in the body.

During those first three weeks with Pichest, I reveled in the presence of this rare soul, and over the last three years I have gone back as often as possible. Living in Chiang Mai, I also explored and experienced the work of other Thai Massage masters, and while each of them is an accomplished healer in their own rights, it is Pichest who constantly reminds his students to go beyond the body and feel into the domain of Energy that lies all around.

This idea is very similar to acupuncture. Acupuncture is also based on the theory that any physical issues are related to the flow of energy in the body. Through needles (or applied pressure) along specific points, the energy blocks can be removed, restoring physical vitality. You would not give the same treatment to all people. Each session is individual and unique, though one could give a general treatment and place needles in all of the major points in the body. Such a treatment would be the same to every person.

The sequence of Thai Massage is a general treatment designed to relax the entire body. It teaches the practitioner about energy and how it moves in the body. A complete session following each movement and posture can take up to three hours. While such an experience sounds heavenly to the receiver, it is a lot of work for the practitioner. In fact, most bodywork practitioners, whether they are Thai or Western, end up after a few years with many physical tensions in their own bodies. One of Pichest's favorite questions posed to his students is: "who will take care of your body?" noting that body workers spend too much time outside their own bodies believing they are serving the other.

Pichestios own experience reflects this dilemma, and after 10 years working as the director of the Old Medicine Hospital, the prominent hospital and school for Thai Massage in Chaing Mai, his own body was deteriorating. He had a hard time sleeping lying down, and had to use a cane to walk, even though he was only in his late 20s. Going to various hospitals and healers, Pichest sought relief, while still working to heal others.

One day, he arrived at the house of an elderly healer. The minute she saw him, she knew he was working too hard. Even though he was working to help others, he was destroying his own body. Pichest credits this woman for changing his life and the way he approached Thai Massage. "You cannot help another if you are not well yourself, she told him, a wisdom he shares every day with his students. Through time with her, he learned Thai Massage is first about understanding how your body needs to move around the client, and how the way one works the sequence affects their own energy as much as the person they are working on. Even though Thai Massage has a sequence, Pichestios continuous mantra is "drop the sequence and feel.

Feel what is going on with the person you are engaged with. Every person is different, which implies that how we work on one body will be different than how we might work with the next body. The sequence teaches you to feel the flow of energy and understand how to expand it.

Over the period of time I spent with Pichest, it occurred to me that he is as conscious of how he relaxes or tenses as he is conscious of the relaxation and softness of the body he is working on. Every posture for the client is complemented with a posture for the practitioner, which can either open Energy or close it. "Yoga for two people, is how Pichest constantly returns to the origin of this beautiful practice. "Yoga for both people; good for me, good for you. Not good for me, not good for you.

In traditional Asana Yoga practice, we are encouraged to feel our own bodies. Feel how the breath flows in our limbs, and how our mind, with its thoughts and emotional turmoil, can affect our concentration and stability. Yoga practice can thus be defined as relaxing through action, surrendering to a subtle force, an energy that can be unleashed through the postures and the breath.

This exploration is very personal, and while a proficient teacher could provide you with specific postures and breathing exercises that can heal your body, Asana practice is not therapeutic in nature. It can have therapeutic benefits, though its intention is to realize a larger scope of interaction. The earliest treaty on yoga, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, defines yoga as "the cessation of the turning of consciousness, at which point the practitioner will experience the Energy they are.

Inspired by my years with Pichest, with his complete control and understanding of his relationship to the person he works with, I developed Thai Yoga, a practice where students learn how to move their body through very specific positioning and breathing, creating a focus and an energetic exchange that is very similar to any yoga class.

Rather than focusing on the other, Thai Yoga focuses primarily on the experience of the practitioner.

Something very interesting happens when we take our practice and engage another body in it. The minute we touch another, suddenly we lose all awareness of where we are. In a traditional yoga practice, the focus is extremely individual. We turn our attention inward, in the hopes of expanding externally. The more connected we are to where we are, the more we realize the connection that exists between everything. This is exemplified in Thai Yoga, where the practitioner follows a set sequence of movements that revolve around another physical body, yet remain connected to his or her own experience.

Through specific positioning and transitions connected through the breath, two bodies unite; two separate beings become one integrated body. The minute touch is created, the sense of touch remains constant. As proficiency is gained in the movements and transitions, there will not be a loss of touch until the entire dance has been completed.

Thai Yoga is based on two of the three primary principles of Thai Massage, the principles of stretching and compressing. The third principle, pressure points along the energy lines, is activated passively. Since the energy lines run all over the body, any movement and pressure engages the energy lines themselves. These principles apply to both practitioners. When the practitioner places the receiver's foot inside their hip, engaging the other in a yogic posture similar to *apavanamuktasana* (wind release pose), it enhances the colon for the receiver with a stretch along the inner groin. This expands the energy flow along the three inner leg lines, while enacting a pressure into the large intestine. Elimination is enhanced, digestion is stimulated and the upper body is charged with fresh blood circulation, thus increasing energy to the heart.

Though Thai Massage is quickly becoming the leading modality in the west, with weekend courses that certify massage therapists as Thai Massage therapists, one should heed the impact it can cause their body. Thai Yoga is an accessible practice that provides the experience to any individual. With its yogic foundation, this practice is an incredible tool for any individual. Whether you are a personal trainer who would like to understand how to stretch your clients, a yoga teacher seeking to grow in your practice or practitioner wishing to enhance your student experience, Thai Yoga teaches safe, easy ways to connect and touch with care and awareness.

True, you can study with masters like Pichest or B.K.S. Iyengar (known for healing his own body through asana yoga and seeing where energy is blocked in his students), and over time learn how to tap into these modes of therapy through postures. This process is akin to a musician learning to play his instrument. You can learn a song, which is a sequence of notes, played in a certain rhythm. In as much, you can learn the sequence of Thai Massage or a yoga sequence like *Ashtanga*. Whether you will become a musician or a Thai Massage healer lies in your own artistic experience.

Thai Yoga on the other hand, is the safe experimentation in playing a song that effectively transforms both bodies while connecting individuals together in a meaningful and spiritual way. After all, the word yoga means to connect. The only

way to step out of your own world is to connect with another, and in the process, plunge deeper into your individual mind-body experience.

About Gabriel Azoulay

Gabriel Azoulay is the creator of Thai Yoga, a yoga practice for two people, an author and an international Yoga instructor. Having spent almost two years in Thailand and India, Gabriel brings a fresh perspective to age old principles. With a passion for stories, anecdotes and koans, his teaching, writing and daily approach to the mat will leave you laughing to the stars. Gabriel will be doing Thai Yoga Training on 6 & 7 Mar 2009 in Singapore. You can look at www.yogainasia.com for his teaching. Thai Yoga previews and DVDs can be found on his website www.gabrielazoulay.com .