

THE POWER OF HEALTHY LIVING

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MEG-A-STAR
Ryan's return to
the spotlight
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Teens, sex
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THE COLA
CULPRIT
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MIND OVER MATTER

Change your
life in a weekend

Dawn Kennedy discovers that Thai yoga massage offers a unique solution to our sedentary, stressful lives

I'm caught in a half nelson: my arm twisted behind my back, while my shoulder blade is prised open like an oyster. Then, in one swift move, I'm rolled onto my back and my leg is stretched in an arc above my head.

I'm having a Thai massage and loving every moment of it.

The therapist lunges around me with the alacrity of a crouching dragon. I sigh and groan as toxins are squeezed from every cell in my body. I stand up a different person; more energised than I have felt in a decade and knowing that my life is going to take a significant u-turn.

Ninety minutes ago I was in a stiff and sorry state; as I approached 40 I found myself a casualty of the attempt to juggle kids and career. For 12 hours my only exercise was walking to and from the coffee dispenser. I'd arrive home depleted and caffeine crazed.

Life wasn't always like this. In 2001 I qualified as an Alexander Technique teacher and ran a small studio where I taught people to enjoy their bodies and exercise them intelligently. I was also a performer and was paid silly amounts of money to jump out of birthday cakes in the guise of a belly dancer.

But the carefree goddess at ease in her body is a fuzzy memory and bears no relation to the adrenaline-laced maniac I had become.

Somewhere along the way I veered off the path of bliss, evacuated my body and took up full-time residence in my head as I kept my eye trained on the cash register.

I was walking numbly through life repeating the mantra "I'm only earning a living."

How had I strayed so far from the free spirit I'd once known?

These thoughts course through my body as I lie on the mat. When I stand up I feel pliable enough to audition for Cirque du Soleil.

"I want more of this."

Always a dangerous thought.

As time passes, the situation becomes even more dire. I stare at my computer fantasising about spending my days dressed in white and rolling around a futon.

I buy every book on the subject of Thai massage and inflict grievous bodily harm on friends. I eat in Thai restaurants a lot, wondering how many massages the chefs have had in their lifetimes.

Then, after a year, I discover that Jean Moore offers an intensive Practitioner Level training.

Jean studied at the ITM (Institute of Thai Massage) in Changmai, Thailand, under Chongkol Setthakorn – a respected master. Her courses are recognised by ITM schools all over the world. Jean is an ideal guide for anyone wanting to enter the world of Thai massage. She manages to translate indecipherable instructions into easier-to-follow steps.

'[Thai massage] is no skin tickle, but precise pressure that contains centuries of wisdom'

It feels like lifetimes ago that I struggled and sweated through the many hours of training that it took to qualify as a Thai Massage Practitioner. Then, the stretches that seemed so effortless when performed by Jean felt like furniture removal when I tried them.

I was captivated by the movements

and terrified by the possibility of doing it wrong. It's quite a responsibility to lean your entire body weight onto another person, especially if they're paying for the privilege. In Thai massage you use knees, elbows and even feet to walk and press the muscles of the body systematically. It's no skin tickle, but precise pressure that contains centuries of wisdom.

Today I run a thriving practice and teach modules of the ITM's training. I watch with wonder as students transform from inept, toe treading adolescents to elegant dancers. It happens every time.

It feels awesome to receive a Thai massage, but here's the punch line – it feels even better to give it. Now that's a win-win scenario: sheer unadulterated magic.

By far the most compelling aspect of Thai massage is that it is a spiritual as well as a medical practice. Before each session the practitioner offers a prayer of thanks and gratitude to the founder, Jivaka Komparaj that says, "We pray for the one we touch, that they will be happy and any illness released from them".

For Thai massage to be authentic it requires the practitioner to be fully present and in a meditative state. Anyone who has had the misfortune of having a

massage given by someone who blithely chatters away, thinking about what to cook for supper as they give you a half-hearted rub, will welcome and appreciate the difference when the massage is given with prayerful attention.

All practitioners are instructed to cultivate 'Metta', which means 'loving

'On the mat, with a good masseur, you will experience moments of sweet bliss, a sense of awe and connection to a greater power'

kindness'. Thai massage is believed to develop the Four Divine States of Mind as taught in Buddhism: loving kindness, compassion, joy in others' good fortune, and mental equanimity. On the mat, with a good masseur, you will experience moments of sweet bliss, a sense of awe and connection to a greater power.

Chances are that as you read this you're thinking about how you too need to sit for several hours a day. While your brain scales great heights of creativity, your butt becomes increasingly numb, your back begins to ache, and your neck gets so stiff it feels like you've gone tribal and are wearing neck hoops. If there's a wild animal rattling your cage and begging to gallop across the savannah, a weekly Thai massage might just tame your inner wildebeest.

MORE THAN JUST A MASSAGE

Thai yoga massage is not just a feel-good rub, it's a complete healing that offers you an awesome stretch routine, an energetic spring clean and a healing touch, all rolled into one. Received regularly, Thai massage dramatically improves flexibility, and feeds the fountain of youth. Hamstrings stretch, hips open and your body discovers an ease of movement. The results are visible: you notice that you can touch your toes, when once you came to an abrupt halt somewhere around your knees.

Thai massage has powerful psychological benefits and enables you to enter a deep state of relaxation. It teaches you to relax into the difficult places. Over time you learn not to fight the stretches. As your hamstrings are screaming, you discover that if you

exhale, the drama ends.

Also, Thai massage helps you to lose weight. It's powerfully detoxifying, which is necessary for effective and fast weight loss. The deep abdominal presses stimulate healthy digestion.

Thai massage has benefits for everyone: sports enthusiasts with stiff, shortened muscles, mothers harassed by toddlers and also older people. As a 71-year-old lady leaves the mat, she says, "I never knew my body could do half of that." Whatever your age or ability, Thai massage pushes you to gently and safely extend the limits of what you thought was possible.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Thai massage is very different from a typical massage. You wear loose-fitting clothing while lying on a mat or futon. No oils or lotions are used, and a session lasts a minimum of 90 minutes. The first 20 minutes clear the energy in your feet and legs. Next, your body is moved into the yoga asanas (postures). People describe Thai massage as a type of dual yoga, and it has even been nicknamed 'lazy man's yoga'.

ORIGINS

The origins of Thai massage are veiled in myth and mystery.

Traditional Thai medicine is a 2500-year-old system of natural healing composed of four major branches: herbal medicine, nutrition, spiritual practices and the manual therapy Nuad Bo'Rarn, that we call Thai massage.

The Thai word 'Nuad' means 'to touch with the intention of imparting healing'. The word 'Bo'Rarn', derived from the

Sanskrit language, means 'something that is ancient, sacred and revered'.

The founder of Nuad Bo'Rarn is Jivaka Komparaj, who was the Buddha's physician. He brought Nuad Bo'Rarn to Thailand over two thousand years ago when Buddhism travelled from India.

Komparaj taught Nuad Bo'Rarn to a specific order of Theravada Buddhist monks. This knowledge was highly revered and transmitted orally from teacher to student.

When Thailand was invaded by the Burmese, many ancient texts relating to Nuad Bo'Rarn were destroyed. In 1832 King Rama III had the surviving texts inscribed in stone and set in the walls of Wat Po, Bangkok, where they can still be seen today. Wat Po is, to this day, still one of the major teaching centres of Nuad Bo'Rarn.

Nuad Bo'Rarn has been keeping people in Thailand healthy and happy for centuries. In the '80s, thanks to the efforts of a few intrepid Westerners, Thai massage gained respect outside of Thailand. Today, properly qualified and experienced Thai masseurs can be found worldwide (along with a bevy of less scrupulous 'practitioners' on beaches and in massage parlours, who offer Thai massage that is a far remove from the medical practice). Globally, Thai massage is one of the fastest growing massage forms. The last 10 years have seen a huge upsurge in interest in Thai massage and what was once an obscure, esoteric practice is fast becoming a mainstream service offered by spas and hotels. ●

For further information on treatments and training, visit the ITM website on www.itmthaimassage.com