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THAI MASSAGE: That's a Stretch

BY: DENISE REYNOLDS

Wouldn't it be nice if you could do a workout without the work? Bend your body into dozens of yoga positions without breaking a sweat? Improve the flexibility of your muscles and joints without exercise or medication? With Thai massage, you can turn your exercise fantasies into reality.

From the Land of a Thousand Smiles, comes this healing massage practice favored by competitive athletes and ballet dancers. Devotees maintain that it not only restores muscles stiff and sore from overexertion, but also promotes the release of lactic acid in the muscle fibers and helps recapture lost range of motion. And by stimulating the lymphatic system, traditional Thai medicine claims their deep massage and stretching also aids in detoxing, strengthening the immune system, and preventing further injury by increasing flexibility and improving the suppleness of joints and ligaments.

Hardly a passing craze, Thai Massage has been around for thousands of years. Originating in India during Buddha's lifetime, this ancient form of massage traveled along the Silk Road with the migration of monks around the second century B.C. and was originally practiced only in healing monasteries found throughout Siam, now Thailand. Thai massage techniques were handed down from one generation to the next—from teacher to student and parent to child—via oral tradition. Once recorded on palm leaves in the capital city, early records of Thai massage positions were destroyed during the Burmese attack in 1767. By order of King Rama III, surviving fragments were literally carved in stone—30 statues depicting the front of the body and 30 showing the back—and today still surround the gardens at Bangkok's Royal Monastery, Wat Pho.

Two distinct styles of Thai massage exist: The Southern, or royal tradition centered in Bangkok, and the Northern, or rural tradition based in Chiang Mai. The Southern style is more of a yang form—faster paced and more intense—utilizing a plucking technique, which stimulates nerves that run along the body's energy lines. The Northern style is yin in nature, involving more stretching, and uses palming and

thumbing techniques to free the body's energy. For my first Thai massage experience I was grateful to have a therapist skilled in the gentler Northern technique.

To the uninitiated, Thai Massage may not look like massage at all: No massage table, no massage oil, no need to disrobe. Instead, you'll find yourself wearing loose fitting clothing, situated on a futon-style mat on the floor. I had my first Thai massage at the Mandarin Oriental, Miami, in a spacious light-filled suite with stunning floor-to-ceiling views of Biscayne Bay. My therapist was Jongrak Intatha, a Thai native, educated in Thai massage at the Old Medicine School in Chiang Mai.

Although Dr. Dolittle and his pushmi-pullyu may have been fictional characters, you literally have little to do as your therapist pushes and pulls your body into a multitude of yoga-like positions over the course of a few hours. Jongrak began with my feet and worked her way up my legs and arms, using her thumbs, fingers, hands, feet, forearms, elbows, knees, and at times her entire body weight to delicately twist, lengthen, and stretch my body. Her gentle, rhythmic, rocking motions were performed very slowly. All of the stretches were done with multiple repetitions, with each subsequent movement going a little deeper into the stretch. Along the way I realized that she was placing my body in a variety of yoga postures: I recognized the Triangle, Forward Bend, Cobra, and Bridge. She spoke only twice, softly saying, "Turn over, please."

By the time we concluded our Thai massage "dance", I felt deeply relaxed, reenergized and refocused. Very peaceful. As the Tibetan mantra says, "May the jewel of the lotus shine forth this light of love and compassion to unite all existences as one. May all beings be happy."

Who said massage is just a rubdown?

Spa specialist Denise Reynolds, whose column "Spa Pleasures" brings you reports on spa treatments from around the world, invites you to visit www.spapleasures.com for more information on the pleasures that await you at today's spas. Copyright © 2004