

## **THAI FOOT REFLEXOLOGY**

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Thai Reflexology is part of Traditional Thai Medicine, a centuries old model of authentic healthcare that has proven its validity over the centuries, even in the face of the introduction of western medicine to the country. Of the four branches of Thai medicine, reflexology is arguably the most popular treatment used to maintain health in Thailand.

Although monks and doctors commonly administer the work, it is the public that has elevated Thai Reflexology to its current status. Perhaps because it originated as an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation, it is a regular occurrence to witness people seated outside their homes at the end of the day exchanging sessions.

To fully understand the position that reflexology holds in Thailand we must look at both the culture and the development of Traditional Thai Medicine (TTM).

### **The Roots**

Thailand is situated along a major international trade route between India and China. Because of this geography, the culture has been greatly influenced over the ages by foreign traders people and missionaries passing through. One of the biggest influences was the arrival of Indian monks about 2500 years ago. Their route brought them into northern Thailand, bringing with them the practices they picked up from their earlier sojourns to China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea. Their greatest gifts to the Thai people were the spiritual philosophies and practices of Buddhism, Ayurvedic medicine and yoga. Marrying these new concepts to indigenous practices created the basis of Thailand's current vibrant model of healthcare.

By far the greatest impact on the culture was Buddhism.

### **The Influence of Buddhism**

Buddhism began with the transformation of one individual born in 624 BC in a part of India now known as Nepal. Siddhartha Gautama, the son of a regional king, literally walked away from a life of luxury at the age of 29, and entered the severe existence of an ascetic.

In his hunger to reach enlightenment, Gautama eventually grew so weak that he nearly died. This experience and his earlier life of opulence

brought him to an important realization that would shape not only his life, but also establish the foundation for Buddhism – and Traditional Thai Medicine.

Gautama realized the futility of extremes – whether asceticism or privilege – and constructed from that awareness the first plank of his program: the principle of the Middle Way, a path of moderation, self-discipline and equanimity that held the promise of liberation from all suffering.

Just as Buddhism assigns its beginning to one man, so does Traditional Thai Medicine. Credit for founding the formal structure of TTM rests with Jivaka Kumarabhacca, a legendary Ayurvedic doctor known to possess great healing gifts. In addition to administering to both royalty and commoner, he was the personal physician to the Lord Buddha. The Father Doctor, as Kumarabhacca is affectionately known, created TTM based on the foundational principle of Buddhism: the Middle Way.

### **Traditional Thai Medicine**

Unlike in North America, where we compartmentalize ourselves so as to segregate exercise, food and lifestyle from our religious and spiritual selves, Thailand integrates all these aspects into four branches of medicine.

The four branches of Traditional Thai Medicine are:

- Medicine – the internal and external application of plants, salves, compresses and vapors (steam).
- Manipulation – nuad boran (ancient massage), foot reflexology and ruesi dud ton (yoga).
- Diet.
- Dhammanamai - spiritual rites and practices that nourish a healthy mind, body and lifestyle. A healthy mind (Jitanamai) was believed to evolve from regular meditation and study of Buddhist teachings; a healthy body (Kayanamai) from diet and manipulation; and a healthy lifestyle achieved by following the Middle Way or Path. The Middle Way demands that one pay attention to the relationship between thoughts and behavior, and the relationship between behavior and its consequences. Interestingly, this spiritual tenant relates nicely to the present-day lifestyle recommendations of moderation and responsibility.

The Buddha himself stated, *“All we are is the result of what we have thought.”* For that reason, the greatest emphasis in Thai medicine is placed on one's thoughts and one's spiritual practice, so that the order of attention to the above four areas is “bottom-up”. Dhammanamai represents the foundation for health and wellness. Because TTM does not

segregate daily lifestyle choices and habits from ideal health, conditions arising from chronic abuse and faulty thinking are reduced, with the result that only extreme situations require the intervention of allopathic approaches.

Traditional Thai doctors abide by the original definition of *dis-ease*: from the early Latin, *dis* meaning *away from* and *ease* meaning *flow*. Disease is defined simply as energy out of balance. Rather than confining an individual's condition to a static, permanent box – a disease label - the doctor sees the situation as a dynamic state of the individual's energy, momentarily out-of-balance and capable of change.

The doctor identifies imbalances according to descriptions of the state of the energy (known as *lom* in Thailand) felt by the practitioner and/or reported by the patient. The doctor's goal becomes one of altering the flow of energy and strengthening the healing ability of the body, rather than attempting to eliminate symptoms. Symptoms take on great importance in Thai medicine. They are not considered to be the disease nor the "enemy"; instead, bodily sensations and experiences are considered the language of the body. They are the voice of a body crying out for help.

So, although Thai reflexology is ubiquitous within the tourist trade in Thailand – as a way to relax and put your feet up – *Kayanamaii*, the nurturing of a healthy body, has always been viewed as a spiritual practice, to be received in the temples and hospitals, rather than the beach or market place. As part of TTM, reflexology is considered "a practical expression of loving kindness", one of the *Four Divine States of Mind* of Buddhist teaching.

### **The Difference Between Thai and Western Reflexology**

When people learn that I practice and teach Thai Foot Reflexology, in addition to the more well-known conventional western style, I am invariably asked, "What's the difference?" There are many, the most significant being the intent.

When Thais are asked how their style of reflexology compares to the western model, they will respond with "same same", which colloquially translates to "similar and not the same".

In the west, reflexology focuses on shifting the autonomic nervous system into a parasympathetic state and working reflexes that correspond to the various organs and glands of the body. The specific intent is to relax the body and improve the functioning of the related structures. In Thailand,

the focus is on removing energy blockages and strengthening the flow of lom (energy) within the body's sen lines (energy lines).

In actuality, Thai Reflexology does stimulate points – but in general, not intentionally. The session protocol is so precise and thorough that all western-identified reflexes do get addressed. Through a well thought-out and time-proven sequence of techniques that originate from the movement of the practitioner's body, the recipient's energy is balanced and restored, allowing his or her body to let go of unwanted symptoms.

### **Thai Foot Reflexology**

Although Thai Reflexology is often referred to as the “marriage between India and Asia”, it would be more accurate to refer to it as the “offspring” of that marriage. The Thais really created their own version of the original Ayurvedic model. As an example, they softened the Chinese version of reflexology by adding relaxing “sabaai” movements into the more vigorous, deeper (jep) Chinese techniques.

Utilizing stretching and a variety of manual techniques, including the use of a specifically tooled wooden stick, Thai reflexology incorporates elements of India's Ayurvedic medicine, Japanese shiatsu and Chinese reflexology to work the feet, lower legs and knees to produce results most often described as relaxing, refreshing and revitalizing, as opposed to sedating.

The session can be offered on the floor or in on a chair - reflexology or regular. In the west it is most often given using a massage table and stool. Techniques originate within the practitioner's body and are transferred by way of body movement to that of the recipient. Within this dance the practitioner reduces the likelihood of muscle stiffness that can result from remaining stationary for a length of time, encourages his or her own lymphatic flow and fully engages with the client's energy. Repetitive strain injuries are avoided through the application of a variety of techniques that put little stress on the digits or vulnerable joints of the hands.

### **The Benefits**

The benefits of Thai Foot Reflexology are wide ranging. Various sources and clinical testimonies report benefits that include:

- vitality
- relaxation
- improved circulation in the legs and hands
- improved lymphatic drainage

- reduced pain
- reduced stiffness and improved flexibility
- relief from stress
- improved sleep
- accelerated physical healing
- increased mental clarity and performance

His Holiness, the Dalai Lama is quoted as saying, "*When you are strongly motivated to work for others, you can lead a meaningful life. When you have a strong inclination to benefit others, you will find that you are always happy.*" Nowhere is that more evident than in Thailand, a country dubbed *The Land of Smiles*.

*Originally published in Massage Magazine 6/2015*