

Exploring the
“Lazy Yoga”
in Thai Massage

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Thai Massage is an ancient style of healing that includes elements of reflexology, yoga, energy meridian work, meditation, acupressure, muscle compression and joint mobilization. The founder of Thai Massage is said to have been Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha, a physician to the Buddha over 2500 years ago, and head physician of the Sangha – the community of followers of Buddha. The history, however, is probably a combination of influences from Indian, Chinese, and South Eastern Asian cultures and traditions of medicine. There is a variation from region to region even in Thailand, and no single routine is universally accepted. The style I have been trained in is called Southern Traditional Thai Massage, but it can be seen referred to as Thai Medical Massage, Ancient Massage, Thai Yoga, Thai Yoga Massage, Thai Classical Massage, Thai Bodywork, Passive Yoga, as well as Assisted Yoga. In Thailand, it is also known as Nuad Bo' Rarn. Nuad means "to touch with the intent of imparting healing". Bo' Rarn (derived from Sanskrit) means "something which is ancient and revered". This term is also applied to several sutras of Buddhism. Thai Massage therefore has a sacred, revered history of healing associated with it.

In Thailand, Thai Massage is recognized as a core part of an entire system of traditional medicine. The 4 aspects of Thai Medicine are:

1. Herbal Medicine

2. Nutrition and Food Cures
3. Spiritual Practices (mantras, prayer, meditation)
4. Thai Massage / Nuad Bo'Rarn

Historically, Thai Massage was a hands-on practice of traditional medicine used to treat physical, mental, and emotional ailments. Monks traveled from India to Thailand around 200 BC, bringing with them the practice of what we now call Thai Massage. Medical knowledge was transmitted orally from teacher to student, and over the centuries the traditions evolved with influences of Ayurvedic techniques. By 1292 AD, traditional medicine was established in the Buddhist monasteries, known as Wats. Healing work was administered to the people by the monks and even Buddhist nuns.

The Buddhist philosophy heavily influences medicine in Thailand. Healing is understood to be the practical application of metta, or loving kindness. Metta is sought in daily life by followers of Buddha seeking awareness and fulfillment. It is referred to as the "foundation of the world", essential for peace and happiness of self and others.

Thai Massage demonstrates 4 divine stages of mind:

1. Metta (loving kindness)
2. Compassion
3. Vicarious Joy
4. Mental Equanimity (through meditation)

I began looking into Thai Massage about 6 years ago as an additional service to offer my massage clients. At that time I had been practicing yoga and working as a massage therapist for 7 years, and as I came across articles in massage magazines about Thai Massage, I became interested in it. It appealed to me as a new service that I could offer clients, since it was a departure from traditional table massage. I thought the element of yoga-like stretching in Thai Massage would intrigue many of my regular clients. I could see the parallel to some of the yoga poses I knew, and it seemed that this would be a good compliment to traditional massage. After researching qualified Thai Massage teachers, I came across Winnie Cain in Scottsdale, Arizona. Winnie had been practicing and teaching Thai Massage for many years, and had traveled to Thailand over a dozen times ... (that number is now over 20 times!) She studied extensively, including a 6 month period of living and studying in Thailand. This gave credibility and added interest to her training program. After talking to her, I knew she was the person for me to study with. I spent an intensive week studying and practicing her method in a small group atmosphere at her home studio. Winnie turned out to be not only an exceptional teacher, but a wonderful example of a humanitarian as well. She is the president and founder of the Akha Women's Foundation, which supports projects to provide women of the Akha tribe in Thailand with vocational and health

care programs. The foundation has also built a hostel where up to 25 Akha girls can live while attending school.

At the time, I had heard Thai Massage referred to as “Lazy Man’s Yoga”, and since our culture loves anything that sounds beneficial without the effort (sad, but true!) I had a feeling it would pique the interest of many people. I do not call it by that name, but prefer to call it simply Thai Massage. My description of the session includes assistance into yoga-like poses, since it is more interactive than most massage techniques where the client is lying still. During Thai Massage, the client and the practitioner are moving, bending and stretching throughout the session. Thai Massage is done on a padded mat on the floor. Comfortable clothing is worn to allow for movement, and no oils or lotions are used. This is a departure from the traditional table massage my clients were used to in which there is little movement on the part of the client, and the session is done on bare skin using oils or lotions. The correct use of the practitioner’s body weight is essential in this style of massage. The practitioner uses thumbs, palms, elbows, feet and knees to apply pressure to the sen lines of the body. Sen lines are similar to the nadis in the Ayurvedic system. The sen lines do not correlate specifically to any organ systems like the Chinese meridians do. The Thai meridians begin at the navel and end at the extremities of the body. The acupressure points used in

Thai massage also are often parallel to the Indian marma points.

Thai Massage is based in the idea that air is inhaled through the lungs and travels through the body along 72,000 pathways called "sen lines". The Thai Massage therapist manipulates the sen lines by applying pressure to points along the lines. The yoga-like stretches are meant to stimulate the sen lines also. Ten primary sen lines which originate deep in the abdominal cavity are identified with Thai Massage. The pressure is rhythmic and the entire body is stretched, including the fingers, toes, and even the earlobes. The peripheral stimulation of the sen lines produces an internal effect. Although the physical body is being addressed, the primary focus and intention of Thai Massage is to bring balance and harmony to the energetic body and mind of the recipient.

There are many benefits to Thai massage, including:

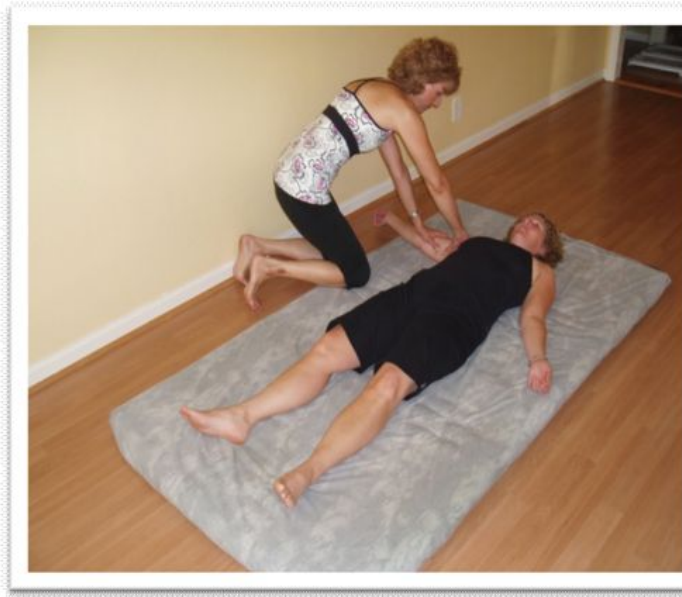
- Increases range of motion in the joints
- Relieves muscle soreness by supplying blood and oxygen to the tissue
- Promotes general relaxation
- Reduces emotional stress
- Elongates and releases fascia
- Relieves muscle and joint stiffness associated with aging
- Helps prevent joint sprains, muscle tears, and re-injury to muscles

- Eliminates toxins by increasing blood flow to muscles
- Reduces tightness that may contribute to pain , spasms and cramping

During the routine, many stretches have close similarities to traditional yoga poses. People describe the session as similar to doing yoga without the work, and leave with a relaxed but energized feeling.

The intention of my thesis is to break down the Thai Massage sequence into its individual parts and explore the similarities to traditional yoga poses...

THE SEN LINES



The Thai massage session begins with thumb and palm pressure along the sen lines of the body. There are thousands of sen lines throughout the body, and 10 main lines are addressed in the sequence. The feet, hands, arms, legs, and abdomen are all opened with this series of rhythmic compressions. The body is being prepared during the first 1/3 of the session for the asana-like poses which will follow. Joints are mobilized during this time and blood and lymph flow are stimulated. The client moves from supine to side-lying to prone positions during this portion of the Thai massage.

PLANTAR FLEXION OF THE FOOT



Plantar flexion of the feet is passively done by using the weight of the practitioner's forearms and upper body to press the toes down toward the mat. By doing this in an assisted way, the client can feel the stretch in the front of the lower leg and in the muscles and ligaments on the top of the foot without having to contract the muscles of the posterior lower leg, such as gastrocnemius and soleus, or the muscles on the bottom of the foot. This stretch often causes cramping of the toes when done unassisted, but in Thai massage, this rarely happens.

DORSIFLEXION OF THE FOOT



Dorsiflexion of the foot is done by cupping the client's ankle in the practitioner's hand and using the leverage of the forearm to pull the toes back. In many yoga poses, the legs are activated by contracting the quadriceps, pressing out through the heels, and pulling the toes back. By allowing the client to relax their legs and feet, the muscles on the anterior side of the leg, especially tibialis anterior on the lower leg, do not have to contract to dorsiflex the foot. The stretch is for the plantar surface of the foot and the posterior lower leg muscles, namely gastrocnemius and soleus.

SPINAL TWIST - SUPINE



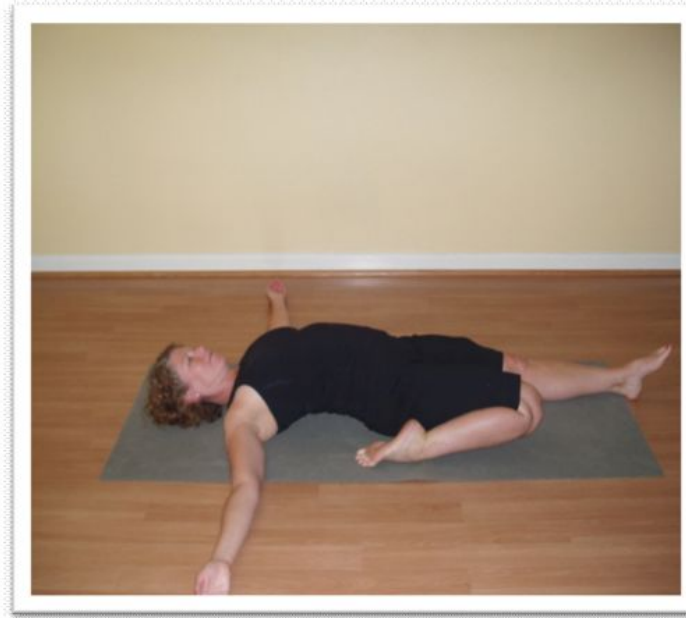
The Thai Massage sequence involves several twists such as this one in which the client is in a bent leg twist with the assistance of the practitioner to ground the opposite shoulder down as the bent knee is crossed over the body. This allows the clients to remain passive while receiving the benefits of a twist. The stretch is intended mainly for the ilio-tibial band and gluteus muscles, but is often felt in the back due to tightness. This pose is similar to the adjustment of a modified (bent leg) parivrtta supta padangustasana.

NATARAJASANA



The side-lying client is positioned in a pose which is similar to natarajasana, or dancer pose. Since the client not standing upright, the element of balance is removed from the pose. The top leg is extended by the practitioner to stretch the hip flexors. Since this is done in a passive way, the top shoulder must be held steady to prevent collapse of the chest forward. The extension is mainly felt as the iliopsoas and quadriceps muscles are stretched, which are often tight due to our lifestyle of sitting in hip flexion.

SUPTA EKA PADA VIRASANA



The flexion of the leg at the knee allows for a deep stretch of the quadriceps. By plantar flexing the foot, the tibialis anterior is also stretched. As the leg and foot are held in this position, palm pressure is applied down the length of the lower leg. Just as in supta eka pada virasana, the entire front of the bent leg is stretched, as well as the iliopsoas. Depending on the degree of flexion in the client's knee joint and the openness of the quadriceps, the foot can be gently pressed toward the gluts (eka pada vajrasana) or moved lateral for a deeper stretch. The position is repeated on the other leg.

VAJRASANA



After stretching each leg separately in eka pada virasana (or eka pada vajrasana), both legs are brought together into flexion in a pose similar to a prone version of vajrasana. Although the Thai massage routine presses heels to gluts, as in vajrasana, depending on the level of flexibility, the stretch could be intensified by moving the flexed legs more lateral. As in the last pose, the quadriceps, iliopsoas, and anterior lower leg muscles are the intended focus of this stretch.

BROKEN TOE POSE



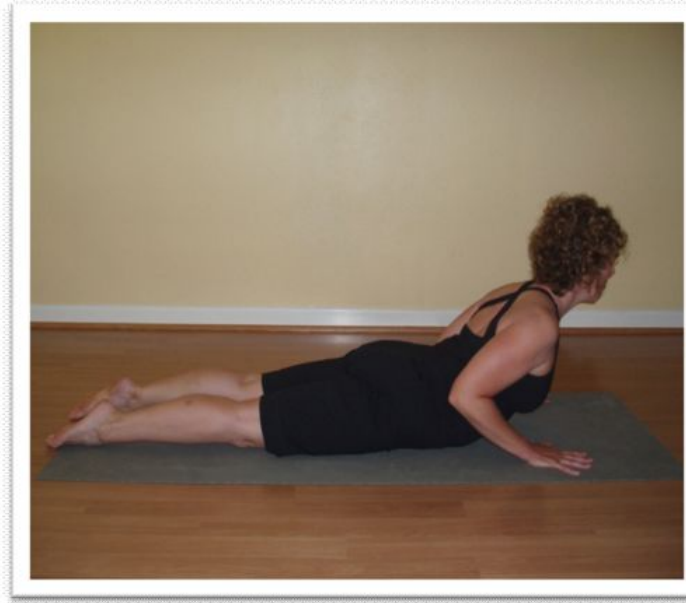
The deep dorsiflexion of the foot in Thai massage is done by the pressure exerted on the soles of the feet using the forearms of the practitioner. The weight of the upper body is used to bring the plantar surface of the foot into a deep stretch. The toes are bent by the angle of the forearm. The body mechanics of the practitioner are important throughout the session to avoid undue strain to muscles while giving the massage. This stretch provides the benefits of broken toe pose, such as assisting in lengthening the ligaments of the foot to help prevent and relieve plantar fasciitis.

ARDHA SALABASANA



This pose is a good example of how the Thai massage practitioner must use their body weight to allow the client to get into a deep pose without effort. By kneeling on the client's gluteal muscles, the pelvis is grounded. Even this would allow the client to come into ardha salabasana with less effort. However, to take the effort completely out of the pose, both wrists are grabbed and the client's body is gently pulled into the pose by simply leaning back. This pose involves back extension as well as deep opening of the chest and shoulders, especially the pectoralis muscles and the anterior deltoid.

BHUJANGASANA



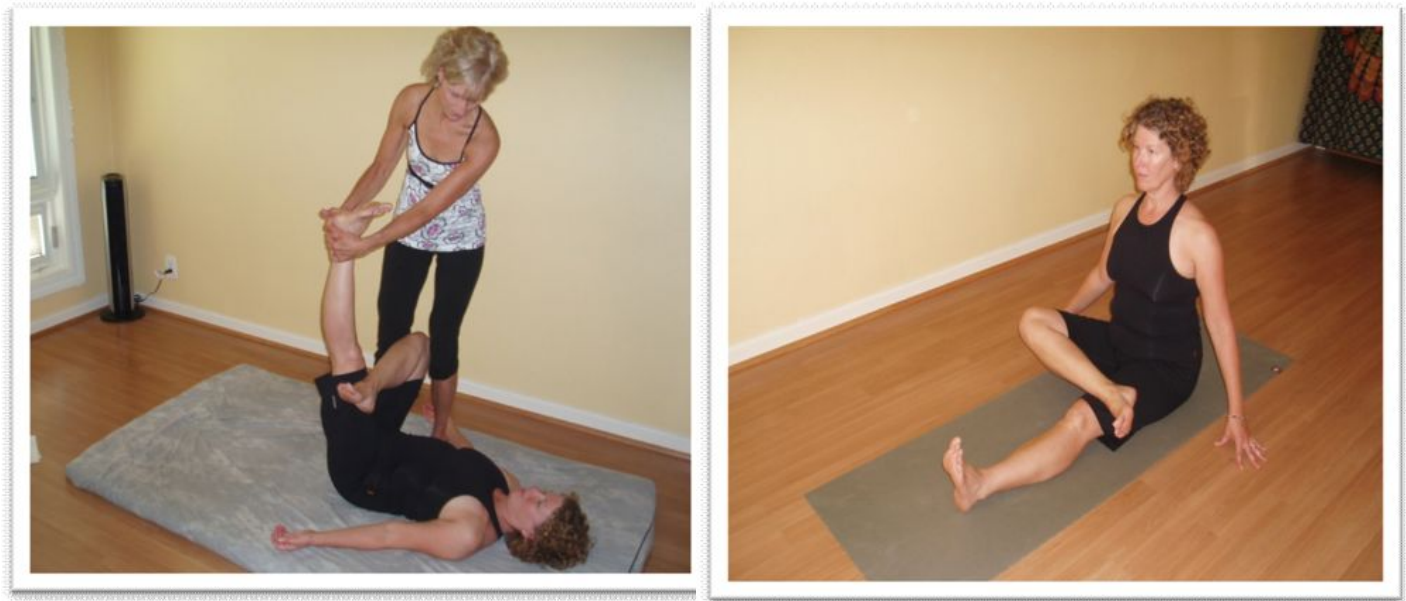
Thai massage includes a variation of bhujangasana, or cobra pose. The client's knees are bent to support the practitioner while she assists with the lift and extension of the upper body. This pose has the option of the client fully passive with fingers interlaced behind their head, or with palms down as pictured above. I have found that the pose is much more effective with the hands on the mat for balance, as well as allowing the practitioner more leverage to lift the upper body. This is especially true with larger or heavier clients. The pose involves back extension as well as chest and shoulder opening.

EKA PADA APANASANA



The client's knee and hip joints are brought into deep flexion in eka pada apanasana. This pose is often very comfortable to the client since it allows the low back to gently stretch without the use of the upper body strength to hold the leg in position. The gluteal muscles are stretched as the hip is flexed. Since the client is passive and not aware of the sequence of the poses, the practitioner's wrist is placed behind the flexed knee to add a cushion and prevent undue stress on the knee joint.

FIGURE 4 LEG STRETCH



The Thai massage sequence includes a stretch with one leg in a figure 4 position. The practitioner braces the client's bent knee between their own knees to maintain the correct alignment during the stretch. This is an intense stretch due to the combination of the hamstring stretch on the straight leg and the external rotation of the bent leg, causing a stretch in the gluteal muscles at the same time. By stabilizing the client's bent knee and controlling the height of the straight leg, the practitioner can intensify the stretch quickly, and therefore communication with the client is important in this pose.

ARDHA UTTANASANA



The client's legs are raised to 90 degrees with both feet flexed. For many people with tight hamstrings, this is a deep stretch. For a client who cannot stand in ardha uttanasana without a rounded back, the Thai massage position may not go to 90 degrees. These clients generally like the feeling of their back on the mat. In this supine position, the weight of the body will cause the back to stay flat, allowing the stretch to be isolated in the hamstrings.

ARDHA HALASANA



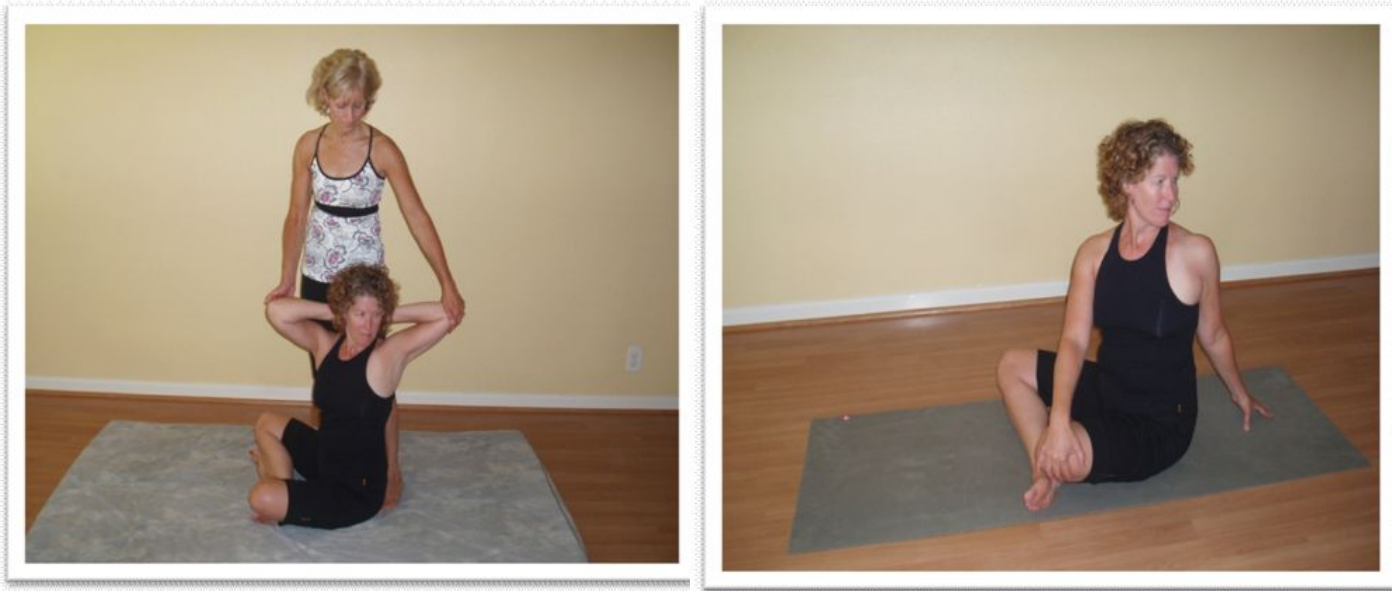
After the client experiences the effects of ardha uttanasana, the body is brought into a pose that is similar to ardha halasana. The Thai massage sequence suggests that the client's hands stay braced on the thighs and the body is rolled up only until the mid-back is off the mat. Care must be taken not to push the body further to avoid any strain to the neck. The blankets used in sarvangasana and halasana accomplish the same purpose. As in yoga, this pose is not always included due to the comfort level of the client and any restrictions they may have.

SUKASANA



Sukasana is used as the most common comfortable seated pose in the Thai massage sequence. It allows the practitioner the correct body placement and leverage needed to apply downward pressure on the client's upper trapezius muscle. A combination of palm pressure and thumb pressure is used. The downward pressure also helps to intensify the grounding of the hips and the external rotation of the thighs.

SPINAL TWIST - SEATED



A seated spinal twist is done with the client in sukasana. The sequence allows a variety of stretches and poses to be done from the basic sukasana position. In this twist, the client's hands are interlaced behind their head to open the chest. This also gives the practitioner leverage to twist by using gentle pressure on the elbows. At the same time, the practitioner is applying slight pressure with the knees on the client's back to prevent rounding and to keep the spine elongated. In order to achieve this length and stretch unassisted in a yoga pose, the leverage must be achieved by using one hand on the mat and one on the knee.

FORWARD FOLD IN SUKASANA



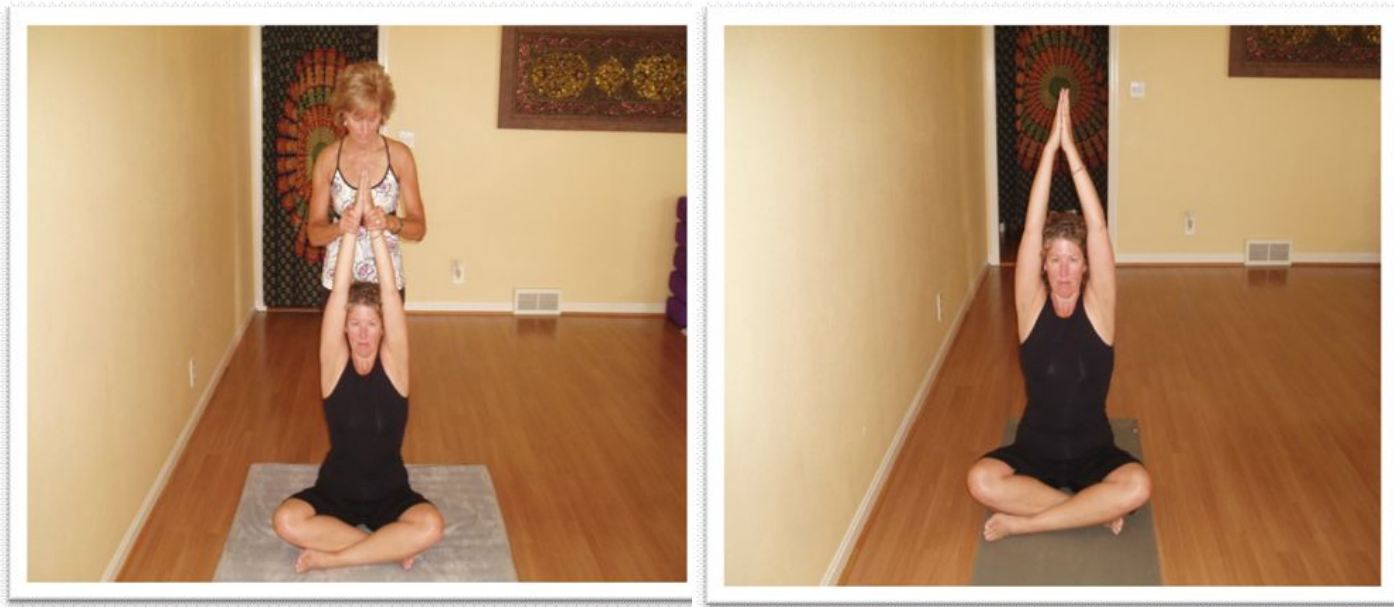
The Thai massage sequence contains several versions of a forward fold with legs in sukasana. The top 2 pictures show the use of the practitioner's knees and arms to increase the intensity of the fold. This is achieved by either pressing down on the knees or pulling the body up into the fold and propping the client's crossed legs against the standing legs. The bottom position provides a different feel for the client because the back is allowed to round as the practitioner guides the elbows to the mat.

MATSYASANA (variation)



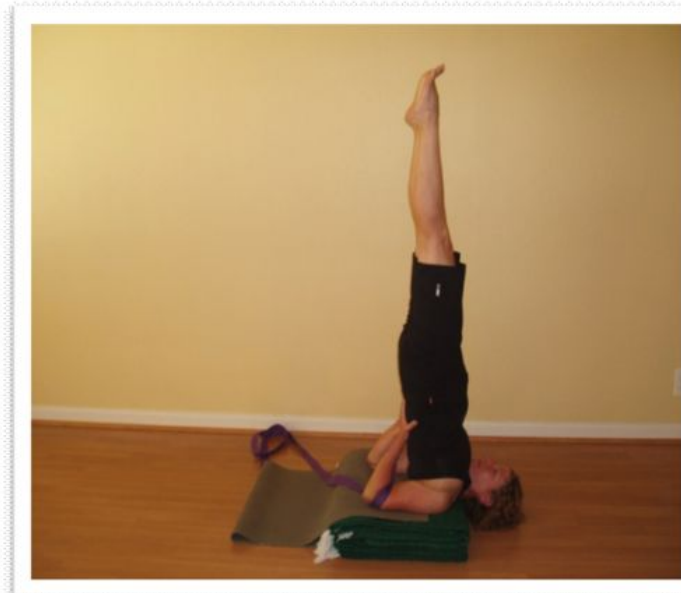
The Thai massage sequence includes a pose similar to matsyasana, with legs in sukasana. This pose is done using the practitioner's knees to stabilize the thoracic area (on either side of the spine) while the client's arms are gently pulled back for a stretch of the front body. This position brings the body into a slight backbend and allows the chest to open. The pectoral muscles as well as the abdominal muscles are stretched. This is one of the more challenging poses of the sequence to perform since the practitioner must be able to maintain balance while moving in the broken toe position.

SUKASANA (NAMASKAR HANDS)



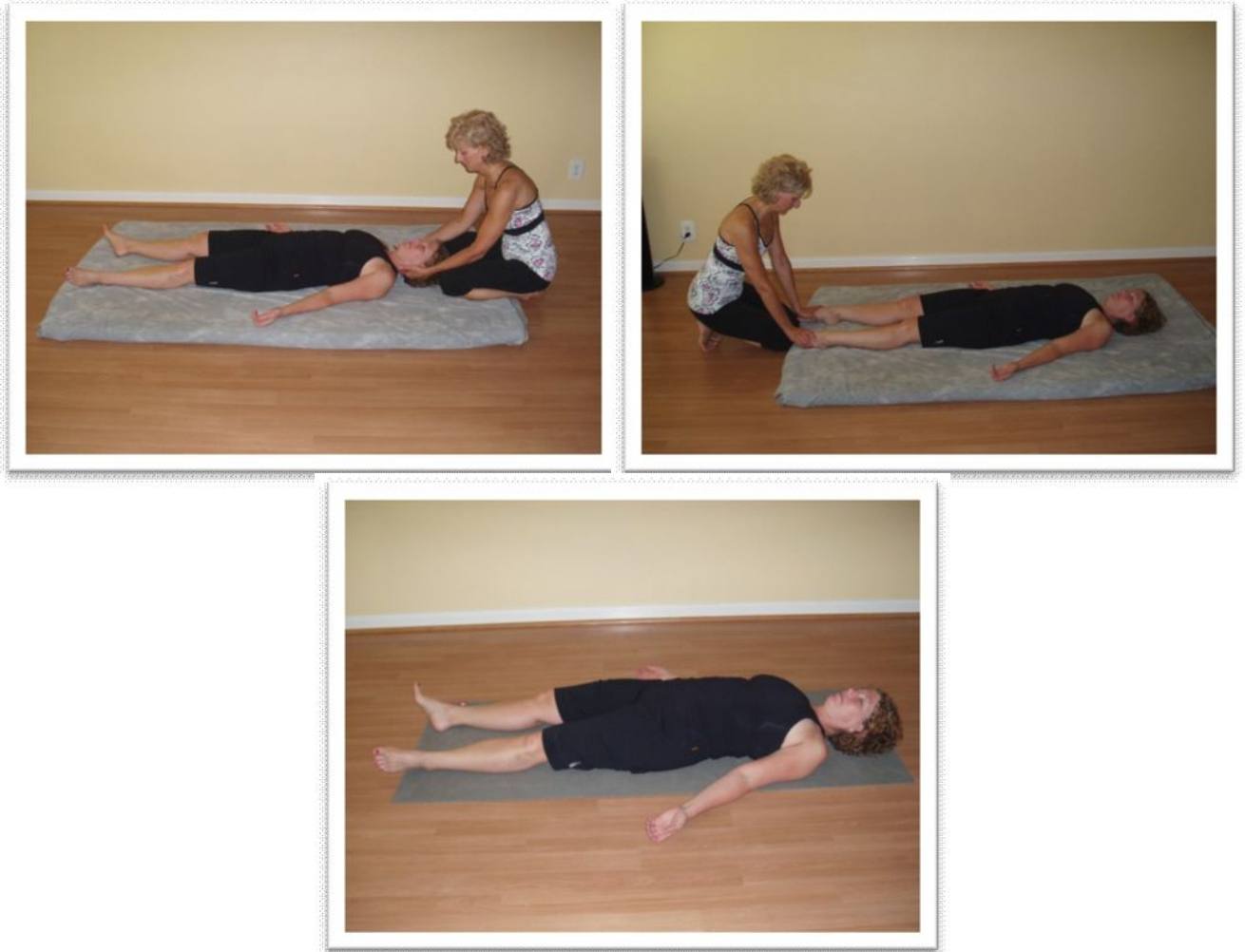
A stretch to the upper body is done with the client seated in sukasana with namaskar hands. The entire upper body from the side waist through the armpits and arms is stretched. The practitioner uses her knees at stabilize the client's back and prevent rounding, while lifting up on the wrists. A slight bend in the knees before performing the stretch allows the practitioner to use leg strength in lifting upward instead of only upper body strength. The intensity of this stretch cannot be achieved without assistance.

SARVANGASANA



As the client comes to a supine resting position, thumb and palm pressure is applied to the shoulders and neck. This is followed by a stretch to the posterior neck with the chin toward the sternum, which puts the body in a position similar to shoulder stand. The practitioner must use both hands to give the client a sense of safety and security. Because the body is lying on the mat, there is no possibility of rounding the back or collapsing the chest. Although this is obviously not an inversion, the deep flexion of the neck provides some of the other benefits of sarvangasana, such as stimulation of the thyroid and parathyroid, and engaging of jalandhara bandha.

SAVASANA



While the client is in savasana, neck massage is done, as well as acupressure points on the occipital ridge. Facial massage follows, incorporating sinus points, ears, and scalp massage. The practitioner then moves to the feet to end the session with joint mobilization and massage of the feet and toes. The legs are lifted slightly off the mat and rocked side to side before gently coming back down to rest for the final moments of the session. As in traditional yoga, the mind and body rest fully in savasana.

This thesis project has been very beneficial to me both as a massage therapist and as a yoga instructor. I always knew there were some obvious parallels between Thai Massage and traditional yoga asana. Poses like bhujangasana and salabasana were apparent right away. I saw these the first time I looked at this project idea, but I never stopped to look at it from the perspective of the body in different planes in space. Each time I looked, I saw more details...subtle poses that were hidden in a passive, supine position! Surprisingly, such poses as natarajasana, eka pada virasana, and many others came into focus when I began breaking down each position of the sequence with a new perspective. We get so used to looking at things from one point of view...the one we are used to. But when I took the time to open my mind and let go of the usual expectations of this routine, it suddenly opened up to me in a new way.

When I started this project, I could not see a direct parallel between the acupressure along the sen lines (which constitutes the first 1/3 of the Thai Massage session) and yoga. As I gave it a deeper look however, I realized that this actually activates the muscles and increases blood flow in a passive way.

Opening energy lines is the equivalent of the simple stretches we do at the beginning of a yoga class to bring blood flow and opening to the body by gentle flexion, extension, and rotation of the spine. Even the hands and feet are activated by thumb

pressure to the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. After 6 years of doing Thai Massage, I never realized it, but the first half of the session is also another way of preparing the body for the poses, just as we prepare our body for asana by focusing, grounding, breath work and intention.

Over the years I have gotten used to the usual flow of the Thai Massage routine, and I am excited to tie it in with traditional yoga poses to educate my clients. I will certainly be much more apt to market my Thai Massage services as an “assisted yoga” session, especially to my new yoga students who will be able to see and feel the similarities. The Thai Massage session has become so much more to me since this thesis project...massage techniques and yoga asana now come together in a way that is not only beneficial, but can be used as a way to educate my clients.

(Heartfelt thanks to Reeny Linstrom for volunteering to be photographed for this project. Your beautiful poses added so much to the visual comparisons!)

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