

THAI YOGA MASSAGE

DRAWING ON A BLEND OF ANCIENT EASTERN HEALING TRADITIONS, THAI YOGA MASSAGE ADDS A NEW DIMENSION TO THE PURSUIT OF WELL BEING.

STORY BY LAL INGRAM

It's only Monday, but I can already feel the tension creeping up my shoulders and into neck. My head is starting to get that achy, stuck-on-a-stick feeling that comes from spending eight hours in front of a computer screen. No matter how much stretching I do, the tension lurks there all day.

I've tried massage, with good results, so when someone suggests Thai Yoga massage I think sure, why not. It's healthier than taking a handful of acetaminophen tablets. I get to keep my clothes on, call me modest but that's a plus. And it's supposed to treat my whole body – toes to fingertips to ear lobes – to both a penetrating massage and deep stretch.

Thai Yoga massage is an ancient art. Its roots go back more than 2,500 years, to the traditional Ayurveda healing system of India. In its modern form, it combines Ayurveda, yoga, meditation and Shiatsu massage techniques.

There are a number of practitioners in Canada and the United States; our expert, Marvin Swartz, is certified by the Lotus Palm School founded in Montreal by author, practitioner and teacher Kam Thye Chow.

"Thai Yoga massage is a very holistic treatment," Swartz says. "We work the whole body instead of focusing on a particular area. The practitioner uses hands, feet, arms, legs and body weight to compress muscle tissues."

The massage, or bodywork as Swartz calls it, involves manipulating the body through various supported yoga postures. Because you're supported in the movements, you get a good stretch. The technique begins with the upper body and works down to your legs and feet, then up again, working your back,

abdomen, arms, upper body and finally, wonderfully, ending in a gentle massage of head and face.

The goal is to 'gently stretch and open the body.' This helps increase your joint mobility and flexibility, enhances blood flow to cells, tissues and organs, stimulates the lymphatic system and unblocks your energy lines.

The concept of energy lines is central to Thai Yoga massage, and reflective of its Ayurvedic influence. According to Ayurvedic tradition, humans have a network of energy lines running through the body. "In the Thai tradition, there are ten important lines. These lines are connected to acupressure points, and massaging them promotes the free flow of energy," Swartz says.

By applying yoga postures in different rhythms and intensities, Thai Yoga massage also helps rebalance your 'doshas.' This goes back to the belief that each individual is a combination of three doshas, or elements: vat (air-ether), pitta (fire-water) and kapha (earth-water). An imbalance can manifest in health or emotional problems.



COBRA



COWFACE

Thai Yoga massage is performed on a mat on the floor rather than a table. A typical session lasts about two hours. "It takes the first hour for the body to relax. It's in the second hour, when you see the body becoming more relaxed, that I do some of the deeper work," Swartz says.

And what is the tell-tale sign of a relaxed client? "I look for that first yawn," he laughs. "Sometimes tension is obvious, sometimes it's not, but you learn to see it. I think a good practitioner can sense whether someone is relaxed or not."

"During a session, there's a deep focus on my part: I watch body movements, eye and facial expressions. Sometimes when you move one part of the body, another part will move and that tells you something. It can help you identify problem areas."

The Lotus Palm method has been adapted to the North American lifestyle, which means it focuses more on the upper body – neck, shoulders and back where so many of us hold our tension – than the lower. But Swartz notes that he does an assessment of new clients to identify problem areas.

"It's a challenge because each person has their own issues. When I'm doing the bodywork, it's almost like a game where I'm figuring out what techniques will work on what spots. There's a procession I follow, but I have advanced techniques I can draw on to alleviate specific issues."

Stress relief is probably the biggest reason people come for Thai Yoga massage. "People are definitely looking for a stress outlet," Swartz says. "But I think people are also paying more attention to their own wellness today. They're disillusioned with health care and trying to take charge of their own health. And massage is a drug-free alternative to stress relief."

He also points out that today's society is more accepting of massage and touch. "In our Christian-Judeo culture, touch has always had a sexual connotation, and that's led to a fear of touch. There's still a bit of a taboo, but it is breaking down."

Swartz believes that our society is more open to experiencing new things. And that is being helped along by medical research showing the positive benefits of touch.

"I think there is a therapeutic benefit, in terms of flexibility, stress relief and mental release. And there's a very strong meditative quality during the session. There's a sense of achievement in being able to successfully release an individual's tension and stress levels. My ultimate satisfaction is when they fall asleep and start snoring, because it shows a complete sense of trust in me. I consider that an accomplishment."

It is mostly male clients who do the snoring, but everyone has their own reaction. I felt wide awake and physically invigorated. The ache in my shoulders and neck was gone ... at least until next Monday. 🐻

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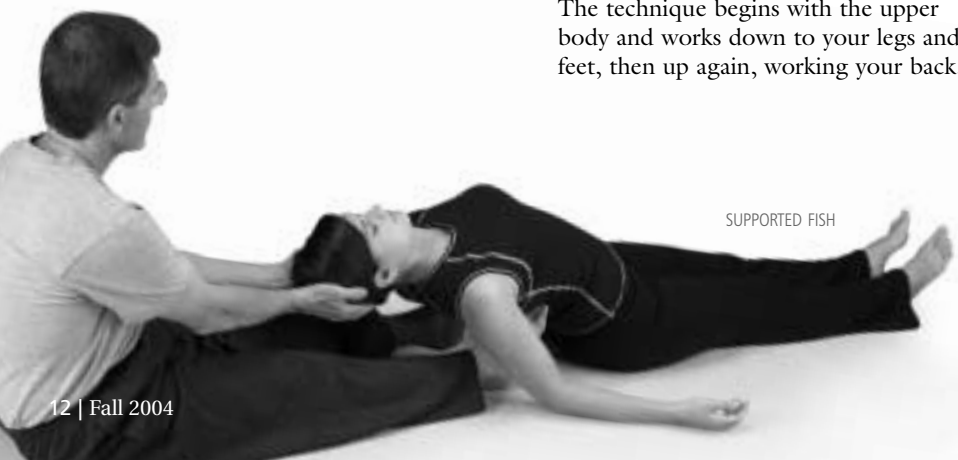
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