

## Interview with Bob Haddad

This interview is based on questions that were asked to Bob Haddad by several of his European students in 2015, and some information was updated in 2020. Bob is a Thai massage therapist and teacher, and is the founder of Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI).



### *What brought you into Thai massage?*

Traditional Thai massage came into my life serendipitously. Right after a series of difficult personal events in my life, I went to Thailand to rediscover myself, and I took an introductory course in Thai massage at one of the only schools in Chiang Mai at the time. Naturally, I got hooked, and I began to practice on friends back home, and then I returned to Thailand for more study that same year. I continued to study with other teachers around the world, and I returned to Chiang Mai every year, until I met my first mentor, Asokananda. He introduced me to Mama Lek Chaiya and also to Pichest Boonthumme, who was one of his teachers. At that time Ajahn Pichest was teaching to small groups at his home in Hang Dong. I was privileged to study with Lek, and to have Pichest as my mentor.

### *What makes Thai massage special for you?*

I believe that when Thai massage is practiced efficiently, and within the guidelines of traditional Thai medicine and Buddhist principles, it has a holistic healing effect on the body, the mind, and spirit of the receiver (and also the therapist). Most other therapies and healing arts focus on either the body or the mind, or sometimes on the spiritual center. The beauty of traditional Thai massage (*nuad boran*) is that it can treat all three at the same time. It loosens the body through stretches and compressions; it stimulates the energy system and dissolves blockages by working on the *sen* lines with hands, feet and fingers; and it calms the mind and the nervous system with the love and *metta* that is directed to the receiver.

As Thai therapists advance in their practice, it's important to not get stuck in pre-defined sequences, since no two people react the same way at any given moment. In my practice, what is most important is to stay in the present moment at all times, to keep an uncluttered mind, and to meditate on the feelings and sensations of the person that is being touched. That is where Buddhist principles enter the work. Ultimately, when a person feels safe and nurtured, he or she can unfold into a personal process of self-healing.

*Why and how did you start Thai Healing Alliance (THAI)?*

I created the framework for Thai Healing Alliance toward the end of 2004. At that time, I was studying with Asokananda (he died the following year) and also with Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme. In some courses I had previously taken, I'd noticed people that were practicing Thai massage with bad ergonomics and in unsustainable ways. I also realized that many of the teachers that worked in schools in Chiang Mai didn't seem to notice or care that their students were struggling to execute techniques. In addition, many people claimed to be experts in Thai massage, yet they really seemed to know very little. One day after class with Pichest, I asked two of my fellow students for their feedback and comments about starting an organization to help educate others about Thai massage. We had lunch together, and based on our conversation, I wrote down some points and ideas on a napkin, and that was the beginning of THAI.

THAI was formed with a desire to unite practitioners and teachers of *nuad* (Thai massage) around the world, and to elevate and dignify these traditions by proposing standardized levels of study and practice. The title of Registered Thai Therapist (RTT) was created for those who met the minimum number of study hours and practice experience. Over the years, THAI hosted two international study retreats; developed connections with bodywork organizations around the world; printed and distributed a newsletter; and grew to have thousands of members in 70 countries. In 2020, THAI underwent a re-structuring, and it now serves as an educational website for Thai healing arts. The online library (archive) is open to the general public, and it contains the world's largest collection of information and research about Thai massage, Thai herbal traditions and Thai healing arts.

*Your book "Thai Massage & Thai Healing Arts" focuses on the spiritual aspect of Thai massage and Thai healing arts. This part of Thai massage is not often taught. How did you get in touch with the more spiritual part of Thai healing arts?*

After my first four or five years of learning and practice, some of my clients began to change in ways that could only be described as extra-physical. I also began to change. By working slowly, and by utilizing stillness, sensing and intuition, I could "listen" more to the bodies of my clients, and not just perform techniques in a mechanical sequence. During this same period I paid more attention to my altar, and I tried to be still and focused when I worked. As I deepened my studies with Thai spiritual masters, some amazing things began to happen, and the effectiveness of my work improved. Jivaka became much more important to me, and with the help of a few special teachers, I went deeper into the Thai spirit world. I am a true believer in the spiritual connections inherent in Thai massage and Thai medicine. Some of the things I have experienced could only be the result of connections with the spirit world. As you say, unfortunately this part of Thai healing arts is not often taught to Westerners who learn Thai massage. But for me, it became such an important part of my practice that I decided to write a book, not about techniques, but rather about the "practice, culture and spirituality" of Thai massage.

*How do you integrate this knowledge into your own practice and teaching?*

My knowledge is limited, and I'm constantly learning. In my professional practice however, I use assessment tools that I've learned in order to better understand my role in each client's process of healing. Sometimes our role as therapists is predominant and active – and sometimes it absolutely must be secondary! In fact, for short periods of time, it is sometimes completely absent. The trick is to understand when and what to “do” and when and what to “not do.” It's also important to not “be in your head” when you work on the mat. Thai massage, like Buddhist meditation, works best when there is an empty mind; when we as therapists are empty vessels. Ego and thinking almost always cause problems. They create interference in the healing process between the therapist and the client, and they result in less effective Thai massage practice. Awareness of energy flow (wind movement), blockages in the sen, and energy overload (“charged” energy that may be released from a client during a session) are extremely important focal points for an experienced Thai massage therapist. In my practice, I pray and meditate at my altar before and after each session; I “feed” my altar as they do in Thailand, with water and food; and I try to perform some version of a *wai khru* every day, even if it is only a moment of reflection and gratitude for my life teachers.

As a teacher, I try to inspire my advanced students to utilize their innate sensing abilities, and not to remain stuck in the standard sequence that they first learned.. I remind them to be reverent, to keep their egos low, to work slowly, and to always work with the breath, not against it. I am so grateful to receive feedback from my students around the world, and to remain in touch with many of them, even when we don't see each other for several years. My connection to my students, my Thai massage colleagues and my clients is my “sangha” – my extended family in the field of Thai healing arts.

*What do you think about the modern modalities that are based on Thai massage?*

Well, this is a big issue, with many different perspectives. I believe that for serious students and professionals in the field of Thai healing arts, it's important to know what is truly Thai; what comes from other healing traditions but is perceived or presented as Thai; and what is simply the result of modern hybridized methods of assessment and treatment.

Thai massage is not a part of Ayurveda, Chinese medicine, yoga, or any other Eastern or Western tradition, and elements or interpretations of those systems cannot be injected into Thai massage without distracting from its purest intent and reducing its ultimate effect. I feel that there is no need to integrate concepts and techniques from other systems or modern inventions into traditional Thai massage. Doing so does not make Thai massage any more effective. In my opinion, it only confuses and dilutes it, and in some cases, it elevates the egos of those who practice, thereby desensitizing their work as therapists. Thai massage is already a complete, wondrous and amazingly efficient system, and it operates at its most efficient level when it is carried out through the lens of traditional Thai medical theory, and with a direct connection to the Buddhist principle of metta, or loving-kindness.

I see most of the current-day fusion as “confusion”, especially when new techniques and concepts from other traditions are presented and marketed as “Thai.” In the early days, Thai medicine concepts and access to texts were not available to Westerners, so some early teachers unintentionally taught and spread techniques and concepts that were not Thai. Some of them taught Ayurveda, Chinese medicine and yoga philosophy like doshas and chakras to their students. Today however, I think there are two general categories of non-traditional teaching and practice:

Some teachers and schools around the world and in Thailand deliberately misrepresent Thai tradition by using the word “Thai” or by presenting information as if it is truly from the Thai tradition. This is sad and disappointing because it misrepresents the tradition, and because in some cases, the techniques and concepts run contrary to Thai medicine and Thai massage. In most cases, they do this in order to “sell” themselves and their courses to unassuming and enthusiastic students. This is happening in the West and also in Thailand. Some examples are “Thai aromatherapy”; “Thai” oil massage; Thai chair massage and Thai table massage; “Thai abdominal detox massage”; and also stick foot reflexology. None of these things belong to the Thai tradition, yet they are sometimes sold and marketed as “Thai.”

Other teachers teach techniques from other Eastern and Western traditions without claiming that they are “Thai.” In other words, they are honest from the start, and say that these are non-Thai techniques and traditions that may also be used in Thai massage. I don’t have a problem with this approach because these teachers are not deliberately misrepresenting the Thai tradition.

Part of the beauty of Thai massage is that it is constantly changing and evolving. Experienced Thai massage therapists are always free to invent and create their own techniques, and modify traditional techniques to suit their needs. They can still do this while following the general guidelines of Thai medicine and element theory; by being sensitive and keeping their egos low; and by using common sense.

