

Thai Massage Education: Some Questions and Concerns

By: Bob Haddad

Unfortunately, the world is filled with people who teach or practice Thai massage without adequate knowledge or study experience. Some people study only for a few weeks or months before beginning to charge money for their services. All too often, those who take a hurried approach to learning emerge as unaccomplished and unrefined practitioners. There are certain factors that contribute to this situation.

The Concept of “Levels”

Westerners are generally conditioned to pursue education in levels, or modules of study, with the eventual goals of completion and validation. This is not the case in the teacher/ student model upon which much of the world’s traditional, non-academic education is based, including in Southeast Asia. When students ask me “how many levels” they need to become a Thai massage therapist, I often respond that there is only one level, and then there is death. That confuses them, so I go on to explain that in order to become a sensitive, accomplished Thai therapist, you need to abandon the concept of levels, and realize that you will be studying for life.

The Words “Certified” and “Certification”

For the most part, these words mean very little in the realm of Thai massage. There is no regulation or licensure for the practice of Thai healing arts in most countries around the world, so teachers, schools and training programs that advertise “certifications” generally have no authority to award a document that allows someone to legally practice Thai massage. The irony is that some serious and dedicated Thai massage students study for many years and still can’t practice legally, while some regional and national massage boards allow western table workers to legally practice and teach Thai massage, even if they studied for only a few days at a continuing education class.



Therapist Training Programs and “Teacher Training” Programs

Teachers and schools, including some in Thailand, try to convince students to enroll programs ranging in length from 120 to 500 hours. These programs cost large sums of money, and they give an impression that a graduate will be qualified to begin a professional practice as a Thai therapist, or to begin teaching Thai massage, as soon as the program is over. These programs, without subsequent affiliation of a licensing body, are not legally binding in Thailand or in any other country. To compound the situation, programs are often filled with non-traditional elements of training, and accessory modalities such as Thai table and chair massage, oil massage, Chinese-influenced therapies (including *chi nei tsang*, *tuina* and stick-style foot reflexology), aromatherapy, and other modern or hybrid therapies. Furthermore, many of these programs give the impression to unknowing students that they will be legally certified for practice. In some cases, schools in Thailand and elsewhere place logos and seals on their advertising and websites which can give the impression that their certifications legally authorize the student to be endorsed by the Thai government for professional practice. But none of that is true.

Very often, students who go through “fast-track” programs demonstrate a dearth of knowledge, preparation, and experience on the mat. Many have poor body mechanics, minimal breath awareness, and an unrefined sensitivity to touch. In Thailand today, “Practitioner” courses are offered in as little as 3 or 4 weeks of study. There are no requirements for subsequent long-term practice, little ongoing support, and no encouragement for the student to study with other teachers in the future. In fact, many schools who offer “programs” entice these same students to come back to their schools for more advanced programs, or to pay large sums of money to stay on for a few additional weeks, in order to receive “certification” as a teacher.

These days, an increasing number of schools collaborate with Western certifying organizations from different countries, claiming that their programs meet certain licensing requirements. In most cases, both the regulatory agency and the referring school stand to profit financially by this arrangement, yet the student is often left unprepared, with an inflated sense of ego, and lacking strong ethics and standards for safe and effective practice of traditional Thai massage.

Lack of education and outreach on the part of Thai government agencies

In Thailand, Thai massage education aimed at foreigners brings in millions of tourist dollars each year. The Thai government, however, whether through its Ministries of Education, Health, or Tourism & Sports, has made no tangible effort to reach out to the international community of Thai massage students, therapists and teachers. There have been no attempts to standardize programs of study for foreigners, or to educate them about safe, effective and legal practice of nuad in their native countries. Those schools that choose to be accredited by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education must first have their courses approved by the government. Many schools and teachers, however, teach whatever they wish, including hybrid modalities and other types of therapies that do not have their origins in Thai tradition.

Summary

It’s important for students of Thai massage to pursue study only with highly qualified teachers. It’s also important for consumers to thoroughly investigate a prospective therapist before making an appointment for a Thai massage. Whether searching for a teacher or a therapist, check the person’s study and training history. If it’s not listed on their web site or in their promotional information, ask them about it. How long have they studied Thai massage, and with whom? Have they studied in Thailand? If so, when was the last time they were there? Do the descriptions of their services use western anatomical language or Eastern healing terminology? Do they blend Thai massage with other modalities? Are they members of Thai Healing Alliance, or at least do they meet the minimum requirements for Instructor, School, or Registered Thai Therapist (RTT)? Before you make an appointment for a Thai massage or register for a course in Thai massage, check into each person’s background just as you would do for a prospective employee, or a tenant for your rental home. To learn more about proposed world standards for the practice and study of traditional Thai massage, visit the Thai Healing Alliance web site.

Traditional Thai massage is a unique and powerful vehicle of healing, and it is worthy of being practiced, taught, and promoted within the context of traditional Thai medicine, not from a perspective of Western bodywork therapies, Ayurvedic medicine, Chinese medicine, or any other body of knowledge. Thai massage has been treating and helping people to improve their physical and spiritual health for a very long time. Thai massage study, when carried out seriously, and with a commitment to cumulative, long term study with a wide variety of teachers, can contribute to integrity of practice, and a well-rounded base of knowledge and experience. Don't take the fast-track approach to studying Thai massage. By studying slowly, for many years, and with different teachers, we can help to dignify Thai tradition, and maximize the potential of this great healing art.

Bob Haddad has been studying traditional Thai massage in Thailand and elsewhere since 1999. He is Founder of Thai Healing Alliance International (THAI), and author of "Thai Healing Arts: Practice, Culture & Spirituality." He teaches workshops internationally.



Ponsi

Bob, thank you for showing gratitude and passion toward Thai massage. Your emphasis on life long learning practice with the reputable instructors or institutions is so critical. My pet peeve has always been false claiming or certification as Thai massage practitioner or bodyworker which usually leave authentic Thai massage a negative image. KopKhun ka.



Astrid

Great Bob, thanks for this clarification,
Warm regards, Astrid