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The Thai Herbal Compress Technique

Healing from Thailand

by Kamala Thiagarajan

The healing practice of Thai herbal compress therapy dates back nearly 5,000 years, to an era when the knowledge of plants, including their effects through ingestion or application on the body, were painstakingly researched and then passed down from one generation to the next.

This herbal therapy was designed to relieve pain and inflammation. A selection of therapeutic herbs, including prai, ginger, turmeric and lemongrass, are wrapped in a muslin compress, steamed and then applied to the body in gentle pressing, circular and rolling movements.

In Thailand, the herbal compress is called *luk pra kob*, translated as "herbal pressing sphere." To make the com-



press, a combination of healing herbs is bundled together in accordance with ancient recipes, steamed and placed directly on the skin to soothe muscular aches and swelling.

The popularity that these herbal compresses have long enjoyed was mainly due to their easy adaptability—the treatment is neither expensive nor complicated, yet effective. For

this reason, it has the power to transcend social barriers. In ancient times it was used by Thai royalty in elaborate treatments and by soldiers for aches and pains after returning from battle.

Some scholars believe that herbal compress massage was first introduced to Thailand by monks from India,

who established the first Buddhist monasteries in Thailand around 200 B.C. Others believe it originated from rural folk medicine and was passed on by word of mouth through an unbroken chain of masters, or through secret manuscripts that changed hands from teacher to student.

Herbal compress therapy retains its popularity in Thailand and is offered throughout the country—from storefront massage establishments to high-end spas to the Traditional Thai Massage School in the temple of Wat Pho in Bangkok.

The technique moves West

Thai medicine experts say that knowledge of herbal compresses made its way to the West by practitioners who traveled to schools, such as the Old Medicine Hospital in Chang Mai and Wat Po in Bangkok, and studied the art directly from Thai masters.

In the United States, where an herbal compress is sometimes referred to as an herbal stem or herbal ball, an increasing number of spas and individual therapists are offering the treatment to their clientele.

Spa Esmeralda in Indian Wells, California, introduced the herbal compress treatment in 2006 and it was an instant hit

Compresses can be either hot or cold, depending upon the client's preference and/or area in need of therapy.

with guests, says the spa's director, Kim Cadra.

"I had experienced the service when I was visiting Thailand a few years ago," she says. "I found it to be an amazing experience. You will feel both intensely relaxed and energized by this restorative treatment."

Hot stone therapy has established the popularity and benefits of thermal therapy, according to Tom Wellman, President of Sabai Spa Products, a company based in Tamarac, Florida, that imports Thai herbal compresses to the United States.

"The herbal ball allows you to provide aromatherapy, thermal therapy and herbal therapy all at once in a modality that is new and unique," he says. "I firmly believe that once this product is widely available and direct experience has grown, herbal ball therapy will become a highly requested treatment, much like hot stone therapy is now."

The rising popularity of the Thai herbal compress is credited to its perception by clients as a wholesome, complete treatment.

"I chose the Thai herbal massage for lower back pain and because I like the way it warms up my muscles during a massage," says Mindy Cohen, 46, services manager at the Spa at Pebble Beach in Pacific Grove, California. "It is a complete experience, with the scent of the herbs and the feel of the warm compresses."

After a session with Thai herbal compresses, she adds, her body feels more flexible and energetically balanced.

"Thai herbal massage is gaining popularity with the world-class spas we work with," says Tara Grodjesk, president of Tara Spa Therapy, a company that trains massage therapists in various healing modalities. "The compresses are basically steamed and used to penetrate [the skin] through moist heat therapy with herbal benefits."

Benefits of the technique

The Thai herbal compress technique offers several potential health benefits: It induces deep relaxation, relieves stress and fatigue, boosts both emotional and physical well-being, assists alignment and postural integrity of the body, improves circulation of blood and lymph and stimulates the internal organs.

"As the pores open and allow the herbs to take effect, ailments such as stiff, sore or pulled muscles and ligaments, back pain, migraines, stress and anxiety are almost instantly relieved," says Prin Prakittiphoom, marketing manager at MSpa International, a spa-management company in Bangkok.

The hot compresses are ideal for alleviating pain, stiff, sore or pulled muscles and ligaments, chronic back aches, arthritis, even skin conditions, migraines and chronic stress or anxiety. The blend of traditional Thai herbs used in these compresses has a relaxing and invigorating effect on the body and mind, soothing sore and overworked muscles while giving the body's energy reserves a huge boost.

The compress traditionally consists of a mixture of several herbs, most containing the six basic herbs as a base: lemongrass, prai (or plai), turmeric, kaffir lime, camphor and tamarind.

"These herbs possess properties that are anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, astringent and antioxidant," says John Rasch, a massage therapist in Boulder, Colorado. "They are used to [address] sprains, bruises and sore muscles, cleanse and heal the skin by promoting cell growth, and [aid] upper respiratory ailments such as bronchitis, asthma and the common cold."

Camille Western, director of the Thaiyurveda Institute, which trains therapists in Thai techniques, says, "There are traditional blends that can be used on all clients, but [blends] can also be customized to [address] specific

conditions... such as colds, sinus congestion and headaches."

For example, she says, a compress could contain eucalyptus, peppermint, cloves or camphor to relieve sinus congestion.

The technique's application

"A typical session using herbal compress application is an integral part of the Thai discipline of hot therapy," Western says, although the compress can also be used cold.

One of the more traditional ways to warm up the compresses is to use a bamboo steamer. An electric steamer can also be used. Rasch steams the herbal compress with a simple rice cooker fitted with a steaming rack.

Therapists should always have two compresses ready for use: One is placed on the heat source, while the other is applied to the client.

"The heat can be turned up or down depending how hot the client likes it," says massage therapist Gisela Di Carlo, who also distributes Thai compresses in the United States, "but the [compresses] are always just hot enough to touch them comfortably."

After one compress starts to cool, Western trades it for the hot one. "Simply apply the compress to the site and press gently with your palm," she says. "The compress can be set aside to cool if the client is sensitive to the heat. It can be used over the person's clothing to give that additional layer of protection from the heat."

Steaming releases the aroma and medicinal properties of the compress, according to Di Carlo.

Western says that some therapists begin a session with the compresses as a way to stimulate the *sen* lines (meridians in Chinese medicine) and soothe and prepare the joints and muscles before massage.

"Another idea is to use the compresses as heated pillows, as a prop for the client's neck, head or the backs of the knees."

Therapists may also wish to leave a compress at an acupressure point in order to stimulate the energy flow throughout the body, Western adds. To do this, they simply apply the compress to the site and press gently with their palm.



The hot compresses alleviate pain, stiff, sore or pulled muscles and ligaments, chronic back aches and arthritis.

Di Carlo also owns Safari Spa in Milford, Philadelphia. Her 70-minute Lok Pra Koh massage is part of the spa's Thai Wellness treatment package.

"We make our [compresses] in Thailand, [following] an old recipe for bruising, detoxification and pain relief," she says. "We also make small coconut [compresses] for the face. They truly eliminate small lines and leave the face glowing and younger looking."

Thai herbal compresses can also be applied cold. The compresses are first heated for 10 to 15 minutes to release the beneficial alkaloids in the herbs, and then frozen or iced.

"Cold compresses are recommended for clients with muscle strains, tendon or ligament sprains, contusions, hematomas and more severe injuries requiring cold therapy," says Roxane Narigi, a massage therapist who runs Balanced Body Works studio in Salinas, California.

"Cold compresses help to reduce swelling and pain and can promote dissipation of pooled stagnant energy due

to broken *sen* [energy meridian] lines. [They] should be applied only to the site [of] the injury and should be monitored while the practitioner massages other areas of the body."

Client satisfaction

Rasch says the Thai herbal compress technique is popular with his clients. And according to Wellman, the customer can be given the compresses after the session, which promotes word-of-mouth advertising and assists therapists in attracting more clients. The compresses can be heated in a steamer or microwave for use twice more at home.

Today's massage client wants a choice in techniques. Thai herbal compress therapy, whether offered in a spa or in private practice, is a new and effective way for massage therapists to provide clients with a variety of healing benefits.

Kamala Thiagarajan is a freelance journalist in Madurai, South India. She writes about health and fitness, alternative therapy and esoteric healing, and has been published in six countries.