

LIVING TRADITIONS

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Acupuncture and Thai Massage — “ Same Same, but Different “

By Eric Spivack

Thai massage and acupuncture are ancient healing arts that have existed for thousands of years. Thai massage is based in Ayurvedic medicine, Buddhist spiritual practice, and yoga. Acupuncture is based on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). While acupuncture and Thai massage are distinct modalities, they share some similarities, and could perhaps be described by the popular Thai expression ‘*Same Same but Different*’.

Acupuncture and Thai massage are individual elements of more complex systems of medicine. Both Chinese medicine and Traditional Thai medicine comprise herbal therapies, nutritional and food cures, spiritual practice and physical medicine. Neither acupuncture nor Thai massage is based on the Western system of anatomy. In many places in the East, dissection was forbidden until the introduction of Western medicine, so the earliest references to the human body were based on external observation.

As a result, both modalities are complete energy-based healing systems. In Thai massage, we use the term *sen* to describe the pathways along which energy travels, and the energy itself is referred to as *lom*. In acupuncture, the pathways are called *meridians* or *channels*, and the energy that moves throughout the body is called *Qi* (pronounced ‘chee’). Other Eastern names for this energy force are *ki* (Japanese), and *prana* (Indian Ayurvedic medicine).

This energy powers all our physical, mental, and emotional processes. In both acupuncture and Thai massage, the practitioner’s intent is to harmonize and clear energetic imbalances. Such imbalances may present themselves physically in a number of ways such as body pain, muscle cramping and stiffness, insomnia, irritability, anxiety, constipation, or disease. When the system is working well, a person feels happy, relaxed, and free from pain, though according to Chinese medicine, being symptom-free does not necessarily mean a person is in complete balance. Whereas an acupuncturist inserts sterile, single-use, hair-thin pins at various points on the body, the Thai massage practitioner uses his/her fingers, palms, elbows, knees, and feet to correct for energetic blockages.

In the Ayurvedic tradition, it is believed that 72,000 *nadis* (channels) course through the human body. Of these channels, ten major *sen* lines are the focus for Thai massage practitioners. Acupuncturists address twelve major meridians and eight additional pathways called *extraordinary vessels*. While there is some overlap of Thai *sen* and Chinese meridians, they are not the same. For example, in Thai medicine, the ten *sen* begin and end at or near the navel, and energy travels in both directions along each *sen*. In acupuncture, the meridians either begin or end at the finger tips or toes, and when energy is flowing properly, it travels in only one direction.

As the energy pathways are different, so are the treatment points along them. For example, in Chinese medicine, the *ren* meridian originates in the uterus in women and in the lower abdomen in men. It emerges at the perineum, travels up the anterior midline of the the body, and ends just below the lower lip, where it curves around the lips and terminates below the eyes, where it meets the In Thai massage, this pathway may be similarly comprised of several lines:

- 1) *Sen Sumana*, which originates at the navel and travels to the tip of the tongue
- 2) *Sen Nanthakrawat*, which divides into two lines: *Sen Sukhumang* (which travels from the navel to the anus) and *Sen Sikhin* (which travels from the navel to the urethra)
- 3) *Sen Khitchann*, which also divides into two lines: *Sen Pitakun* (running from the navel to the penis in men) and *Sen Kitcha* (running from the navel to the vagina in women.)

Though strong differences exist between Chinese medicine and traditional Thai medicine, there is enough similarity for them to complement one another. In my experience, I have found that combining acupuncture and Thai massage in a session can be extremely beneficial.

I have noticed that my patients respond best when they are able to receive approximately 30 minutes of acupuncture followed by 60-120 minutes of Thai massage. Acupuncture helps clear a person's energetic blockages and enables them to benefit more from the Thai massage. People feel more relaxed, breathe more deeply, experience deeper stretches, and feel like they've received a holistic treatment.

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