

Clinical Thai Bodywork

by Chuck Duff

Tradition Meets Modern-Day Pain Relief

Treatment of pain is an industry that consumes hundreds of billions of dollars annually. Many expensive, invasive medical treatments for chronic pain conditions, such as back pain, have a disturbingly low success rate. Given the skyrocketing costs of insurance and consequent stresses upon both individuals and employers, our society desperately needs more effective approaches to treating pain.

The development of Clinical Thai Bodywork emerged from my experiences as a practitioner and teacher of Traditional Thai massage, my studies and clinical application of myofascial trigger point therapy, osteopathic research and Asian medicine.

A Thai foundation

Clinical Thai Bodywork is built upon Thai massage, a branch of traditional Thai medicine that involves



COURTESY OF BETSY TRAPASSO

Using a traditional sitting-under-the-leg position, by flexing the knee the therapist has control of the rotation of the femur. The therapist can work the external rotators of the hip while having the client actively contract into medial rotation, then bringing the ankle in on exhale to stretch.

very efficient methods of hands-on compression, stretching and rhythmic movement, with the client clothed on a comfortable mat on the floor. In the traditional Thai view, human vitality is supported by an energy system in which wind, or *lom*, flows through a network of *sen*, or channels. There is virtually no use of physical anatomy in the traditional Thai model, which complicates teaching and any attempt to

interface with the Western medical system.

Although often performed as a relaxing spa treatment today, Thai bodywork was developed with therapeutic intent, as a way for Buddhist monks and common people to stay healthy and free of pain. In practice, there is very little that is massage-like in the practice of Thai bodywork.

Masquerading pain patterns

Trigger point therapy, the other major component of Clinical Thai Bodywork, developed in the Western medical world along a path totally independent from Asian tradition; although, there are surprising areas of intersection.

Drs. Janet Travell and David Simons wrote the seminal works on the topic, *Myofascial Pain and Dysfunction: The Trigger Point Manual*, volumes 1 and 2. These volumes carefully document decades of clinical experience in examining how small contractions—trigger points—in taut bands of muscle fiber can cause extensive pain and dysfunction in the body.

Several studies cited by Travell estimated a majority of the pain conditions causing patients to enter the reporting clinics were due to trigger points, and therefore easily treatable. Unfortunately, because trigger point pain patterns can masquerade as many common, more serious conditions, such as migraines, carpal tunnel syndrome, thoracic outlet syndrome, nerve root compression and hundreds of others, mistaken diagnoses and treatment are extremely common.

Tradition meets modern science

There are significant correlations between point locations in several disparate medical systems: Thai bodywork, trigger point therapy, Chinese medicine acupoints, motor points and the marma points of Ayurvedic medicine, which was a significant historical contributor to traditional Thai medicine.

Thai practitioners have also found ways to treat points of tenderness in the body, framing them energetically as stagnation in the sen. There are obvious similarities to myofascial trigger point therapy in some of these techniques. Lek Chaiya of Chiang Mai, Thailand, for example, teaches Jap Sen, or nerve-touch techniques that make use of what trigger

A HandsFree technique for addressing the lateral hamstrings. The therapist brings the hamstrings to a stretch, working tender points with the knee and simply leaning in to increase stretch. Using post-isometric relaxation, the client is asked to try to bend the knee against resistance, and releases into stretch on exhale.



COURTESY OF BETSY TRAPASSO

This seated spiral pose from HandsFree Thai allows a therapist of any size to create a spiral rotation of the spine and torso while lengthening the piriformis and working the vastus lateralis with the foot.



To comment on this, or any other, article in MASSAGE Magazine, send a letter to Editor in Chief Karen Menehan at kmenehan@massagemag.com.

point therapists would call a “local twitch response.” Physiologically, trigger points are, in fact, a manifestation of local metabolic stagnation in muscle fibers.

Myofascial trigger points cause referred pain, but also have insidious postural and kinetic effects due to shortening muscle fibers. Effective treatment demands some form of intervention (pressure), followed by stretching to restore the normal function of the muscle

techniques, with precise attention to order of events, point locations and taking care not to activate already troubled muscles. Many Clinical Thai Bodywork therapists use HandsFree techniques, another style we teach at the school. These techniques protect the therapist by emphasizing working from the core, using body weight and working with efficiency.

Clinical Thai Bodywork therapists frequently work

The techniques used in Clinical Thai Bodywork are generally minor modifications of traditional Thai techniques.

fibers. Thai bodywork techniques, combining pressure and stretch, can be an ideal means of addressing trigger points if we take care to properly structure the treatment.

The dynamic nature of Clinical Thai Bodywork has some important benefits.

“I find the Clinical Thai Bodywork protocol extremely effective in the treatment of pain,” explains Mark Boone, a Clinical Thai Bodywork therapist and licensed acupuncturist in Ann Arbor, Michigan. “Many Thai asanas and movements are, in fact, orthopedic tests the practitioner can use throughout the treatment to evaluate the patient’s range of motion and flexibility.”

Efficiency, effectiveness

The techniques used in Clinical Thai Bodywork are generally minor modifications of traditional Thai

with athletes, where therapist efficiency and effectiveness are at a premium.

Julie Pluss, who works on several pro NFL and NBA athletes in her practice in Highland Park, Illinois, says, “My clients love how deeply I can work their muscles by using my feet for the compressions as well as the stretches. They get up after a session with less pain and much more flexibility.

“A lot of the athletes are surprised at how strong I am, although it has more to do with working from core energy than strength alone,” she adds.

Former Chicago Bears quarterback Kyle Orton (now with the Denver Broncos) is one of Pluss’ clients. “I really enjoy the broad, strong pressure that Julie can provide by using her feet, knees and

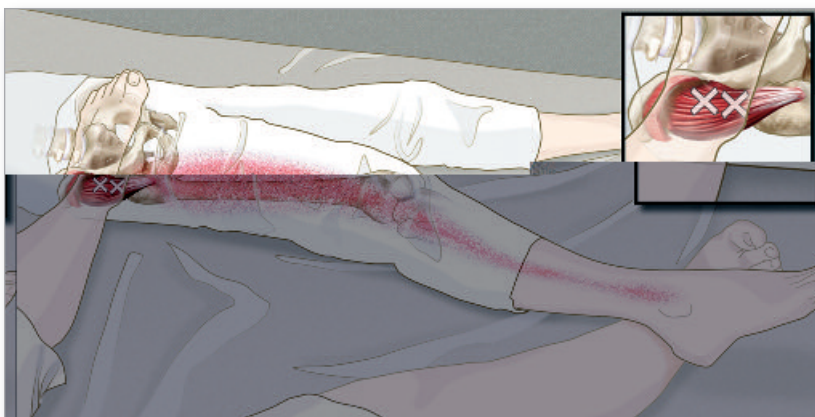


Figure I: Trigger points in the gluteus minimus muscle are an often-overlooked source of pain in the lateral leg. This pain pattern is likely to be identified as originating from sciatic nerve impingement or other problems, but is likely caused by trigger points. In this technique, the therapist compresses tender points in gluteus minimus with the foot while the distal leg adjusts the client’s leg position and stretch.

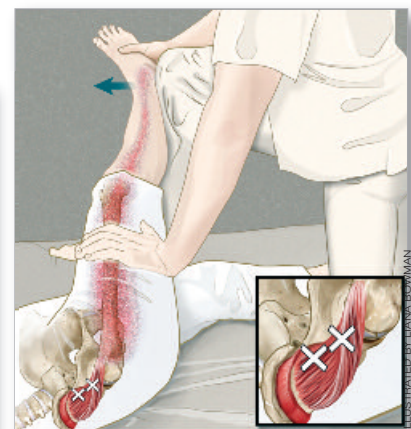


Figure II: The therapist supports the leg in an adducted position, lunging to lengthen the fibers of gluteus minimus after the work in Figure I. The palm provides mild pressure to the lateral leg, working the referral zone in the vastus lateralis muscle and keeping the pelvis flat.

elbows in combination with the deep stretches during our sessions,” he says. “I consider it a key part of staying healthy and flexible and playing at my peak.”

In Clinical Thai Bodywork, we treat tender points in muscles under stretch with rolling compression, while at the same time moving the muscle into additional stretch as the taut fibers release. While this can be tricky, Thai Bodywork has a very broad range of poses that allow the therapist to maintain excellent body mechanics while both treating and moving the client.

Clinical Thai Bodywork benefits from the holistic and extremely efficient Thai system of stretching, distraction and compression, while giving the practitioner a rigorous, reproducible road map for treating pain.


“I suffered an incomplete spinal cord injury seven-and-a-half years ago and was given a 30-percent chance of recovering,” says Tina Mann, who receives regular Clinical Thai Bodywork sessions. “After a few sessions, I now have less internal hip rotation, my pain is much improved and my energy is continuing to increase.

“My colleagues are commenting on how much better I am walking,” she continues. “Clinical Thai Bodywork


has already done more for me than any doctor, medication or physical therapist ever has.”

An exciting journey

Clinical Thai Bodywork has been an exciting journey for me on many levels. In addition to providing new hope to people in pain, Clinical Thai Bodywork continues to deepen my appreciation for the depth and sophistication of traditional Thai bodywork, which values the well-being of the giver as well as the receiver. Clinical Thai Bodywork allows practitioners to work deeply and accurately without fear of injury to themselves.


Chuck Duff founded Thai Bodywork School of Thai Massage (www.thaimassage.com) in 2001. He trained in the U.S., Canada and Thailand in various styles of Traditional Thai Massage and Thai Herbal Compress, and has been a faculty member at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine and National University of Health Sciences. Duff teaches a program of Traditional Thai Massage, HandsFree Thai and Clinical Thai Bodywork at his school, and he produces the *Thai Bodywork* DVD series. He can be reached at chuck@thaibodywork.com. 

Level 1 Weekend
(20 hours/17 CEs)
Sept 11, Oct 2,
Nov 6 & monthly
through the year



National Certification Board
for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork

“The class was really great: Thorough, detailed - a great balance of theory & technique”
Michelle T



Thai Massage Certification

Save your body, revitalize your career and learn to work therapeutically and sustainably on clients of any size.

Thai Bodywork offers the deepest, most clinically oriented Thai massage curriculum available anywhere.

More than 1,000 practitioners trained since 2001



School of Thai Massage, 537 Casler, Suite 3, Evanston

- ❖ Over 350 Hours of Training Available
- ❖ Clinical Thai Bodywork **EXCLUSIVE TO TBW**
- ❖ HandsFree Thai **EXCLUSIVE TO TBW**
- ❖ Thai Herbal Compress
- ❖ DVD Series - View clips at www.youtube.com/thaibodywork

For complete course list visit

ThaiMassageSchool.net or call **888.576.8424**

email: admissions@thaibodywork.com



Chuck Duff CTI, ABMP
Faculty, Pacific College of
Oriental Medicine