

## Chapter 6 Thai Massage – meditation in movement

‘Conscience calls me to be myself.

To be myself begins with self-knowledge.

Self-knowledge begins with work on myself.

Work on myself is based on the sensation of myself’ (Vaysse 1978)

Vipassana meditation is a practice associated with the Theravada branch of Buddhism found in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Laos. In the West its best known teacher is SN Goenka. He translates vipassana as ‘seeing things as they really are’. According to Goenka, although the Buddha taught vipassana as a way of living, it was rediscovered rather than invented by him.

The aim of vipassana is the development of a balanced mind full of love and compassion - freed from self-delusion and internally generated suffering. Such a mind would be capable of supporting the four divine states described by the Buddha and aspired to by followers of his teaching. The Buddha called these divine states metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha. These Pali words are usually translated as: loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. Thai Massage is traditionally offered with the aim of manifesting these divine states in action.

A modern therapeutic equivalent is, perhaps, ‘unconditional positive regard’, a term forever identified with Carl Rogers, even if coined by Stanley Standal (Rogers 1992, p 283). Rogers, a significant figure in the development of ‘client centred’ psychotherapy, describes unconditional positive regard as, ‘an outgoing positive feeling, without reservations, without evaluations’.

According to Rogers, research shows that the more a therapist is able to experience this state in relation to the client, the more successful is the therapy likely to be for the client (Rogers 1992, p 62).

If unconditional positive regard is the aim, vipassana is the process. As a meditation practice it is best learned in a dedicated retreat or monastery and under the guidance of a suitably trained teacher.

In the Buddhist tradition, the starting point in the training of a teacher (lama) is total retreat from the world for three years, three months and three days.

As a way of living, however, vipassana is of great value in therapeutic practice. In common with many meditation practices, vipassana begins with the effort of drawing the mind more deeply into relationship with the body. We find this aim not only in sitting meditation but also in the practice of yoga, tai chi, qigong and many martial arts. This understanding is not limited to the East. It is well recognised in the meditative traditions of Christianity. Father Thomas Keating, a Cistercian Monk and advocate of 'centring prayer' suggests that:

'... a movement toward our own center is really a movement toward everybody's center, which is the oneness of the ultimate unifying source of all creation. In other words, individuals are bound together by a unifying force which is present but not normally perceived, given the human condition, without the discipline of a practice that penetrates the mystery of ordinary time' (Keating 1990).

Our body is always in the present while our mind tends to wander, flitting from thoughts of the past to projections into the future. If we can draw our attention away from the passage of thoughts into the sensation of our body, we will be more present. In the therapeutic relationship our patient will not only perceive this but will benefit from it too.

In his book 'Focusing', Eugene Gendlin discusses the significance of sensation in relation to the practice of psychotherapy. In the 1970's Gendlin and colleagues at the University of Chicago conducted research into the effectiveness of psychotherapy in making a positive difference in the patient's life. They were surprised to discover that they could predict therapeutic outcome by observing the way in which the patient organised and related to their experience. The patients who gained most benefit from the therapeutic encounter did something internal that less successful patients did not (Gendlin 1981).

Gendlin went on to demonstrate that this 'something internal' could be taught. He calls the process 'focusing' and describes the stages involved in his book.

The process of focusing is designed to help the patient align an unresolved memory or thought with a 'felt sense' in the body. Gendlin discovered that when a patient achieved this alignment, the thought or memory resolved.

Significant though focusing is, it is a process guided by the words of the therapist and a process that the patient, not the therapist does. In Thai Massage, where touch is the main form of communication, the masseur aims to work with what SN Goenka calls 'noble silence — that is, silence of body, speech and mind.'

Another form of communication takes place in this silence - perhaps 'the direct communication between the unconscious of the patient and the unconscious of the therapist' that psychoanalysts refer to (Laplanche & Pontalis 1988). Many masseurs and bodyworkers have come to appreciate that their work is most effective when they enter into an altered state in which their attention is softer and more receptive. The key to finding that state is sensation.

In the practice of Thai Massage, it is clear that the more the masseur is able to work in this altered state the more the patient relaxes. It is as if the masseur models the outcome of the massage. This concept is not however limited to Thai Massage. Practitioners of other bodywork modalities have discovered it too. Dr Milton Trager, founder of the 'Trager Approach' to bodywork, referred to 'Hookup' which is described as 'a sense of calm and clear connectedness with one's body, one's feelings, and the forces that sustain them.' Trager insisted that the practitioner must work on developing this state of consciousness in order to stimulate it in someone else (Juhan 2003).

Hugh Milne, an osteopath talks of 'glamour' and says 'In a glamour, consciousness can work from the crown soul – from a place of complete acceptance, of unconditional love. There is a subtle merging of boundaries between you and the client' (Milne 1995).

Fritz Smith, the founder of 'Zero Balancing' refers to a 'witness state of observation' in which the practitioner is 'uncritical, non-judgemental, expectation-free and uninvolved with an active thought process' (Smith 1998).

Practicing Thai Massage is not an alternative to vipassana training but it is a good place to practice vipassana. As Goenka says, vipassana is intended as a way of living. As masseurs we can practice working with more sense of our own body in relation to our patient. As masseurs we should aim to know exactly what it is we intend to do so that we move with certainty and grace. As we work we can accept that we will be distracted by our own thoughts – perhaps our attitude or opinions about our patient, perhaps the ordinary things we forgot to do. This is inevitable, but we can always return to the present, by turning to the sense of our body in movement and our sense of contact with our patient.

We are using our body to work with our patient's body. When we make contact, whether with our hands or elbows or feet or knees the contact should be clear, sensitive and aware. Our patient is reading us throughout the massage. They are deeply aware of where we touch and, more to the point, from where we touch. It is a relationship of trust and our patient will not trust us if they are aware of our hesitations, clumsiness or incongruence. As we communicate our clarity and certainty to our patient, they give their body to us and give up their habitual tensions.

For a masseur it is a wonderful aim to work towards a sense of selflessness and to search for the qualities in our work through which every patient feels utterly cared for, accepted and loved. We can communicate these qualities through our touch and our presence. We may by moments ourselves feel touched by 'metta' and realise that metta is not something we can do. It is a sensation that can flow through us but only if we relax.

## **The Metta Sutta**

Buddha and his followers took shelter at Savatthi in Jeta's Grove during the rainy season. The tree deities were upset by the presence of the monks. When they discovered that the monks intended to stay for three months, they set about trying to frighten them away. The monks were suitably scared and went to Buddha to tell him of their unease. He taught them the Metta Sutta. When the monks practiced according to the Buddha's instruction the tree deities were so touched by the power of love they radiated that they decided to leave them to meditate in peace.

This is the Metta Sutta in the original Pali with a translation into English by Acharya Buddharakkhita, founder and president of the Maha Bodhi Society in Bangalore, India.

## The Karaniya Metta Sutta

### The Hymn of Universal Love

- 1 Karaniyam atthakusalena  
Yan tam santam padam abhisamecca  
Sakko uju ca suju ca  
Suvaco c'assa mudu anatimani

Who seeks to promote his welfare,  
Having glimpsed the state of perfect peace,  
Should be able, honest and upright,  
Gentle in speech, meek and not proud.

- 2 Santussako ca subharo ca  
Appakicco ca sallahukavutti  
Santindriyo ca nipako ca  
Appagabbho kulesu ananugiddho

Contented, he ought to be easy to support,  
Not over-busy, and simple in living.  
Tranquil his senses, let him be prudent,  
And not brazen, nor fawning on families.

- 3 Na ca khuddam samacare kinci  
Yena viññu pare upavadeyyum  
Sukhino va khemino hontu  
Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta

Also, he must refrain from any action  
That gives the wise reason to reprove him.  
(Then let him cultivate the thought:)  
May all be well and secure,  
May all beings be happy!

4 Ye keci panabhut'atthi  
Tasa va thavara va anavasesa  
Digha va ye mahanta va  
Majjhima rassakanukathula

Whatever living creatures there be,  
Without exception, weak or strong,  
Long, huge or middle-sized,  
Or short, minute or bulky,

5 Dittha va yeva adittha  
Ye ca dure vasanti avidure  
Bhuta va sambhavesi va  
Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta

Whether visible or invisible,  
And those living far or near,  
The born and those seeking birth,  
May all beings be happy!

6 Na paro param nikubbetha  
Natimaññetha katthacinam kanci  
Byarosana patighasañña  
Naññamaññassa dukkham iccheyya

Let none deceive or decry  
His fellow anywhere;  
Let none wish others harm  
In resentment or in hate.

- 7 Mata yatha niyam puttam  
Ayusa ekaputtam anurakkhe  
Evampi sabbabhutesu  
Manasam bhavaye aparimanam

Just as with her own life  
A mother shields from hurt  
Her own son, her only child,  
Let all-embracing thoughts  
For all beings be yours.

- 8 Mettañ ca sabba-lokasmim  
Manasam bhavaye aparimanam  
Uddham adho ca tiriyanca  
Asambadham averam asapattam

Cultivate an all-embracing mind of love  
For all throughout the universe,  
In all its height, depth and breadth —  
Love that is untroubled  
And beyond hatred or enmity.

- 9 Titthañ caram nisinno va  
Sayano va yavat'assa vigatamiddho  
Etam satim adhittheyya  
Brahmam etam viharam idhamahu

As you stand, walk, sit or lie,  
So long as you are awake,  
Pursue this awareness with your might:  
It is deemed the Divine State here.



- 10 Ditthiñca anupagamma silava  
Dassanena sampanno  
Kamesu vineyya gedham  
Na hi jatu gabbhaseyyam punar eti'ti

Holding no more to wrong beliefs,  
With virtue and vision of the ultimate,  
And having overcome all sensual desire,  
Never in a womb is one born again.

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html>

## References

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6. Rogers C 1992 On Becoming a Person. Constable, London
7. Smith FF 1998 Inner Bridges. Humanics New Age, Atlanta p 110
8. Vaysse J 1978 Towards Awakening. Far West Awakenings, San Francisco

## Resources

For information on Vipassana Meditation as taught by S N Goenka:

<http://www.dhamma.org/>