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 pi, 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 compress, 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,

The Thai Herbal Compress Technique
Healing from Thailand
by Kamala Thiagarajan
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 Chiang 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 steam 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 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 thermotherapy, according to Tom Wellman, President of Sabai Spa Products, a company based in Tampa, Florida, that imports Thai herbal compresses to the United States.

“The hot 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.

“The 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 Prakashoom, 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, arthritus, 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: lemon grass, pail (or pal), turmeric, kaffir lime, camphor and tamarind.

“These herbs possess properties that are anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, astringent and antioxidant,” says John 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 sin [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.

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