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RESTORATIVE STRETCH

Thai yoga massage therapy works out the kinks and soothes the soul

By Anne Miller

Special to the Times Union

ALBANY - Prone on the yoga studio floor with Robert Cuozzi's knees on my back, I lift my shoulders off the blankets.

Cuozzi grasps my wrists and pulls slightly back as his legs form a counterbalance against my spine. My chest stretches forward, my back arches. I feel like a Viking goddess strapped to the prow of a sailing ship, free and open.

This was my first experience with Thai yoga massage therapy, a combination of ancient massage and yoga techniques that stretches muscles while addressing deeper tensions. Unlike a yoga class, I did not reach for poses myself. Instead I let Cuozzi position me as his fingers worked specific massage points.

For years, the purview of alternative health types or the more physically adventurous, Thai yoga massage therapy is reaching a more mainstream audience. In May, culture queen Oprah Winfrey lauded the practice on her afternoon talk show during a televised spa visit.

At the Balance Massage Studio in Delmar, owner Denise Mason says a few years ago her studio might have seen three Thai yoga massage clients a year. Now, it's three a month.

Releasing control

Thai yoga massage therapy is not for everyone. Mason notes that some physical ailments, such as frozen shoulders or arthritis, limit the practice. Subjects also must be willing to release control of their limbs to someone who is virtually a stranger. That's a lot of trust.

By the end of my session, I feel like Gumby, all floppy clay to be molded, and still Cuozzi says he could tell by certain tightnesses that I hadn't completely given myself over to the practice.

Others say Thai yoga massage therapy has worked out physical kinks that nothing else could address. Jennifer Mosher of Schoharie suffered debilitating back pain and other problems. After regular Thai yoga therapy, her pain lessened significantly, she says. She also waits much longer between chiropractic visits, and when she does go, the adjustments last longer.

Guilderland physical therapist Jeannette Maturo says she recommends Cuozzi to her clients.

Cuozzi sees the therapy as possessed of intangible exchanges of energy. He calls his work Thai yoga therapy, and not massage, because he does not have a massage license. He does have numerous yoga instructor certifications with thousands of hours of training.

"Some clients come regularly each week. Some come for a specific problem for a few weeks. Some come once and never come back," Cuozzi said.

A long history

Thai massage has a 2,500-year history, according to the book, "Thai Yoga Massage," by Kam Thye Chow, who runs an internationally renowned Thai yoga massage center in Montreal. Buddhist temples in India saw the practice's infancy. It later spread to temples in Thailand and was favored by royalty.

Chow's method, which he calls Lotus Palm, has been adapted to Westerners, who tend to be larger than Thais and suffer more back and shoulder problems.

Thai yoga massage focuses on energy lines called sen , according to Chow's book. Releasing the sen releases energy, which restores the body's natural balance and, in turn, increases its functionality. The sen pathways meet at pressure points called marmas, where energy can also back up. Thai yoga massage works the sen lines and pressure points from head to toe.

Unlike other massages that often require clients to undress, Thai yoga massage sessions keep the subject fully clothed.

Balance is the key in Thai yoga massage, says Mary Panza, a Thai massage practitioner at the Balance Massage Studio. It's not just about relaxation or rejuvenation, but both together.

"I like that Eastern way of thinking - taking care of yourself, being balanced," she says. "It's a smart way to be."

Dance of yoga

Panza learned techniques from a class at the Center for Natural Wellness School of Massage Therapy in Albany.

She can do floor work for clients comfortable on mats. But she also uses the massage table for clients who dislike lying on the floor.

Cuozzi likens Thai yoga therapy to a dance.

"When we're in our meditative dance, there's something mysterious and ineffable. It goes beyond technique," he says. "It brings them in touch with who they really are."

Anne Miller is a freelance writer from Albany.

Factbox:

The healing touch

Who: Robert Cuozzi, certified yoga instructor

Where: HeartSpace Holistic yoga studio, 747 Madison Ave., Albany Cost: \$60-\$110 for 60- to 120-minute sessions

Phone: 827-7242 or 689-4714

Web: Robert@yogaforliving.com; <http://www.wpyoga.com>

Who: Mary Panza, licensed massage therapist

Where: Balance Massage Studio, 318 Delaware Ave., Delmar

Cost: \$125 per 90-minute session

Phone: 475-9999

Web: <http://www.balancemassagestudio.com/>