

# Interview with Bob Haddad, RTT

By: Sarah Kirton, Mystic Mag

*MysticMag* has the pleasure of chatting with **Bob Haddad, RTT**, a renowned Western teacher of traditional Thai massage and a respected author in the field of Thai healing arts. His first book, *Thai Massage & Thai Healing Arts*, was published in 2014, followed by his second book, *The Art of Thai Massage*, in 2022. In addition to his books, Bob has contributed to various magazines and participated in podcasts and radio interviews, sharing his expertise on traditional Thai massage and healing practices. His work continues to influence and educate practitioners worldwide

**Bob, you've studied with many renowned teachers in Thailand and the West. How did your experience with Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme and Asokonanda influence your personal approach to Thai massage and healing?**

First of all, thanks to MysticMag for this opportunity, and hello to all the readers. Regarding my background, I've studied with many teachers over a period of more than 20 years, and all have contributed to my awareness of this work, but two have been my true mentors. The first was Asokananda, a German-born yogi who settled in northern Thailand and taught Thai massage before it became known on a wide scale around the West. He was the first person to write books about Thai massage in any language other than Thai. I was fortunate to study with him and to have him as a guide for a few years before he passed away. My second and longest-lasting mentor was Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme, and he totally transformed my approach to working with others in the healing arts. Pichest was an extremely elevated being who had connections with the extra-physical and spirit realms, and I shared several almost-unbelievable experiences with him involving spirit intercession and possession. Several of these stories are recounted in my memoirs, "Ordinary Person – Extraordinary Life".

Pichest taught me how to listen to the body; how to be still and empty at times rather than be thinking; and how to utilize sensing and intuition when working with others in the healing arts. At its essence, traditional Thai massage is based on the principle of metta, a multi-faceted Buddhist term for loving-kindness, goodwill, compassion and benevolence. How to maintain this awareness as a therapist and work in this way is what I learned from Ajahn Pichest Boonthumme. Pichest passed away in his sleep, peacefully, and without any pre-existing conditions.

**In your opinion, what are the most important cultural and spiritual elements of traditional Thai therapy that often get overlooked when practiced in the West?**

Unlike Western massage therapy which addresses physical structures such as muscles, bones, tendons and fascia, Thai massage also affects the human energy system. In traditional Thai healing arts, and also in Chinese, Ayurvedic and other traditional medicine systems, total health is determined by both the physical state and the "extra-physical" state of an individual. To a certain degree, because this concept isn't as prevalent in Western massage or physical therapy, and because Western therapists generally focus on physical movements, manipulations and massage techniques, the extra-physical and energetic aspects of this healing art sometimes get diluted, overlooked or entirely lost. To a certain degree, it depends on how, where, and by whom the individuals were trained, and there certainly are Thai massage therapists who work from a spiritual healing perspective in the West.

Traditional Thai massage is a combination of several physical elements: focused acupressure along the sen, or energy channels of the body; yoga-like stretches, lifts, twists and suspensions; broad compressions of the body using the therapist's palms and feet; loosening of the muscles and fascia through rolling and percussive movements; and other physical techniques. But the way these things are carried out matters greatly. In my opinion, the results are most profound when the therapist works from a place of humility, respect, sensory awareness, meditation and spiritual focus, rather than from a place of trying to "fix" the other person through a sequence of physical techniques and manipulations. I've found that it's also important to help encourage and activate the receiver's parasympathetic nervous system. Once the receiver enters this state, he/she is more able to enter the process of self-healing. Some ways to effectively trigger the parasympathetic nervous system include meditation and non-thinking, slow yoga, and deep and relaxed breathing.



**The use of medicinal herbs and herbal compresses is an integral part of your practice. Could you explain how these elements enhance the healing process in traditional Thai massage?**

In Thailand, medicinal herbs are prescribed and used in many ways by the general population. They are ingested in foods and in teas; applied topically with balms, oils and poultices; rolled into small capsules for swallowing; inhaled in steam baths; and used in hot and cold compresses during massage treatments.

One of my important teachers, Lek Chaiya Thiwong, was a master herbalist and a matriarch of Thai herbal healing in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, where I did most of my study. Dry and fresh herbs and rhizomes are mixed together and made into compresses wrapped in cotton muslin, which are then steamed and applied to the body before and during Thai massage treatments. Naturally, hot herbal compresses relieve stress, ease tension and bring about a calm state of mind, but they also reduce topical inflammation and loosen muscles so the therapist's touch, movements and techniques can be better received. This is an ancient tradition in Thailand, and one that has many applications in the modern world. The effects of a Thai herbal session can be truly amazing. Aches and pains seem to fade away, and the receiver feels relaxed yet energized. Compresses can be used for both floor work and table work.

**In Thai traditional healing practices, spirituality, animism, and Buddhist principles are often connected to physical therapies and traditional medicine. Can you elaborate on how Thai Buddhist spiritual beliefs influence the healing process in Thai culture?**

Buddhist principles and spirituality are certainly connected to many forms of healing arts in Thailand. There are 5 branches of the traditional Thai medicine system. The ones most familiar to Westerners are internal medicine (herbs, diet, treatment of the internal body) and external medicine (massage, bone-adjusting techniques, and topical application of medicines). Then there is a branch based on what the Buddha said and taught about life and suffering, and about ways to regulate, minimize or end suffering through acts of loving kindness, and study and practice of the Buddhist dharma. The last 2 branches relate directly to the spirit world, and these are divinatory medicine and spirit medicine. In divinatory medicine (horasaht), healers use systems such as astrology, palmistry and numerology to determine medical predisposition, and to pursue remedial steps and a course of treatment. Spirit medicine (saiyasaht) involves healing through spirit intervention, and the use of incantations, magic spells, mantras, exorcisms, and objects that are believed to have healing or protective powers.

Although knowledge of anatomy from a Western perspective plays a role, Thai massage itself is based in Buddhist medicine. An altar containing special items is generally found in places of practice. There is usually a candle, food and water for the spirits, photos and mementos of deceased family members and teachers, and statues or images of the Buddha and Jivaka, the doctor who treated the Buddha. A mantra to the medicine ancestor spirit is generally recited aloud or silently before beginning a treatment. These are some of the spiritual elements that are part of all forms of traditional Thai healing arts.

Even in modern-day urban Thailand, a person may decide to visit a spirit doctor or a shaman to treat a lingering symptom, or to address something that immediately appeared after an unusual personal or spiritual occurrence. People may visit spirit healers after seeing a Western medicine doctor at a clinic or hospital, and sometimes they'll visit a shaman before they consult with a medical doctor. A physical symptom isn't always considered to be the result of a physical problem... the source may be an underlying spiritual condition, an imbalance, or even a magic spell that was cast on the victim.



**Your latest book is “The Art of Thai Massage,” What new insights or perspectives do you bring in this book compared to your earlier works?**

My earlier book, “Thai Massage & Thai Healing Arts” is more of an overview; an anthology that presents information on a wide range of traditional Thai healing arts, in both the physical and extra-physical realms. “The Art of Thai Massage” was designed as a guide to help students, practitioners and massage therapists deepen their knowledge and refine their techniques and approaches toward the practice of traditional Thai massage. Aspects of the work such as sensing, using intuition, and breath awareness are discussed at great length, and exercises to channel and hone these concepts and techniques are presented. There are also chapters dedicated to Thai medicinal herbs and herbal compresses, client assessment based on Thai element theory and body language, and ways to flow gracefully from one technique to the next. Although the book is geared toward practicing therapists, it will also be appreciated by beginning students and other bodyworkers.

**As the founder of Thai Healing Alliance International, how do you see the role of organizations like THAI in preserving the authenticity of traditional Thai massage while allowing it to evolve in different cultural contexts?**

THAI was created in 2005, during a time when there was practically no support for students and practitioners of Thai massage outside of Thailand. It was the first and only organization to propose minimum standards of study and practice of traditional Thai massage, and to provide networking opportunities for teachers, students and clients. The organization was well received in Thailand and around the world, and received critical acclaim from the press, trade magazines, and partner organizations in the USA, Canada and Europe. We raised money for victims of the SE Asian tsunami, awarded scholarships for first-time students to Thailand, and held international retreats. In 2020, after 15 years of serving its members and endorsing Registered Thai Therapists and Teachers around the world, THAI was transformed into an educational and informational web resource. The THAI Archives are the world’s largest online library for traditional Thai massage and Thai healing arts, and the library is open to the general public.

Regarding the transmission and evolution of its original values in other cultures, in recent years the essence of Thai massage has sometimes been merged with other disciplines and modalities. Techniques have been borrowed, altered, combined with Western and newly-created modalities, and in some cases, marketed as “Thai” when they are not. Naturally, these things will happen, but it’s important for the consumer and the student to at least know what is traditional and what is modern or hybrid. There are many excellent practitioners of traditional Thai massage around the world, and a little bit of investigation into the therapist’s study and background can be helpful.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to share with the readers my passion and love for a healing art form that has changed my life and the lives of my colleagues, clients and students around the world.

