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Thai massage: The 'lazy man's yoga'

By Stephanie Smith
CNN

LOS ANGELES, California (CNN) --John Sahakian takes a deep breath, and then his legs become contorted into a complex yoga posture. A few minutes later, his back moves into an arch in the shape of the letter "C."

Sahakian barely lifts a finger, or a leg for that matter. His instructor does the work for him, performing a Thai massage, an ancient technique characterized by lots of contorting and moving, with ironically little work on the client's part.

Some people have even called Thai massage (or Thai yoga) the "lazy man's yoga."

"You're manipulated into letting go," Sahakian said. "It feels very vulnerable sometimes because you're so open and on your back. Like a turtle lying upside down."

As its name suggests, a Thai massage involves some massage, but the main elements of the session include yoga poses and twisting.

"There's not anything that you have to do," said Phoebe Diftler, Sahakian's Thai massage therapist. "Sometimes you're asked to move over or from side to side or front to back or reach your arms back, but beyond that, breathing and just releasing into it are what you're supposed to do."

Diftler said the practitioner uses all different parts of the body.

"We use our hands and our feet and our forearms and our elbows and knees and actually the weight of the whole body," Diftler said. "There are parts of it that are a cooperative ... effort where it actually is two people, the practitioner and the receiver, in a pose together."

Besides moving the client into various poses, therapists also massage acupuncture points on the body.

According to Thai massage practitioners, blockages in energy lines are the roots of many illnesses. They say that stimulating the flow of this energy is the key to better health and the healing of serious health afflictions.

"There are meridians on the arms that are connected to organs and the entire body," Diftler said. "So as you press on the physical body and release tension, it allows the energy in the body to flow."

Thai massage is relatively new in the United States, but the number of classes and instructors certified are growing.

In Thailand, the practice has been a part of life for more than 1,000 years. While a traditional Western massage generally lasts one to two hours, a session in Thailand could span days.


Thai massage is used for a range of health issues in Thailand, including maladies as serious as asthma.

Diftler's clients said the massage is more for increased flexibility, stress relief and help in tension relief.

"It can actually affect everything," Diftler said. "When you learn how to open your body and release, you begin to learn how to release in your life and let go of things that you don't need anymore."

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