

EDUCATING THE HEART: MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION IN THE STUDY AND PRACTICE OF THAI MASSAGE

Bianca Briciu and Kamontorn Prompitak*

Abstract: This article investigates the therapeutic role played by the state of mind of the practitioners of Thai Massage focusing on the process of teaching and learning Thai Massage as transnational exchange between Thailand and the West. Starting with the definition of Thai Massage as the art of giving with two hands and one heart we explored two means of educating the heart: mindfulness and compassion. Through a survey of books written in English on Thai Massage and interviews with teachers and students at three well-known Thai Massage schools in Thailand we analyzed how mindfulness and compassion improve the quality of massage while at the same time offering a path towards self-transformation for practitioners.

I. Introduction

In the book *Ancient Thai massage, Healing with Life Force* (2012), Jan Chaithavuthi and Kanchanoo Muangsiri offer a metaphoric definition of Thai massage as “the art of giving from two hands and the heart.” (XX) While there are many studies about the physical aspects of Thai massage technique, the “heart” aspects are still elusive and controversial. What psychological qualities must Thai massage practitioners develop in order to make Thai massage the art of giving from the heart? This research attempts to answer this question by exploring what Thai massage teachers and students say about their education of the heart and its role in the therapeutic aspect of Thai massage. We focused on the teaching and learning of Thai massage because this cultural exchange allows us to see more clearly cultural differences that produce various interpretations of Thai massage. For many Western students, Thai massage is not only a profession but also a path to the transformation of consciousness. Through the learning and practice of Thai massage they get a better understanding of the mind/body relationship and they develop a more mindful and compassionate lifestyle. Mindfulness and compassion are two aspects of consciousness closely associated with Buddhist spiritual practice that continue to inform the secularized practice of massage.

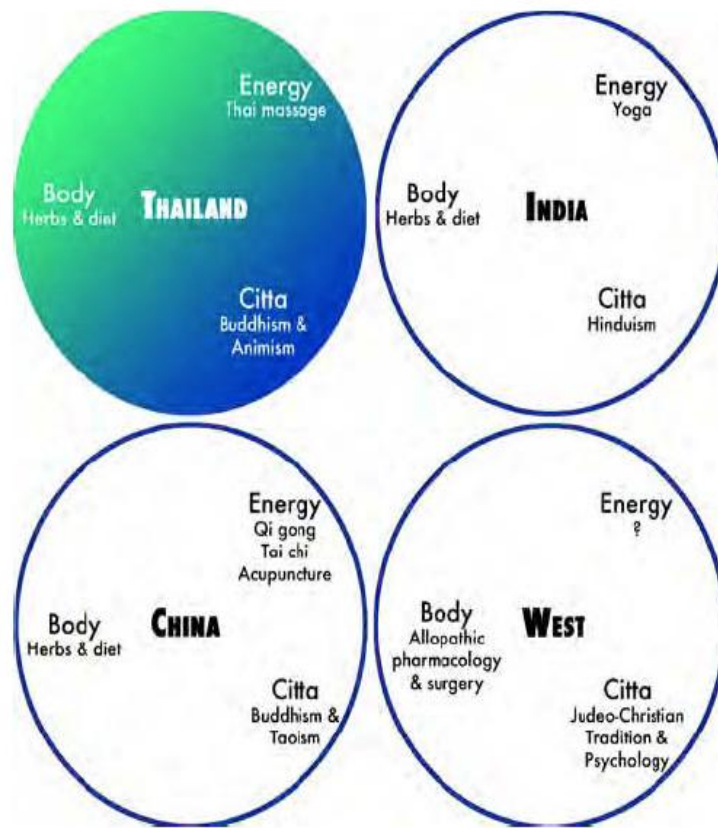
In the context of our research, the education of the heart means the development of a mindful and compassionate state of consciousness through meditative practices. The “education of the heart” is a practice deeply rooted in Buddhist thought but it has

*Dr. BIANCA BRICIU and KAMONTORN PROMPITAK, lecturers at Prince of Songkla University, Phuket, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality. Email: biancabriciu@gmail.com.

recently acquired a more general meaning of transformation of consciousness and it is also a term used in psychology. Pierce Salguero (2006) pointed out that in Western culture the mind is seen as separate from the heart, most often seen as differences between the right and left brain hemispheres. In Buddhist language however, there is one term, "*chitta*" that means "both intellect and emotions at the same time." (Salguero, 2006: 7) Asian healing traditions, including Chinese, Indian and Thai do not clearly separate between body, mind and heart or emotions. They see energy as the connecting agent between *chitta* (which includes mind and heart), and the body. "In the Thai model, because body, energy and *chitta* are interlinked, working with *chitta* is important to overall health and well-being before and after illness strikes—both for patients and for practitioners." (Salguero, 2006: 8)

In the Western therapeutic tradition, the discipline of psychology, and more recently holistic medicine, work with the relationship between mind, body and heart. Many psychologists have turned to Buddhist practice in order to better understand this relationship. Psychology has only recently begun to acknowledge the important role played by the body and the emotional interaction between doctor and patient in the therapeutic process. More and more Westerners study Thai massage as a path towards a more holistic life that integrates the mind and the body.

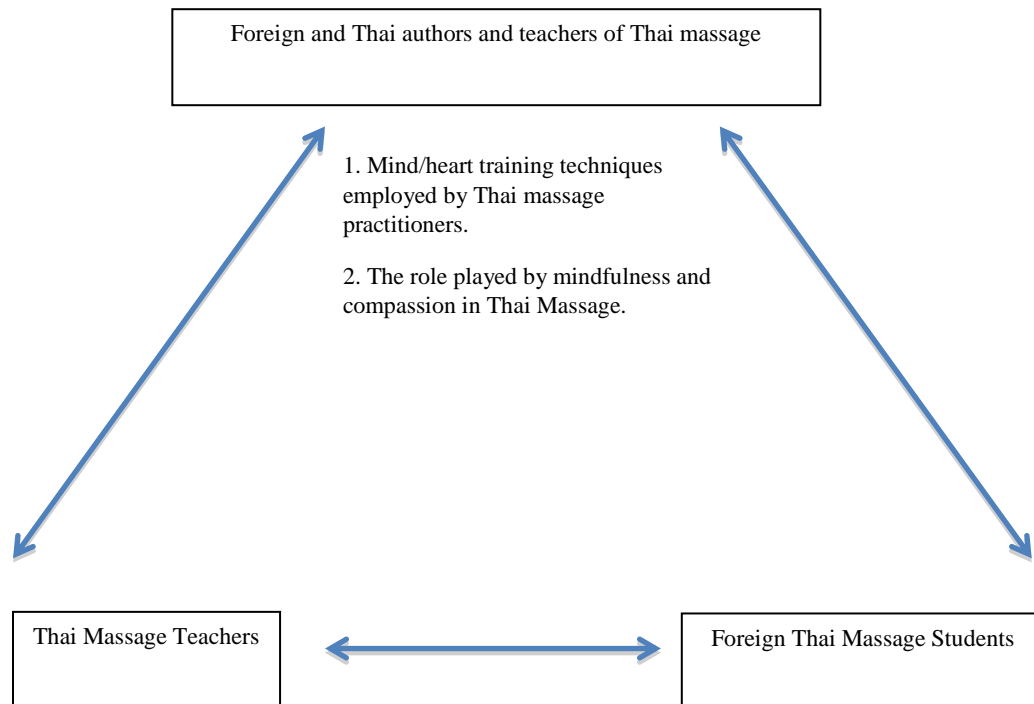
This paper explores the psychological aspects of mindfulness and compassion in Thai massage from the perspectives of Thai and Western massage practitioners. The purpose of this study is to offer a better understanding of the ways in which the state of mind of practitioners influences the quality of massage. The focus will be the process of teaching and learning Thai massage as a cultural tradition that involves both knowledge and self-transformation. There are two hypotheses of this study. The first hypothesis is that many Western students undertake the study of Thai massage as a path to spiritual development or self-transformation. The second hypothesis is that the training of the mind/heart of Thai Massage practitioners increases the therapeutic potential of Thai massage. This hypothesis helped us create a theoretical approach to the education of the mind/heart, which represents the cultivation of mindfulness and compassion. There are two main objectives of this study. The first objective of this research is to explore the study and practice of Thai Massage as a cultural exchange between Thai teachers and Western students. The second objective is to analyze the relationship between the therapeutic effect of Thai massage and the state of mind of practitioners. This paper will analyze what are the means and the outcomes of training the state of mind/heart of the practitioners in mindfulness and compassion.



(Salguero, 2006, 9)

II. Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative study about the role of mindfulness and compassion in Thai massage. We synthesized data about the history of Thai massage and analyzed psychological and Buddhist theories about mindfulness and compassion. The study brings together the personal histories of four Western Thai massage practitioners and authors, with individual interviews of ten teachers and ten students at three major Thai massage schools in Thailand. The study used a triangulation analysis summarized in the following figure:



We asked the following questions that were translated in Thai language by my colleague, Aj. Kamontorn Prompitak who conducted the interviews in Thai language with Thai teachers.

1. Can you tell us about your decision to study Thai Massage?
2. Do you think the learning and teaching of Thai massage should only focus on body technique or should it include spiritual exercises or “education of the heart”?
3. Does your school offer any formal training on developing awareness and compassion?
4. Was your learning and practice of Thai Massage therapy associated with a transformation of consciousness?
5. Do you think it helped you acquire mental or spiritual qualities you did not have prior to it? If it did, could you please explain what are those qualities?
6. Our study is about the cultivation of awareness and compassion as spiritual aspects of Thai massage. Do you think Thai students of Thai massage have more of these two qualities than Western students? Is the personality of each individual a stronger factor than culture?
7. How does awareness improve the quality of Thai massage?
8. How does compassion improve the quality of Thai massage?

9. What exercises/training do you do for the development of awareness and compassion?
10. Do you notice a difference in the quality of massage if it is paralleled by spiritual exercises?
11. Have receivers of massage ever commented on the spiritual quality of massage? If yes, could you please give an example?
12. Is there a connection between *prana* (life force) and the state of mind of the practitioner? Is the goal of spiritual practice to connect the practitioner to the flow of life force?

III. History of Thai massage and Academic Controversies

In order to better understand how Thai massage as a primarily bodily technique fits into a psychological framework, I will sketch a brief history of Thai massage and the academic controversies around it. Thai massage has become a very important aspect of traditional Thai medicine and a rapidly increasing part of a transnational flow in the training of practitioners and international tourism. It has also become one means of exporting the spiritual values of mindfulness and compassion, an aspect that is sorely missing from many existing studies on Thai massage.

A brief survey of the existing literature on Thai massage reveals a hierarchy of different types of narratives. At the top there are those narratives connecting Thai massage with traditional medicine, stressing its medical importance and the effects it has on the body. This is followed by narratives highlighting the Buddhist lineage of Thai massage. They point out the spiritual or psychological aspects of healing. These narratives highlight the importance for practitioners to develop awareness and compassion to increase the effectiveness of Thai massage. At the bottom of the hierarchy we find narratives connecting Thai massage with a shallow, mass-produced and commoditized touristic experience of the senses. The first two aspects of Thai massage focus on its healing potential for body and mind while the last one stresses relaxation and bodily, sensorial aspects. The same difference also appears in the institutionalization of Thai massage. In 2001 the Thai ministry of Public Health licensed therapeutic Thai massage under the regulations of Traditional Medicine practice while Thai massage for relaxation (usually practiced in spas) is not under the same regulations. (Chokevivat and Chuthaputti, 2005: 15). The former type of massage taught at prestigious hospitals and schools is the type of massage mainly learned by Westerners and this is the focus of the current research.

In one of the most historically detailed studies of Thai massage, Junko Iida (2013) speaks with irony about the desire Western students of Thai massage show for its spiritual aspect. In her view, what we experience nowadays as Thai massage has been produced through “transnational encounters.” (Iida, 2013: 81) In other words, she argues that the contemporary Western students of Thai massage were the ones who turned it into a “spiritual” and holistic practice since most Thai massage schools in

Thailand stressed its bodily aspects, connecting it to medical practices and overlooking its spiritual or psychological aspects. Thai national authorities emphasized efficacy and safety from the points of view of biomedical science because they wanted to legitimize Thai massage for the Western scientific communities. (Iida, 2013 and Chantana, 1989). Iida criticizes the search for the spiritual aspects of Thai massage as an Orientalist fantasy of Western practitioners. Asokananda (Harald Brust) published the first book in English on Thai massage in 1990. Iida suggested that Asokananda's "ethereal interpretations" of the *sen* lines' (energy lines) connection with *prana* (life force) underlie a Western desire for finding spirituality in a context where the majority of Thais thought of *sen* lines as simply parts of the body that caused pain or stiffness. (Iida, 2013: 96) We can see in this criticism the historical dimension of ancient traditional practices. Each historical period stresses out or underplay certain aspects and with appropriate historical lenses we see the irony of the Western scientific worldview that led to the suppression of spirituality from Thai massage while at the same time many Western practitioners were searching for it. As Joseph Alter (2005) has pointed out, what we call "ancient, traditional practices" have been produced through transnational exchanges and they are deeply involved in political and cultural practices. The search for spirituality in Thai Massage answers the Western "Orientalist" search for a more integrated aspect of human life in ancient traditions that might have valued this aspect at certain historical times.¹ In the last three decades Thai Massage has moved from a biomedical model to a larger framework that answers a variety of needs, from spirituality to the enchantment of the senses.

All studies see Thai massage as a branch of Thai traditional medicine with a very old lineage. The origins of Thai massage are interlinked with traditional healing practices in Thailand and Theravada Buddhism. The first record of Thai massage appears in the Ayutthaya period. (Chaithavuthi, 2012: 60) Together with traditional medicine, Thai massage flourished under the reign of Kings Rama I, II, III when techniques were inscribed in marbles on the walls of Wat Po and Wat Raja Oros. (Chokevivat, 2005: 4) After the introduction of modern medicine in Thailand, the traditional and modern approached coexisted for almost three decades. However, the influence and prestige of Traditional Thai Medicine declined after the 1930s among educated circles until its revival in 1980s due to the initiative of World Health Organization. (Chokevivat, 2005: 5) For a period of almost 70 years Thai massage was relegated to folk remedies of the uneducated due to its lack of a scientific basis. The biomedical model of healing left almost no place for traditional medical practices such as Thai massage. The Thai government attempted to revive Thai traditional massage in 1985 as an NGO project. This changing history shows how Thai massage

¹We do not use "Orientalist" here as a derogatory term but mainly to point out that the desire outsiders show for certain aspects a culture do not exist in a void but they are inextricably connected to aspects of that culture.

was defined through different cultural frameworks being at different periods associated with Buddhism, traditional medicine, with folk remedies and finally with a booming tourism industry.

Until recently, practitioners and teachers of Thai massage highlighted its bodily aspect and underplayed its spiritual aspect, which was frowned upon by modern medicine. Iida's study of the transnational construction of Thai massage shows that holism or whole body massage form that we mostly know nowadays as Thai massage came into being as a result of Western students' connection of Thai massage with yoga. Her research contrasts the biomedical approach of Thai authorities to Thai massage and the need of Westerners for traditional spiritual practices. The highly intuitive nature of massage that required long practice and apprenticeship became condensed into a theory meant to explain to Western students the *sen*² lines. (Iida, 2013: 96)

This account of the history of Thai massage shows that although an ancient practice, Thai massage was constructed according to national and international values and interests. Originally imported to Thailand in connection to Buddhist practices, it was recorded in Ayutthaya period, it lost prestige in 1930s due to the advent of a scientific paradigm, and it regained prestige in 1980s. It was taught at certain times as a bodily technique and at others as a holistic practice meant to bring together the mind/heart and the body.

IV. Learning Thai massage as a Path to Self-Transformation: The Accounts of Western Students

Bob Haddad, Peirce Salguero, Harald Brust and Richard Gold are students of Thai massage who wrote books both about their experiences of learning and practice. In their books they recount their personal histories and encounters with Thai massage together with academic aspects of history and techniques. Bob Haddad (2013) offers a detailed, three-dimensional definition of Thai massage. "At its essence, *nuad boran*³ is a balanced blend of physical, energetic and spiritual healing techniques and concepts. It is the skillful combination of applying both broad and targeted acupressure, finding and dissolving blockages, stimulating energy lines, opening and toning the body with yoga-like stretches, and last, but not least, allowing and encouraging the receiver to engage in a process of self-healing, deep relaxation and renewal." (Haddad, 2013: 8) His account highlights the transformation of consciousness occurring in the meditative practice of Thai massage associated with other meditative techniques meant to increase awareness and sharpen intuition. Calming the mind is essential for becoming aware of the bodies of clients and staying present throughout the practice. His account shows the ways in which the practice of

²*Sen* lines are the Thai language name for energy lines that run on the surface of the body.

³*Nuad boran* means Thai Massage in Thai language.

Thai massage incorporates Buddhist healing principles: “stay grounded: be silent and encourage silence; focus your energies on your hands and on the other parts of the body that come in contact with the person you are touching; send *metta* (loving-kindness or compassion) to the receiver as you work; observe breath, both yours and the client’s; try to keep your mind empty of thought as in *vipassana*⁴ meditation; try to sense blockages in the *sen* lines as you work, then try to dissipate them before you move to the next area of the body.” (Haddad, 2013: 12) The practitioner increases his/her therapeutic skill by educating the mind in a manner similar to meditation.

Harald Brust (Asokananda) echoes the same concern with the spiritual aspect of Thai massage. “If a massage is not practiced with loving-kindness and mindfulness, a certain quality can be missing from the end result.” (Asokananda, 1997: 29) Since Thai massage was brought to Thailand together with Buddhism, it remained closely linked to spirituality. In his opinion, Thai massage should be taught alongside meditation and yoga. He became interested in Thai massage as he was traveling in Thailand from Burma and India where he was doing meditation. In the 1980s there were only two schools teaching Thai massage: Wat Po in Bangkok and the Old Medicine Hospital in Chiang Mai while at present there are more than thirty government accredited schools.

Richard Gold (2000) wrote the first edition of *Thai massage: A Traditional Medical Technique* in 1998 and the publication of his book was hailed as a breakthrough event of the West learning from Asian traditions.⁵ The publication of a book on Thai massage written by a Westerner was a sign that “the ethnocentricity of the world has diminished.” (Gold, 2000: 4) At last, the Western world was ready to learn from the wisdom of other cultures. The success of the book and its very existence marked an important step towards cross-cultural learning. In the preface to the second edition of Gold’s book, Ted J. Kapchuk states that, “massage is undergoing now a renaissance and re-emerging as a critical component of medicine.” (Ibid: 4) In a brief account of his encounter with Thai massage, Gold relates his transformation of consciousness through meditation, yoga practice and the study of psychology. For five years after graduating, Gold sought mindfulness, which he defines as “the ability to quiet the mind.” (Ibid: 12) He spent time alone on a farm in Kentucky dedicating himself to agriculture. He would later study acupuncture and get his PhD in psychology in 1983. In 1988 he travelled to Chiang Mai for personal growth, where he experienced Thai massage. The learning of Thai massage became for Gold, as for the other authors, a tool for spiritual and personal development. He interprets Thai massage as a meditative practice leading to spirituality. “The doing

⁴*Vipassana* meditation is also known as insight meditation and it is common to Buddhist practice in Thailand. Mindfulness of breathing, thoughts and actions is used to get insight into the true nature of reality.

⁵Asokananda’s book was published in 1997 but the less congratulatory reception might be due to the publishing venue in Thailand rather than United States.

and receiving of Thai massage not only benefits the body, but also facilitates a meditative experience for both giver and receiver. (Ibid: 11) As a result of this deep appreciation for the practice of Thai massage, Gold tirelessly taught, organized workshops and wrote about it, introducing the values of touch and bodywork in Western healthcare and thus starting a trend that has become stronger at present. In a search for mindfulness, Gold created a cross-cultural collaboration between Chinese acupuncture, Thai massage and Western psychological practice. The desire for consciousness expansion and the cultivation of attention found an answer for Gold in the ancient practice of Thai massage. In these accounts we see what Iida pointed out as a Western orientalist desire for spirituality in traditional Asian practices. Although authorities in Thailand had stressed the biomedical, bodily aspects of Thai massage, these books include spirituality as a very important dimension. However, they do not link spirituality only to Buddhism but they define it in broader terms connected to qualities of the heart or of consciousness. These qualities are not restricted to Thai massage but they are aspects of a different understanding of mind/body connection that appear in other traditional practices such as meditation or yoga. Focus or mindfulness implies a state of being present and paying close attention to the receiver of massage while kindness or compassion is an elusive but essential ingredient.

In order to better understand the therapeutic role of mindfulness and compassion I will refer to Pierce Salguero's (2006) *The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand*. He explored Thai traditional medicine alongside Buddhist spiritual practices. "The Thai healer works to embody within themselves the principles of loving-kindness and compassion and to bring these into their work with their patients." (Salguero, 2006: 40) This idea of embodying compassion echoes Dan Menkin's (1996) definition of the qualities required by massage practitioners. He states that inner states of being are contagious and calls it the duty of the practitioner to "offer themselves as powerful healing environments for clients." (Menkin, 1996: 30-31). The practitioner must be free of negative thoughts and constrictions, must work on his/her own consciousness in order to have a transformative effect on others.

The Buddhist principles pointed out by Salguero work through meditation in order to enhance positive aspects of consciousness. The two most common forms of meditation practices work along the lines of developing awareness and compassion. The first is awareness of breath and its purpose is "first and foremost the cultivation of attention." (Salguero, 2006: 28) The second is *metta*⁶ meditation, which increases compassion and a sense of interconnectedness of all beings ((Ibid: 36) .

These four Western practitioners and theorists of Thai massage highlight the importance of educating the mind, of developing the qualities of mindfulness and compassion both for increasing the therapeutic effects of Thai massage and as paths to becoming more integrated human beings. In order to offer a deeper understanding

⁶*Metta* meditation is one type of meditation that cultivates loving kindness.

of the role played by these two qualities for the therapeutic effect of Thai massage I will turn to psychological explanations of the mind/body relationship.

V. Mindfulness, Compassion, and the Eastern Model of Healing in Thai Massage

Salguero mentions the Circle of Life forming the basis of Asian medicine, as seen in the figure on page four. The Circle of Life is made up of three elements: the physical body, the mind/heart or inner self and the energy that links the mind/heart and the body. “In the Thai model, because body, energy and *chitta* (mind/heart) are interlinked, working with *chitta* is important to overall health and well-being before and after illness strikes-both for patients and for practitioners.” (Salguero, 2006: 8) Illness appears as the result of an imbalance among these three elements and it influences all of them. This holistic view may appeal to people inclined to rely on intuition but it is generally frowned upon by the scientific view. The interconnectedness of these systems is so complex that it defies a linear, analytical understanding. In our study we focus on two levels of connection: giver/receiver and mind/body.

At its most general level, the therapeutic effect in Thai massage relies on various techniques of bodily touch (the art of giving with two hands) and the interpersonal exchange between the giver and the receiver (the art of giving with the heart). An additional relaxation effect is usually played by the atmosphere and the environment where the massage takes place (smell, sight, light, temperature). The purpose of the massage is to relieve blockages and create an unobstructed flow of energy through the body. Putting pressure on pressure points and along *sen* lines stimulates not only the flow of energy but also the flow of blood and lymph. The rhythmic tensing and release of cells creates better oxygenation and thus more vitality. The benefits of Thai Massage occur at multiple levels: at bodily level it stimulates circulation, improves the movement of bones and connective tissues, increases flexibility, enhances the immune system, helps with the clearing of toxins and metabolic waste, relaxes respiration and heart rate, improves digestion. (Chaitavuthi and Muangsiri, 2012: 104-110). At a psychological level Thai massage stimulates sensory receptors increasing awareness, relaxation and reducing pain. It creates a sense of calm and emotional well-being by reducing stress. Chaitavuthi and Muangsiri have also pointed out the holistic benefits of Thai massage as preventive medicine and acts of kindness and helping in communities. TMC school has trained disabled people and young people at detention centers giving them a sense of purpose and connection to other people. Thai massage offers people a new understanding of the mind/body relationship as well as the relationship between individual and others. One way of understanding this relationship is the theory of energy. “Thai massage is one of the methods of healing and recharging the body by stimulating the life force within and opening up the energy channels to enable energy to flow freely.” (Ibid: 10)

In order to understand better the aspect of energy and how it connects the body with the mind and the giver of the massage to the receiver I will use the theory of energy developed by Yuasa Yasuo (1993) to explain the healing effect that the mind qualities of mindfulness and compassion have on the body. Meditation weakens the function of the conscious mind by reducing the outside stimuli and it forges a stronger connection to the unconscious. At the same time, it also forges a strong mind-body connection (Yuasa, 1993: 22).⁷ What we named in our study “education of the mind” or consciousness training, Yuasa calls “self-cultivation” practiced in Eastern traditions as a form of connecting the body with the mind and the individual with the world. “The skin is a field making unique contact with the material world, within which an interchange takes place through the flow of *ki* between psychological and physiological functions, that is, between the mind and the body.” (Ibid: 108) Self-cultivation of energy through meditative techniques also controls distortions from the unconscious. (Ibid: 110) There are various forms of stilling of the mind but the two most widespread methods of meditation have the aim of developing mindfulness and compassion.

The Eastern theory of energy connects not only the mind with the body but also the individual body with other bodies and with the world. The same energy that runs through all living things as *prana* or life force, runs through our bodies. In the theory of Thai massage there are ten major paths of energy lines or *sen sib*. They all start about two inches below the abdominal surface and they run throughout the body with various exit points. The origins of this theory are in Indian Ayurvedic principles but the lines locations and exit points are not exactly similar. (Chaithavuthi and Muangsiri, 2012: 31) The cells of the body receive energy through the *sen* lines. The stimulation of various points along the *sen* lines activates not only bodily cells but it also has a psychological effect. Mindfulness is the ability of practitioners to sense the energy of the receiver’s body, responding to individual needs, whereas compassion is the intention to heal with loving kindness. The state of mind of the massage practitioner is like the salt in food: an essential but invisible element. In the following part I will define mindfulness and the interaction qualities that develop with it.

We all have the ability to pay attention to things around us. However, our minds will soon wander to thoughts that move us away from presence. Mindfulness means the deliberate cultivation of attention and it is the first practice in any form of spiritual practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn, (2005) founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center defines mindfulness as “an open-hearted, moment-to moment nonjudgmental awareness is optimally cultivates through awareness. Its most elaborate and complete articulation comes from the Buddhist tradition.” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005: chapter 1) Mindfulness means knowing objects as they are through awareness, without making meaning through thought. One can think

⁷One psychologist referred to the unconscious as being stored in the body, not in the brain as has been believed for a long time. (Candace Pert, 2004)

of it as an opening to the other that allows for a more genuine understanding and presence. Mindfulness allows the practitioner to focus on the body of the receiver without estranging emotions or thoughts entangled in the future or past. Mindfulness is the translation of the word *sati* in Pali language and it is the core teaching of Buddhism. Germer and Seigel (2013) define it as “the background radar of consciousness” (Germer & Seigel, 2013: chapter 1) Mindfulness is based on the stilling of the mind and the cultivation of connection between the self and the object of attention. In the context of Thai massage, the cultivation of mindfulness means a deeper perception of the receiver’s body and an intuition of the flow of energy. With mindfulness the practitioner can use the exact amount of pressure, speed and stretch fit for each body by responding to subtle body language cues. Mindfulness means in the context of massage the attunement to the body of the receiver. However, mindfulness is only the first step in the education of the heart. Compassion or kindness provides the main therapeutic effect.

Psychologists refer to compassion as the result of increasing mindfulness. Compassion is “basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it.” (Gilbert, 2008: chapter 1) Germer and Seigel uses the metaphor of light that refers to the difference between mindfulness and compassion as the “difference between the light in an operating room versus candlelight at dinner.” (Ibid: chapter 1) Mindfulness has the ability to understand others as they are, thus the metaphor of the light in an operating room that can make everything visible. Compassion is the desire for all beings to be free of suffering and thus it creates an atmosphere of trust and loving- kindness. The awareness of the vulnerability of all life forms creates a sense of connection and a desire to protect life. In Buddhist psychology compassion is natural and it is the result of being aware of the interconnectedness of all beings. (Kornfield, 2009: chapter 2) The same way we are connected to the environment through the elements that make up our bodies, we are also connected to other people in consciousness. Through meditation people are able to develop compassion for themselves first and then for other beings, “to open to life without armoring.” (Ibid: chapter 2)

Compassion creates for the receivers of Thai massage a comforting environment that relieves them of suffering through the law of resonance (the transmission of another person’s state of mind through touch and presence). People who are engaged in learning any healing practice and in this particular case, Thai massage, are already on a path of compassion. This idea of contagion where the mind of one person influences the mind of another person is what the Eastern theory of energy calls energy flow. Western science uses explains this contagion differently. David Goleman (2007) explains that there are two ways in which the brain processes information. One is the sensorial perception and the other is the emotional aspect of what we perceive “beneath the reach of conscious awareness.” (Goleman, 2007: chapter 1) We can trigger emotions in each other through contagion through the “low

road” of brain circuitry that operates at high speed beneath our awareness. “An emotion can pass from person to person silently, without anyone consciously noticing, because the circuitry for this contagion lies in the low road.” (Ibid: chapter 1)

Compassion is not only a positive emotion that is felt both by the massage giver and by the receiver. It also creates a particular form of touch, guiding the massage practitioner’s interaction with the receiver’s body. Various levels of touch transmit messages to the body (Ford, 1999: 176) This is the reason all theorists of Thai massage point out that practitioners are not only givers of massage but also “powerful healing environments” for clients seeking healing. (Menkin, 1996: 31)

Mindfulness and compassion have not been given much attention as models of communication because they operate at subtle levels of awareness. If mindfulness is the quality of focused attention that allows massage practitioners to interact with the massage receivers in a more open and unmediated way, compassion is the kindness that colors the emotional interaction and the quality of touch creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. Whereas mindfulness is the present state of mind of the practitioner, compassion is transmitted through contagion to the receiver, creating a positive feeling that enhances the therapeutic effect of massage. The following chapters will each explore the findings from interviews with teachers and students of Thai Massage at the three schools where we conducted the interviews: Thai Massage School of Thailand, Suay Thai Massage School and Wat Po and Chetawan Group Thai Massage School.

VI. Teaching Thai massage and the Qualities of Mindfulness and Compassion to Western Students

The first book of Thai massage in English written by Thai practitioners is *Ancient Thai massage, Healing with Life Force*. Its authors, Jan Chaithavuthi and Kanchanoo Muangsiri (2013) are the directors of the Thai massage School of Chiang Mai. In their book they offer a comprehensive theory of energy and its role in healing. They define meditation as a path to the life force (*prana*), which is essential to the healing process.” The practitioner may go within and transmit the power of the life force outwardly for healing while giving massage when performing the noble task with full concentration and the power of the will to heal.” (Chaithavuthi and Muangsiri, 2013: 9) We can see in this quote the two essential elements that practitioners need: mindfulness and the will to heal or compassion. I will discuss the principles of each school that we interviewed and their understanding of the role played by these two psychological or spiritual qualities in Thai Massage.

VII. Thai Massage School of Thailand and the Awareness of the Emotional Interaction in Thai Massage

In February 2015 we visited The Thai massage School of Thailand where we interviewed its two directors, four teachers and six students. The school founded in 2001 is located on quiet grounds outside Chiang Mai in a cozy building with many rooms painted in blue, overlooking a refreshing stream. Jan Chaithavuthi and Kanchanoo Muangsiri, the authors of the book mentioned above, run the school with discipline, rigor and wisdom. Chaithavuthi's concern with safety and hygiene coming from her 20 years of experience as a nurse in United States, combined with Muangsiri's passion for teaching creates an excellent learning atmosphere for Thai massage. The school teaches Thai Massage from the basic level to the teacher certification. The highest certification requires 600 hours of learning. Students start their day with prayer, chanting and a brief meditation. As part of their learning process, they also participate in the school's work with disabled children and elderly, practicing massage with compassionate intention. Since the Thai government offers free training to Thai citizens, the majority of students are Westerners and a few from other Asian countries. All teachers pointed out that mindfulness, or "putting the heart" in it was very important for the quality of Thai massage but the school does not offer formal training in the expansion of consciousness. Every class does start with short prayer and meditation that lasts three minutes each and they are supposed to prepare the students to "get ready in body and mind." (Angsumalin, 2012: interview) Many students parallel their study of Thai massage with personal development by doing meditation, yoga or other practices in mindfulness outside the massage course. During courses, the school teaches about the importance of feelings and intentions, making psychological training concrete to practice. Teachers show students how they can touch with compassion and generosity and they stress the importance of attention. Teachers themselves responded that the practice and teaching of Thai massage helped them be calmer, concentrate more and be gentler. One of the teachers, Saranya, practices meditation that helps her improve the quality of massage by calming her mind. When asked about energy and the idea of the life force (*prana*), all the interviewed teachers talked about illness or pain as a blockage in the flow of energy and they pointed out that learning to unblock the energy was the highest learning course. Chaithavuthi is very knowledgeable about the famous yogi Parahanansa Yogananda, integrating his ideas about energy, life force and meditation in her knowledge and teaching of Thai massage.

Muangsiri defines mindfulness as a quality of attention or "*sai jai*" in Thai language. She refers to the ability of noticing details and responding to subtle cues in the environment. Developing attention allows the students to respond correctly to the verbal and bodily cues of massage receivers. They can sense tension, pain, blockages and energy flow. Students are taught about the importance of their state of mind and

intentions for the quality of their massage. They are recorded while giving massage and asked to analyze themselves and the emotions they put into it: superiority, fear, distaste, compassion. This interesting educational tool is an exercise in self-awareness for many students. They learn to pay attention to their own feelings in interacting with recipients of massage. Concentration allows massage givers to have their mind present and their energy “*jai*” present. Abishek Anand Jha, a student we interviewed, defined mindfulness as the quality of being aware and anchored in the present moment. He also practiced and taught yoga in order to develop relaxation abilities and avoid burnout during bodywork.

One cultural difference between the Thai teachers and Western students is the insistence of students to understand the processes of Thai massage instead of relying on an intuitive form of knowledge that comes with exercise and is passed on through the authority of the teachers. The Western critical mind is always searching for answers to the question: “Why?” “Why does a blockage settle in the shoulder?” “Why should I press here and not there?” This process of learning does not allow for the slow development of intuition and “feeling” but moves rather towards a mental processing of theory.

A second issue that Thai teachers confront is the desire of Western students to accumulate a variety of techniques in a short time. As Pichest Boonthume, a famous Thai massage teacher quipped: “Farangs always do do, do. But how to do?” (Haddad, 2005: chapter 1) Learning to perform massage correctly, with mindfulness and compassion becomes a meditative and healing exercise for both the giver and the receiver. Western students enter a different concept of mind-body relationship in the study of Thai massage and they start developing certain spiritual qualities. As Chaithavuthi stated, “they must stop the mind in order to let the heart (be)” Many students are at first baffled by the theory of energy and by the inability to see or feel it. They need to practice for a long time, also helped by other techniques like meditation and yoga in order to open up to a new concept of the mind/body. The development of theory and techniques are in contrast to mindfulness, which is nonconceptual, nonverbal and present-centered. (Germer and Seigel, 2013: chapter 1) Due to language and cultural differences, it is easier for Thai students to understand the energy explanations than for Western students but all of them are equally eager to learn and open minded about the ideas they get.

In Thai massage schools compassion is an informal professional ethics that enhances its therapeutic aspect but is not taught as part of the curriculum. However, the very desire students have to learn Thai massage shows that as Chaithavuthi stated, “they must at least have half of the heart (in it), otherwise they wouldn’t do it.” (Chaithavuthi, 2012: interview) The students we interviewed expressed their decision to study massage as part of a spiritual search, a desire to become more proficient at healing and understanding others. Kamil Wolyniec, a student training for Thai massage teacher qualification mentioned compassion as the desire to alleviate the

suffering of other people. Other students mentioned that compassion was a desirable goal to be pursued in an effort to move from neediness and the desire to be appreciated and liked by others to the genuine desire to give and heal. (Kujawski: interview) The author Ananda Apflebaum (2004) has called Thai massage “compassion in action,” and both teachers and students recognized the importance of compassion and generosity in the practice of massage. (Apflebaum, 2004: 3)

VIII. Suay Thai Massage School and Thai Massage as the Care for Self and Family

On March 21, 2015 we visited the Suai Thai Massage school in Phuket. The school is run by teacher Masayuki Muranishi from Japan. He has been a teacher of Thai massage and yoga for ten years and he kindly answered our questions, allowing us to interview some of his advanced students as well. The school is very simple but the dedication and expertise of the teacher makes for a memorable learning experience. Masayuki explained that yoga was the care for one’s own body while massage was the care for other people’s bodies. He confirmed our hypothesis that the quality of massage increased with other practices like yoga or meditation but he believed that rather than psychology or spirituality, Thai Massage should be studied more from the perspective of medical science. He was cautious about the belief system involved in the healing process in general and the theories surrounding the concept of energy. “Instead of talking about energy, I prefer the scientific perspective of brain waves,” Masayuki stated. Brain waves show different vibrations according to different states of mind. A state of peace and calm produces low frequency brain waves that induce that state in the receiver. He defined the quality of massage as a subtle interchange between the belief system of receiver and the psychological traits of the massage therapists. Some people are more open to the healing possibilities of massage than others. Regarding compassion Masayuki offered an opinion different than that of other teachers we interviewed. Rather than increasing compassion by meditative practices he pointed out that compassion is a state of consciousness people have rather than grow. Compassion develops naturally out of people’s encounter with various situations. He gave the example of the time when he found stray puppies and started caring for them.

Teacher Masayuki brought us down to reality by pointing out that the majority of people study massage in order to make money. From that perspective our study concerns a rather privileged group of Thai massage practitioners who learn massage out of deep interest and as part of personal development. This group of people sees money as a marginal goal and caring or helping others as a primary goal. They practice massage primarily as a form of self-cultivation in order to help others and secondarily as a profession. The majority of Western students learn Thai massage from this perspective of self-transformation rather than as a survival strategy.

The students we interviewed mentioned the difference between the personally committed students and those who studied massage to have a certificate or as an exotic experience. For example, Jennifer, was already involved in a career as licensed massage therapist and massage teacher in United States. She was knowledgeable about mindfulness and compassion and their role in the quality of Thai massage. She pointed out that by doing meditation practitioners could become selfless and this quality allowed them to genuinely help others through massage. The concept of selflessness that she pointed out is related to our concept of mindfulness: the lack of a concern with one's problems and issues and the opening to the other person. Jennifer explained that good practitioners needed to heal themselves first in order to heal others. Her opinions echo Chaithavuthi's idea of *prana* or life energy that flows better through the mind and body of people who are selfless and compassionate. Being better channels of energy, these people have a better healing ability than practitioners who are too self-centered. She gave the example of clients who were crying during massage, releasing emotions triggered by traumas and who would later become Thai massage practitioners themselves.

Two other students used the example of the family to explain compassion. Erkan from Turkey and Gianluca from Italy explained their desire to learn Thai massage as first the desire to help their families and then possibly extending the caring touch to people outside the family circle. When you do Thai massage on other people you "treat them as someone you care for, a husband or wife." They acknowledged the personal responsibility practitioners had to educate their hearts in order to provide their clients with care and positive energy.

IX. Wat Po and Chetawan Group Thai Massage School-Compassion as Extended Kinship

On April 18 2015 we visited Wat Po, the most famous Thai Massage place. During the reign of King Rama III Thai traditional medical knowledge was preserved in inscriptions on the walls of the temple. There are 60 pictures showing the energy lines and pressure points of the human body and about 1,100 formulas of recognized herbal medicine. In November 1955 Wat Po massage school was institutionalized as the first government approved massage school in Thailand. At the time of our visit Thai massage was offered within the premises of the temple but the school has moved to an outside location. The Chetawan group is the new generation in the family of Wat Po school. Serat Tangtrongchitr, the manager of the school, explained to us its impressive history. "When we started the school we did not do it for money but as an association to preserve traditional knowledge. At that time massage was considered old-fashioned medicine and nobody was interested in it. Now we have 4 schools around Thailand and many of our teachers also teach abroad." The school has at

present 70 teachers and 150 practitioners, with an impressive number of 800 students per month.

Similar to Thai Massage School in Chiang Mai, students start the day with prayer to Shivagomarpaj and five minutes of meditation. Serat explained that in time meditation becomes a habit and it increases the mindfulness of the practitioner. It is a ritual of centering attention on the receiver and the act of giving massage. During the interview he stressed the importance of community and the Asian quality of caring that comes from collective psychology. Some practitioners have been in the school for three generations and they extend the quality of care and compassion from their own kin to larger groups of people of patients in need of help. "Our school is like a big family." (Serat: interview)

Western students come to study massage in order to look for better lifestyles. "Many of them become vegetarian and learn Buddhism. "They become more Thai than the Thais," Serat jokes. This observation confirms the idea that Western students study massage as a path of self-transformation together with care, compassion and mindfulness. They learn the mentality of care from Thai people through the "universal language of Thai massage." (Ibid: interview) The study of Thai Massage opens them to higher tolerance and by doing activities together students learn the values of care and compassion. In the practice of massage students also need to solve their own problems first. They need to stay in good health so that they can help others. Serat stressed more the quality of compassion than that of mindfulness. "Even simple concentration is enough" since each receiver prefers certain personalities of practitioners.

Teacher Noppamas Karawanon has been in the school for 16 years. She came to teach because her relatives were there, which confirmed what the manager had told us about the school as a big family. Learning massage offered a path of empowerment to her through healing oneself and others. Noppamas stated that now she knew what to do in case of minor pains and many friends and relatives came to her first before seeing a doctor. Both she and Serat see massage as preventive medicine and sometimes as therapeutic treatment for an already present illness. Noppamas highlighted the ability to help people that gave her life great joy and meaning. Prayer, meditation and 30 minutes stretching exercises at the temple in the morning helped increase the mindfulness of practitioners. She felt restored by prayer and meditation when feeling tired after giving massage. "The quality of massage is different if you are mindful and pay attention," she stated, demonstrating on my hand the difference between present touch and mindless touch. The former felt good while the latter felt lonely.

When asked about compassion Noppamas used the metaphor of caring family. "It is not only massage when you should have compassion but care starts with first seeing the receiver, greeting them and establishing a connection." She pointed out that Thai people understand better how to do massage with the heart because of Thai hospitality.

She regards education of the heart as a trait of extended kinship system in Thailand. When people live as extended families they learn to care for each other in the same way massage practitioners learn to care for their patients.

Conclusion

The accounts of Western students show that a great majority came to study Thai Massage as a path to self-transformation. They learn not only the techniques but also a new way of perceiving the mind/body relationship and new ways of relating to other people. The majority of them study Thai massage together with meditation and yoga in order to develop the qualities of mindfulness and compassion. These two qualities are essential aspects of the education of the heart. Mindfulness creates a state of mind free of thoughts and personal problems that allows for a genuine perception of the needs of the receiver. Compassion adds a therapeutic dimension to Thai Massage by creating an atmosphere of trust and loving-kindness. Teachers of Thai massage offered different definitions of compassion as general human trait that can be developed through meditative practice and as a specific Thai cultural trait coming from the care of kinship. Whereas mindfulness can be educated through practice and ritualized meditation, compassion is a form of care similar to family relationship that practitioners extend to other people. For some of the teachers compassion is a quality that people develop through experience whereas for others it is an aspect of the heart that can be developed through meditative practices.

The history of Thai Massage shows that massage has always been “the art of giving with two hands and the heart” but various historical periods have emphasized different aspects. Thai Massage has been introduced in Thailand together with Buddhist practices and has been institutionalized during the reign of Kings Rama I, II and III. The introduction of Western medicine has put Thai massage in the shadow, together with Thai traditional medicine only to be revived in the 1980s. At present Thai Massage has become world famous and its popularity is on the increase as the number of students at the schools we visited shows. Learning Thai Massage has become a way of understanding the originally Buddhist values of mindfulness and compassion as secular traits that increase well-being and improve the quality of life for both receivers of Thai Massage and practitioners.

References

- Alter, J.S. (Ed.). 2005. *Asian Medicine and Globalization*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Apfelbaum, Ananda. 2004. *Thai massage: Sacred Body Work*, New York: Avery Trade.
- Asokananda. 1997. *The Art of Traditional Thai massage* (Tenth Edition), Chiang Mai: DK Books.

- Chaithavuthi, Jan and Kanchanoo Muangsiri. 2012. *Ancient Thai massage: Healing with Life Force* (Third Edition), Chiang Mai: Thai massage Book Press.
- Chokevivat, Vichai. M.D., M.P.H. and Anchalee Chuthaputti, Ph.D. 2005. "Traditional medicine in the Thai healthcare system."
http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/Thai_Healthcare.pdf.
- Chokevivat, Vichai and Anchalee Chuthaputti. 2005. "The Role of Thai Traditional Medicine in Health Promotion."
http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/The_Role_ofThai_Traditional_Medicine_in_Health_Promotion_by_Vichai_Chokevivat_and_Anchalee_Chuthaputti.pdf.
- Ford, W. Clyde. 1999. *Compassionate Touch; The Body's Role in Emotional Healing and Recovery*, Diane Pub Co, kindle e-book.
- Germer, K. Christopher and Ronald D. Siegel. 2013. *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, New York: Guilford Press, kindle e-book.
- Gilbert, Paul. 2008. *The Compassionate Mind*, London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., kindle e-book.
- Gold, Richard. 2006. *Thai massage, A Traditional Medical Technique*, Missouri: Mosby.
- Goleman, Daniel. 2007. *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Bantam, kindle e-book.
- Haddad, Bob. 2005. "Thai sets a new standard for the study and practice of traditional Thai massage." http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/THAI_sets_a_New_Standard.pdf.
- Haddad, Bob. (Ed.). 2013. *Thai massage and Thai Healing Arts: Practice, Culture and Spirituality*, Scotland: Findhorn Press, kindle e-book.
- Iida, Junko. 2010. "The sensory experience of Thai massage: commercialization, globalization and tactility." *Every day Life in Asia Social Perspectives on the Senses*, Ed. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E. Y. Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Iida, Junko. 2013. "Holism as whole body treatment. The transnational production of Thai massage." *European Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol 5, Issue 1, pp. 81-111.
http://www.transnational-journal.eu/5_1_2013/EJOTS2013_01.pdf.
- Kabbat-Zinn, Jon. 2005. *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness*, New York: Hachette Books, kindle e-book.
- Komin, S. 1991. *Psychology of the Thai people: Values and behavioral patterns*. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration.
- Kornfield, Jack. 2009. *The Wise Heart. A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*, Bantam, kindle e-book
- Lea Jenniffer. 2009. "The cultural and corporeal geographies of teaching and learning Thai Yoga Massage." *Geoforum*, 3, 40, 465-74.
- Lowe, Martin. 2013. "Thailand sets trend in "massage tourism,"
<http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20120910/105842.shtml>.
- Menkin, Dan. 1996. *Transformation through Bodywork: Using Touch Therapies for Inner Peace*, Bear and Company, kindle e-book.
- Pennapa Subcharoen and Anchalee Chutaputti. 2013. "Traditional Medicine in the Kingdom of Thailand." http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/Thai_Traditional_Medicine.pdf.
- Pennapa Subcharoen. 2005. "The History of Thai Traditional Massage."
http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/Authentic_Thai_Traditional_Massage.pdf.
- Rewat, Wisutwet. 2013. "Thailand-The 'Wellness Capital of Asia' Ministry of Public Health Certification of Thai Spas."

- http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/Thailand-the_wellness_capital_of_Asia.pdf.
Roncarati, Marco. 2001. "Multi-sited Fieldwork into Thai integral healing."
http://www.thaihealingalliance.com/pdf/Multisited_fieldwork_into_Thai_integral_healing.pdf.
RetriSalguero, C. Peirce. 2006. *The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand*. Findhorn Press. PDF book.
Salguero, C. Peirce. 2004. *Encyclopedia of Thai massage: A Complete Guide to Traditional Thai Massage Therapy and Accupressure*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
Vieten, Cassandra. (Ed.). 2008. *Living Deeply: The Art and Science of Transformation in Everyday Life*, California: Noetic Books, kindle e-book.
Watts, Alan. 2002. *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation*, New World Library, kindle e-book.
Yuasa, Yasuo. 1986. *The Body: Towards an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, New York: State University of New York Press.
Yuasa, Yasuo. 1993. *The Body: Self-Cultivation and Ki-energy*, New York: State University of New York Press, PDF e-book.
<http://www.dalailama.com/news/post/92-buddhism-is-a-science-of-the-mind-dalai-lama>.