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### **Luk Pra Kob, or Herbal Stem Compress: An Aspect of Traditional Thai Medicine**

by Marvin Swartz



Since discovering Thai Yoga Massage, more commonly referred to as Thai Massage, in 1998, I have been on a path of discovery and have become a certified Thai massage practitioner. I have also continued to learn about Thai culture and cuisine and have developed a fascination with traditional Thai medicine.

Though traditional Thai medicine went out of fashion in Thailand in the 20th Century with the introduction of Western medicine, it is now regaining popularity and recognition as a national treasure. While Thai Yoga Massage is the most well-known of the ancient healing traditions, there is renewed interest in the other traditional treatments both within Thailand and around the world. The search for natural holistic approaches to health and well-being has helped revive these ancient traditions for all to enjoy.

Medicinal herbs, along with proper nutrition, spiritual practice, and therapeutic massage are the main components of traditional Thai medicine. Historically, the foundations of it trace back to the Buddhist society in the 2nd Century BCE. One can also find parallels to Indian Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medical practices. Buddhist monks were trained as healers and the Buddhist monasteries, or Wats, became centres of learning and healing—and remain so in Thai culture today.

Recently, I was able to learn the technique called Luk Pra Kob, or herbal stem compress, also referred to as hot herbal compress or poultice. Medicinal herbs, plant resins, and spices are wrapped in a bundle of cotton cloth. This traditional Thai massage tool is used to increase circulation, relax muscles and connective tissue, work out painful knots, relieve inflammation, and treat specific ailments. The compresses are first steamed to release essential oils, resins, and other therapeutic ingredients. Then the heated or cooled compresses are applied directly to the body, allowing the therapeutic components from the herbs to penetrate the skin. Moist heat enhances the body's relaxation response and increases both circulation and skin permeability. Cold compresses are used for acute injuries to reduce pain, swelling, and bleeding, as well as for headaches and fevers. The initial steaming and re-heating of the compresses during the treatment releases essential oils and therapeutic aromatic compounds from the herbs into the air, thus contributing to an aromatherapy effect.

The use of the word herb within the context of this article refers to any plant part used in cooking or for its medicinal properties and is not a strict botanical definition. The parts of the plant used may be flowers, seeds, fruit, foliage, stems, roots, and tree bark. Many of the herbs and spices used for healing are also common ingredients in traditional Thai cuisine. More common plants include: lemon grass, kaffir lime, turmeric, tamarind, sesame, coconut, jasmine rice, ginger, cinnamon, galangal, peppermint, cloves, citrus fruits, tea, and basil. Camphor is a resin from the camphor tree. Some plants are native to Thailand and are not well-known in the West. Essential oils can also replace herbs that are not available. For specific skin conditions, purified clay may be added.

A Luk Pra Kob treatment can include traditional massage strokes by tapping, twisting, pressing, dragging, and kneading the body with the herbal stem, working the muscles, as well as acupressure points and tracing energy lines. Compresses may also be placed and left on areas too painful to massage directly. Massage oils may be applied to the skin before applying the compress to reduce friction from the coarse cloth. Depending on how the compress is applied, skin exfoliation can also be achieved. Traditional Thai Massage stretches may also be incorporated during a treatment. Some clients find it more effective and relaxing to have a Thai massage first, followed by a herbal stem treatment. The compresses are usually applied directly onto bare skin or they can be applied over clothing if desired.

Small herbal stems are wonderful for use on the face to soften and soothe the skin, and brighten it, as well as to reduce wrinkles and swelling. Ingredients in the compresses vary with one's complexion. Combining the

treatment with a pressure point finger massage and hydrating mask is a unique facial treatment. Traditionally, compresses have been used for stimulation of mind, body, and energy by soothing and relaxing tense, sore, pulled, or overworked muscles; to open energy lines; and to break up congestion in the lungs and sinuses. Other uses include relieving arthritic pain, softening and conditioning the skin, and increasing circulation of the blood and lymph.

Many of the herbs are considered to have a general tonic effect on health and longevity, while others are said to have specific properties such as anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, moisturizing, and analgesic.

Luk Pra Kob is not for everyone, especially not for those with skin sensitive to heat or chemicals. Other contraindications include a lack of skin sensitivity, recent burns, wounds, or scars, high blood pressure, varicose veins, or diabetes. Also, one should wait 48 hours after body hair removal before a treatment. It is definitely recommended for individuals in need of rejuvenation, tranquility, and deep relaxation and who enjoy bodywork and facial treatments involving heat. Following a treatment, it is recommended not to wash for three to four hours to maximize the effects of the herbal compounds.

Because the herbal stems are massaged directly onto the skin, for sanitary and health reasons they cannot be shared between individuals, but the compresses can be reused two or three times when properly stored.

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