

Massage
and the Writer
Essays on Asian Massage

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Chapter 7

Massaging the Yin-Yang in Pattaya

Golden Fingers Massage Therapy, Pattaya, Thailand. Along with the usual menu of services out front I see they offer massage classes. I go for an oil massage, at the standard hourly rate for Pattaya of 300 Baht (a mere US \$9—or \$6 in the back streets around Soi Buakhao). Curious to see whether a parlor in the guise of a massage school is constrained by pedagogical morality and only chaste bodywork is on hand. The entrance opens onto a lush little courtyard with flowers and foliage and unobtrusive New Age music in the background. Upscale. Mam, my smiling massage therapist, sits me down with my feet in a basin, which she soaps up and rinses off. She's wearing an orange tunic and drawstring pants and has, I notice as she leads me upstairs to the massage room, a voluptuous ass. The room's tables are sectioned off by curtains. She disappears while I get undressed and shower. A folded towel is on the table. I lie face down naked, expecting the usual routine. I have yet to meet a Thai masseuse uncomfortable with male nudity, but they almost always drape you out of respect for the body shy, if you have not already done so yourself...

There is massage and there is “massage.” On the one hand, the physical art, the skillful manipulation of the flesh for therapeutic relief. On the other, the idea, the fantasy, the metonymy: the occasion rather than the act itself. To the materialists, those who take massage literally, who want a massage and nothing else, the latter represents a gross and insulting distortion of the practice. To the idealists, those who take massage figuratively, who don't want a

You may divest massage of the erotic, but you can't divest it of its affect.

massage but something else—sexual relief, an orgasm—the former represents a species of humor.

This essay is about the unacknowledged gray area between these extremes, what goes on during the actual practice of massage and what takes place in most establishments, at least in Asia, where massage predominates in daily life to a greater extent than in the West. It is about what goes on in Thailand, above all Pattaya. And what goes on confounds this stubborn dichotomy and reveals it to be a gross distortion in its own right.

Pattaya is hard for people to wrap their head around. It has to be seen to be believed: a whole city, the very layout of the city, organized around the sex business. It's the sardonic answer to the religious city, the city organized around sacred practice, the Indian city of Varanasi for example, with its labyrinth of temples of all shapes and sizes to get lost in, whether or not we are Hindu. For the same reason, and regardless of whether we intend to partake, we get deliriously lost in the lanes of Pattaya, the more than 100 soapy-massage palaces and go-go bars, 1,000 open-air bars packed with girls waiting to be touched to a drink, and 1,000 massage parlors of every conceivable stripe. But some preliminaries are in order before we proceed, as I lay out what's at stake.

Wilhelm Reich was on to something in his equating of rigid "body armor" with the authoritarian or fascist personality structure. Nowhere are people more vulnerable than naked and passive on the massage table. To invite people who cannot bear to be touched for a massage often elicits a violent verbal reaction (even if you allow them to hold on to their gun). Is there something as well to the observation that one of the most peaceful of countries, Thailand, also has among the highest per capita number of massage parlors?

Mam is from Isan, Thailand's less developed northeast region where the majority of masseuses and sex workers hail from. She does not look the diminutive brown-skinned stereotype of northeast women (ethnically Lao in fact, though any racial homogene-

ity is more evident in isolated Laos), hapless signifier of the world's prostituted, but rather Indian, a light-skinned Indian, as do quite a few people in Thailand, whose population exhibits a greater facial variety than I've seen in any other Asian country, even more so than its neighbors Burma and Malaysia (though I've heard Kazakhstan is the place to be for exotic faces). It's been after all the melting pot of great waves of migration for over a millennium, beginning with the Indian Dvaravati culture that spread east and southward as far as Vietnam and Java in Indonesia, the Tai culture from the north (present-day southwest China), Khmer culture from Cambodia, and perpetual Malay influx from the south. Centuries of cross-cultural push-pull and internal migration have long canceled out any regional racial integrity. I defy anyone to identify the birthplace of a Thai person based purely on their physical features rather than their job.

Mam serves up a blend of Swedish-style deep-tissue work and Thai-style folding and pressing, so seamless and practiced that a thoroughly puritanical massage seems inevitable, until she does something unexpected and glides her hands up my legs all the way into the crack of my butt, swiping her slick fingers firmly against my anus. She repeats this with each stroke. The anus is one of the no-go zones, as taboo as the genitals, belonging in fact to the genitals due its acute erotic sensitivity as well as proximity. To have the anus manipulated with oil is every bit as intense as the penis. Another marvelous move of hers is to work around my outer thigh with one hand while the other sneaks up along my inner thigh to the balls. When it's time to turn over, she holds up the towel to shield me before draping it. But not satisfied with how it settles, she lifts it up and adjusts it a second time, taking in a clear view of my hard-on. The formalities are moot, as it gradually slips off and my erection stands free. She ignores it and carries through with her procedure on the rest of my body. Fin-

ishing off with several strokes down over my abdomen, she draws her fingers back upward over the shaft of my quivering cock, short of actually grabbing it. It's torture, coming at the very end without relief, yet guaranteed to bring me back for more. A smart masseuse.

Think of jazz's relationship to classical music. And then to the blues tradition and rock. Massage has the same relationship to yoga on the one hand and fucking on the other.

Let's start with the idealist, for whom "massage" stands not for massage but for sex. Idealism is the capacity to imagine that there is something more to objects than just stone, wood or flesh, that there is a mystery to things, another reality or realm of possibilities. In contrast to the materialist, the idealist imagines that something more than mere massage might take place on the massage table. Ideally, this involves recognition of the absurdity of the very distinction between the chaste and the erotic, being incompatibles only by virtue of a false dichotomy. Remove this dichotomy and a space opens up for play, a vista, a canvas. In this space opposites not only overlap but are wrought into a wondrous—and frightening—tension. Things can easily get out of control. Rubbing the space may cause a genie to appear. When your masseuse is a poet of the hands and you don't understand poetry, she's one scary bitch.

Faced with this conundrum, the idealist short-circuits and shuts down. While credit is due to his initial conceptual leap, it's only a bellyflop. The touch of hand on exposed flesh, even with the genitals carefully avoided, triggers in his simple mind confusing emotions, fearful shock which he deflects by sudden infantile regression. With barely suppressed smirks and sniggers he fakes sleep, assuming the masseuse is just acting as well, before jumping back alive to startle her with a tit grab. Yeah, babe, show me what you got!

The idealist caricatures the masseuse and is in turn a caricature, very much the repulsive human specimen of Paul Wilson's caricature of a novel, *White Trash*, chronicling Caucasian misadventures with little brown fucking machines in Thailand and the Philippines: "‘Take it off,’ yelled the drunken European, ‘show me your titties.’ I looked at the pot-bellied, disheveled man wearing stubbies and a singlet with beer dripping down his chin and I felt embarrassed. God knows why; this was hardly a church." Go figure.

And to all you women who flee from men in terror at their offer of massage, you are their exact counterparts, diehard idealists as well, because you too have the capacity to imagine massage means something other than massage, indeed can *only* mean something other than massage. You fit together with your fellow male idealists like Yin and Yang in the complementary limits of your imagination.

Walking down Pattaya Second Road I pass by a ladyboy parlor. I've never been massaged by a ladyboy before. Unoccupied masseuses tend to sit out front to catch your eyes, and this bevy is all exquisitely made-up. It's hard to choose from among them. I select one at random and follow him up to a second-floor room. It's a huge letdown from the get-go. He pours oil on my back and spreads it around without actually massaging me, lightly trailing his fingers up and down my spine and along my legs as if with a feather. It's not in the least erotic, because anyone can trail their listless fingers over you. Anyone can pet a cat. He might as well be patting me with one hand while handling his cellphone with the other. Moreover, he commits the cardinal sin of massage, which is to use only one hand.

After ten minutes of this he has me turn over. I am not erect. Not because I'm incapable of getting erect with a man, no matter

how much he looks like a woman, but because he is not massaging me, because he has no skill and therefore no pride in his daily work. If he's really not into his job, there are countless bars where he can go target farangs for more money than he can make at a shabby parlor. But if it is massage he's settled on, he has the obligation to show some expertise at it. Even erotic massage. Erotic or not, the art of massage is governed by the same rules and techniques. He fingers my limp penis. We are both becoming visibly disappointed with each other.

Of course, many seek out massage purely on therapeutic grounds—

back pain, a sports injury—and nothing could be further from their mind than sexual stimulation. But isn't this a good occasion for introducing it? Similarly, nothing could be further from

my mind than the religious proselytizer who confronts me on the street, yet isn't that the most suitable place for proselytizing?

"You don't like me?" he whispers in a girlie voice.

No, I don't, though I keep quiet. It's too hard to explain, when his English vocabulary is limited to the number of fingers on his hand and my Thai vocabulary to less than that. I want to know if he's still got his dick or has already snipped it off. I go for his crotch but he retracts his legs protectively and pouts. Now I think I know what's going on and contributing to our communication breakdown. He thinks I thought he really was a woman, initially that is, and attributes my disappointment in him to my sudden realization of being misled. But if that had been the case, wouldn't it be an occasion of intense satisfaction for him, that he had passed as female, at least for a spell? I get up to leave.

As for the materialist, massage is a form of physical therapy. The interlocking system of skin, muscles and bones comprising the body's frame is of sufficient complexity in its own right to exhaust all the possibilities of the art. The therapist alleviates pain by working the muscles at the junctures of the tendons and bones, whereas Eastern treatments target trigger points in the body's meridian system to achieve the same result. People seek

massage for relief from pain. That's all there is to it and there is no need for anything else. For the therapist to waste precious minutes on something extraneous to the task at hand is irresponsible enough. To drag genital touching into the equation, even with the client's approval, is patently unethical, if not outright harassment or assault, as how can one be assured the client is capable of granting approval in such a vulnerable state?

Reducing bodily manipulation to its essentials, to a precise technique and outcome, is admirably logical and as clear-cut as a nurse giving you a shot: some are deft at it, gliding the needle in seamlessly as if directly into a pore of the skin, others less so, worrying the puncture in the process of puncturing it. The materialist's pride consists solely in this art of the competent massage, of efficacious manual release, and aspires to no more than its satisfactory delivery. The client seeking relief from pain on a specific part of his body wants no more or less for his money (theoretically we could even include the handjob to this purpose—relief from sexual pain). Except for one problem: many people who go for massage are not necessarily looking only for physical relief but something deeper and harder to get at, namely psychic relief, which neither the doctor, chiropractor, spouse or friend is able to help with. Physical relief may not help much in any case, if the medical consensus is right and 80% of back pain cases (acute injuries aside) are psychosomatic and caused by psychological stress.

To relieve the psyche, only full-body massage will do. That's

“Massage therapy” in the West implies a body massage with oil, i.e., a Swedish deep-tissue massage, which requires oil to plasticize and open up the flesh and ease the fingers into the muscles. In the East, massage shops explicitly promote “oil massage” in distinction to the non-oil treatments that are traditionally available. Yet the “oil” of oil massage inevitably has connotations and nuances all by itself. For many, it’s the most inconvenient of substances, which dirties up the flesh and sends one into the shower. It’s not quite a euphemism for sex but something more obscure, an unctuous Other drawing both male and female Western tourists and mocking them at the same time.

why body massage is always the main item on the menu. Naked full-body oil massage. Nothing reaches closer to addressing the absence in many people's lives of physical touch, not the handshake or hug or odd fuck, but the sustained, comprehensive application of skilled hands along the expanse of one's flesh. Massage assuages loneliness more than anything else. The materialist conviction in the sufficiency of muscular relief and not something more hinders access to the loneliness lodged in the muscles.

When a massage doesn't go as well as expected, I get another. I head over to the exotic labyrinth of streets around Soi Buakhao, with its hundreds of massage ladies sitting outside their shops who call out to me. One open storefront I pass by has a travel agency counter and a massage shop in the back, and a sole masseuse squatting before the entrance of the shop on a stool. Not a beauty, forties, but she has sultry eyes. I walk further down the block, slow down, and retrace my steps back to the shop. "I knew you'd come back," she says—a useful phrase in their English kit.

The coconut oil massage on the menu sounds enticing. It's a small makeshift shop, with a single mattress on the floor and a pull curtain. Just as she knew I would be back, I know she has no need of the towel formality but goes directly to work on me naked, face down and then face up. She oils up my balls and cock and asks if I want the "special" massage. When they ask you it means you have to shell out extra for it. That defeats the purpose for me, indeed seriously detracts from the experience—interrupting the massage only to launch into new negotiations? I refuse the special service, as I routinely do. Thereupon the procedure becomes rather prudish. She pulls out a towel and drapes my groin with it, and returns to the rest of my body.

The massage is nonetheless intense—and the momentary dis-

ruption forgiven—for other reasons. There are fast oils and slow oils. Baby oil is a super-fast but ugly massage oil, with its thin and coarse, synthetic feel. Grape-seed oil is a good choice for a natural fast oil. Olive oil is a velvety-smooth medium-thickness oil. Coconut oil is thicker than most, and this results in a radically different sensation, an oil that to maintain traction slows the hands down almost to a standstill. Mindful of this, she goes slow and this forces her to go deep. She plows my flesh like fresh soil, or a blanket of snow. The oil soaks up my flesh the way a vacuum cleaner sucks up shag carpet.

There is another sort of materialist who at first glance might seem to bridge the gap between the chaste and erotic: the sensualist. The sensualist claims that there is only one kind of massage, namely *sensual* or *sensuous* massage (take your pick and coo into the word); that there is essentially no difference between therapeutic and sensual massage; that therapeutic massage should be sensual and vice versa. And since the therapeutic and the sensual come together as one, like Yin and Yang, they are actually one, only their style is different. The physical therapist massages you in a therapeutic manner, the massage therapist in a sensual manner. The result is the same, though you're liable to prefer the candles, aroma oils and soft music of the sensual massage to the more vigorous procedure of the therapeutic massage.

There's a whole literature, an industry, of "sensual massage" books, spawned by Gordon Inkeles' 1972 classic, *The Art of Sensual Massage*. And there is something to be said for that book, the first of its type, with its hormone-sprayed pictures of glistening naked hippie flesh. The innumerable copycat publica-

Those who have a stake in the polite massage business of bodywork centers, New Age spas, aromatherapy, "Sensual Massage" coffee-table books with airbrushed bodies, and the like, need not read further. People who own cars are not in a moral position to propound on massage etiquette anyway.

tions that have followed in its wake are cheesy and priggish by comparison—the over-saturated hues, the manicured nudity with the genitals tastefully hidden, the persnickety avoidance of anything that could be construed as indelicate on the bourgeois coffee table. True, there is the occasional renegade publication that devotes a final page or two to “erotic massage”—strictly for loving couples, of course, and always at the very end of the session, the icing on the cake. I imagine the real audience for these books is the frustrated housewife trying to re-inject sexual spark into her marriage, failing to realize that the last person her husband wants to be massaged by is her. But what you will not see even in the most radical of these renegade publications is someone’s erect penis or naturally lubricated vagina, still less a hand stimulating the same for the purpose of illustrating erotic techniques. Oh no, that would be crossing the line!

The problem with how-to books on massage is that they reduce an art to a procedure, or worse, a list, a manual. Massage should really be taught like Zen, where the rules must be invented afresh each time. A calligraphy for the body.

Here we arrive at the crux of the matter. The absence in “sensual” massage books of real erotic massage, the widespread taboo or illegality of sexual touching in commercial therapeutic massage, and the strict compartmentalization of sex generally in conventional relationships, has resulted in a deep distortion of the practice, leaving it perpetually split, fissured, schizophrenic. There is not a single massage that does not proceed from this binary rupture. Every stroke is a stroke of avoidance, a tiptoeing of the fingers around hazard zones in the body’s minefield. Whether “therapeutic” or “sensual,” massage in our time is defined more by what it is not than by what it might or should be. *Sensuous* is a synonym for *nervous*, referring to whatever is drawn to but recoils and pulls back, scandalized, at the sexual. The New Age therapist may pretend to a more fluid embrace of opposites, a squiggly rather than a straight line, in-

viting black and white to cuddle like Yin and Yang. Yet under no circumstances may the sensual cross over into the sexual. However sensuous and curvy, Yin/Yang is still as cleanly cloven and sharply dichotomized as night and day. It's still black and white. Indeed there is no better emblem of the binary logic with which we organize our experience, our incessant need to divide everything into opposites, into what is acceptable from what is not, the moral from the immoral, the domesticated from the deviant, the legal from the illegal, the chaste from the erotic.

Near my hotel off Pattaya's Walking Street is another little lair of a shop, a shack almost, squeezed between a tailor and a lottery seller and easy to miss, as is the sole unremarkable woman in her forties sitting out front but for her relaxed mien that only I seem to notice, more alluring to me than the usual aggressive ladies in their twenties and thirties fighting for our attention. I grow more intrigued with each pass, by this parlor's very obscurity, and decide to reserve my last slot on my last day in the city for her on a hunch she might be good. In the front section her kid is crouched over a TV, in the back their bed; a rickety massage table is wedged in the middle and isolated by a pull curtain. She covers my ass with a towel and tucks it securely between my legs. The treatment is competent and thorough but thoroughly non-sexual. When it's time to turn over she holds up the towel to shield me from her view before repeating her finicky draping procedure so as to demarcate all the hazard zones and give them a wide berth. These zones are in utter agony from the neglect they are receiving. It's hard to explain this paradox. It's not so much my genitals that are begging for attention as the hot zone around them. It's clear by this point that no erotic massage, to say nothing of a happy ending, will be forthcoming. I have already sharply curtailed my expectations. I just want her to inch a bit further

into the edges of the hot zone and relieve the unbearable tension, the gnawing itch that worsens the more she avoids it.

With only a few minutes left in the massage I ask if she can do me just a bit more on the inner thighs where they join at the butt, if she doesn't mind, and the upper parts of my pelvis around the pubic hair, anywhere, any opening I can compel her closer in by ruse. Surprisingly she obliges and digs deeper, dramatically altering the massage, as if erotic torture is now revealed to be her specialty and not until she has me pinned against the wall begging for relief can she get off herself and release me into orgasmic rebound. Before I know it, my cock is sticking out of the towel as she works me under the balls. When she gathers my shaft in her fingers, she hardly has to pump me. I pop almost instantly. It's mind-blowing. She doesn't ask for a tip.

The difference between massage as a science and massage as an art is that with the former you know exactly what you're getting, whereas with the latter you don't. This is acceptable on a museum wall or in a theater, perhaps, but on the body? Too terrifying to contemplate for most.

To wrap up. Those of you who think “massage me” means “masturbate me” need to get a life. It is a highly skilled art; too bad you don't get art either. And grow some patience while you're at it. The most explosive massage is not the handjob but the massage that keeps you guessing. You need to train your spoiled dick in the art of torment, to have it merely brushed against or grazed rather grabbed, or exposed rather than touched, intentionally or accidentally. You need to experience the rush of endorphins from a strong deep-tissue back massage, or a reflexology treatment on your feet, caressing your toes as if they were nipples, or your chest worked like boobs. If you still don't get it, I can't explain further. I can't address the poverty of the imagination.

And those of you who think sex has no place in massage need to get down off your sanctimonious soapbox. Have a

drink. Smoke a spliff. Do whatever you need to do to unbend, be human and *relax*. The sexual cannot be extricated from the sensual, nor should it. Learn to cross the divide into the gray wonderland where the Yin and Yang come apart and the chaste and the erotic leak into each other. There is always an undercurrent of sexual Chi that gets aroused with the simplest stroking, whether or not the giver and receiver are intent on this or even aware of it. Learn to eroticize massage to varying degrees tailored to the circumstances but also to test the limits, whether through direct genital manipulation and relief, or mere genital teasing, or the simple acknowledgment of the sexual through the quality and intensity of the stroking throughout the body.