

Affectionately named "The Rack," this stroke elongates the spine, stretching and pulling between T-1 and L-5 with even pressure and rocking.



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take
a
walk
on
your
client

ASHIATSU ORIENTAL BAR THERAPY HELPS BOTH CLIENT AND THERAPIST

By Juliet Bourne



fter a day of intense massage work, Ruthie Piper Hardee nearly cried when the last client of the day walked into her “body-work office” on movie

location for Tri-Star Pictures almost a decade ago. At 250-plus pounds, this stunt man needed and asked for the deep tissue work for which Hardee was known. With the pain in her wrists and thumbs persisting and being “completely out of juice,” Hardee knew she couldn’t deliver what this client needed. Still, she tried to offer the last of bit of energy her worn-out hands could offer. It was then, in a moment of ingenuity, that Hardee instinctively hopped on the client’s back, supported herself with the metal beams overhead and began using her feet to give the deep work this client desired.

Afterward, when the huge stunt man proclaimed that was the best massage he’d ever had, Hardee knew she’d hit upon a solution to an occupational hazard many bodyworkers face – physical pain and overuse injuries. As massage therapists well know, alleviating the pain of others often creates pain for the therapist and forces many out of the business they love because their bodies can’t sustain the daily rigors.

After giving that deep tissue massage – applying acupressure with her feet more than her hands – Hardee began developing Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy.[®]

After a short television piece about Hardee was broadcast in Denver, Colo. last year, the news station’s switchboard “lit up like a Christmas tree.” Many of the callers were massage therapists who, like Hardee, were plagued with aching wrists and thumbs and wanted to learn how to put their feet to work. Other callers were sufferers of low back pain, longing for massage that would go deeply into their sore muscles. That’s exactly what makes Hardee’s brand of ashatsu successful as it relieves both the therapist and the client.

Mary McCollum, a retired Denver school teacher who’s now a massage therapist, called Hardee “an artist” at massage. “I’ve had a lot of bodywork and nothing was quite like this. I was totally

impressed by the foot work. It’s like a dance that she does,” McCollum said.

What Is It?

For her Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, Hardee combines what she’s found to be the best elements of traditional Thai massage, barefoot shiatsu from Japan, and Keralite massage from southern India. She balances on her clients’ backs, using different foot strokes to apply pressure on strategic points along the muscles, supporting herself by hanging onto wooden rods suspended from the ceiling in her studio. Her feet create a “push, pull, pumping” effect on the intervertebral disc space. “I’m basically elongating the spine,” she said.

Hardee explained that ashatsu is an ancient form of bodywork using the feet to bring about a structural change to chronic soft tissue damage, while providing complete relaxation to the client. In Hardee’s vision of ashatsu, she applies deep, soothing strokes to all muscles of the back, using hand and foot pressure to “milk” the muscles, open chakras (energy patterns throughout the body), release toxins and stimulate the body’s own self-healing capabilities. She said her clients experience improved posture, movement and bodily functions; pain relief; and a state of well-being. Therapists she has trained say not only do their clients love the technique, but their own bodies feel better.

“I know my body couldn’t have taken many more years of deep work and now I can honestly say I’ll be able to continue being a practitioner for years to come thanks to my ashatsu training,” said Kathy Parker, of Castle Rock, Colo. She said her clients with lower back problems all have felt a looser, more open feeling in their backs, and now prefer her feet to her hands.

The Beginning

The long road to where Hardee is today in massage therapy began when she was just a little girl traveling in Thailand with her family. Her father, Dr. Howard Hardee, was a missionary and medical doctor who specialized in

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Here, Hardee uses her heel with flowing deep pressure along the gluteus medius, maximus, iliotibial tract and tensor fascia latae.



Everting the foot enables the therapist to work the vertebral border and infraspinous fossa.



Utilizing one foot at a time, Hardee moves down the erectors.

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tropical medicine. Her mother, Ruth Piper Hardee, was also a missionary and nurse who grew up in the Belgian Congo. In 1968, Ruthie Hardee, then 11, was staying with her family at the Manohra Hotel in downtown Bangkok. Like Madeleine at the Plaza, the young Hardee loved to explore every nook and cranny in the hotel. One day she passed a big glass window and the entrance to the hotel's health club and steam room. She walked in and peeked around. "What I saw that day would eventually come to change my life," Hardee said.

Inside she saw a diminutive Thai woman standing barefoot on a man's back. He was lying on a massage table, a towel draped over his backside, a peaceful expression on his face. The woman held onto a bamboo rod which was suspended from the ceiling as she massaged the man's back with her feet.

Hardee didn't even know what a massage was then, but she remembers being amazed and curious. It wasn't until 10 years later that the image popped back into her mind as she chatted with a friend on a chairlift at a Colorado ski resort. Hardee was a member of the ski patrol there – her first job after graduating from the University of Missouri. Her friend, a Vietnam veteran, described a massage he'd had in Saigon where a tiny therapist stepped onto his back after he asked for a deeper massage.

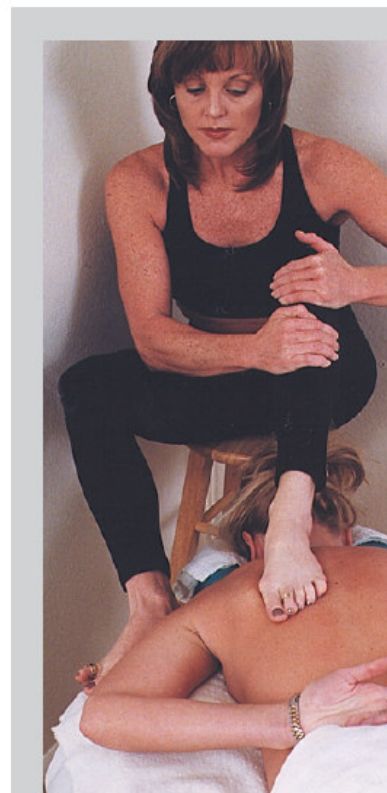
"He said it was the best massage he had ever had in his life and that he'd never been able to get one like it in the United States," Hardee remembered. "It got me thinking. My passion and ideas for Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy began to form that day. But I was still a long way from putting my ideas into action."

Hardee moved on. She wanted to see California and took off for Los

Angeles where she worked as a production assistant in film and television. The work was hard, the hours long, and she felt unappreciated – except when she'd go around the set rubbing tired backs here and there. The work was also sporadic, so Hardee decided to pursue massage school in nearby Santa Monica, planning to supplement her income doing massage during the entertainment industry's off-seasons. When she returned to the set as a certified massage therapist, Hardee soon found she could make more money giving massages than working as a production assistant and realized greater appreciation for her new line of work. Her secondary career soon became her primary one.

She built a clientele consisting mainly of professional athletes, stunt men and male actors, including a few stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sugar Ray Leonard. She gave massages on location, her massage table set up in a grip electrical truck with lighting and gaffing equipment all around. She hung sheets over the equipment and played soft music to create a soothing atmosphere for her clients. She began to get more work than she could handle. It was there the "beefy" stunt man put Hardee's physical capabilities to task and forced her to think of new ways to help her clients.

"I told him I had no more juice left in my hands and that I just didn't think I could do another deep tissue massage session," Hardee recalled of that day. "He begged me to work on him for just a little while and I gave in. As I poured every last ounce of energy and strength into my already hyperextended wrists and worn-out thumbs, I noticed directly above me a metal grid that was fastened to the inside roof of the truck. All of a sudden my brain was flooded with memories of Bangkok and my



This foot work allows for attention to the scapula from a seated position.

friend's story about his Saigon massage. I thought for a moment, 'What if I could climb up on his back, hold onto that grid and do with my feet what those Asian women did?' It would give him the deep pressure he wanted and I could work another hour with no problem. That's exactly what I did and after a few minutes of getting my weight balanced and with the help of my upper arm strength, I began to flow up and down his back muscles with foot pressure. It came so naturally and with such an intuitive feeling of being safe and right that I couldn't believe more therapists weren't doing this – but then again, what was this? This was my first experience of what would later become a massage modality that I love to share with others."



Acupressure with the heels covers all of the levator scapula, rhomboids and upper trapezius.



Using the seated position, Hardee uses her heel to cover the vertebral border and infraspinous fossa.

Learning From Personal Pain



Hardee credits her ability to relate to people with lower lumbar pain because she suffered with it herself. During her first two years as a massage therapist, Hardee discovered she had scoliosis and bulging disks at L3, L4 and L5. Doctors said she was probably born with the condition, but didn't notice it because of her active lifestyle. Due to the significance of the curve, an orthopedic surgeon told her she would probably experience pain the rest of her life and advised her that continuing to work as a massage therapist would aggravate the condition.

As there was no root impingement, surgery wasn't recommended. Hardee wasn't willing to give up the work she'd only just found.

"The constant leaning over the massage table doing deep tissue work, day in and day out, coupled with my lumbar situation, was just the right formula for sending excruciating sciatic pain down my back, hamstrings and lower calves. Utilizing proper body mechanics at my table and a daily yoga workout didn't help alleviate my pain," Hardee said. "Aside from my back problems, my ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) on both thumbs were shot from thousands of hours of circular friction on my clients. I developed nerve damage in my right arm from all the pushing

using my elbow up and down erector spinae. Also, I developed carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) in my right arm from constant wrist hyperextension. Again, I was trying to give my typical 6'2, 230-pound male clients the deep tissue work they paid for and expected. Unfortunately I was beating myself up while making them feel so wonderful."

Trying to give her hands a break, Hardee said she became a "continuing education junkie," searching for any modality that would teach her how to get away from the continuous deep effleurage and pressure of using the hands. She trained in different types of energy work, positional release, reflexology, Jin Shin Do and more. But each new technique she tried disappointed her clients. They wanted the steady flow of having their muscles "milked." She began to look to the Asian side of the world in her quest for some method of using the feet like she had seen in Thailand. Ashiatsu Massage Oriental Bar Therapy was in its embryo stage in her mind.

When family ties brought her back to her native Tampa, Fla., Hardee took a 100-hour course in Thai massage. She found using pressure on energy points, working on a floor mat and the systematic structure of yogic exercises performed by the therapist and client to be "a powerful and amazing technique, but I found that I was constantly bending over. And the up and down was not helping my back." She then read *Barefoot Shiatsu*¹ by Shizuko Yamamoto, a small section of which was devoted to applying foot pressure on the muscles of the back.

"I was so excited to read about her method of using the feet," Hardee said, "but using a chair for balance as recommended created tremendous pressure against my already hyperextended wrists."

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Another problem for Hardee was that most mat work requires the client's head to be turned. Hardee didn't want the cervical area [C1-C6] to be twisted where it connects with T1. She was determined to figure out a way for using her feet while her clients could relax on a comfortable, padded massage table, face down in the headrest, under warm heated sheets in a position where the spine would be completely straight. Her search led her to read *One Rope, Two Feet and Healing Oils* by Harald Brust and Prabhat Menon. The book focuses on Chavutti Thirummal², the ancient art of Keralite massage developed in the state of Kerala in India. Chavutti Thirummal involves massaging the body with healing oils and is administered with the

therapist massaging another's back with his feet while holding onto a long rope for balance. It is a tough, deep form of massage that provides maximum relief to the patient.

It was finally combining the best of these various styles that brought Hardee to Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy.

Medical Interests



Dr. Mark McDonough, Division of Plastic Surgery at the University of South Florida, is one of the doctors who enthusiastically recommended Hardee for certification and recognition by the National Certification Board of Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB) and other

professional organizations. McDonough, who is also a physical therapist, describes chronic myofascial pain as a cycle between the initial pathological insult (decreased facet joint mobility with or without muscle strain) and resultant muscle shortenings, and decreased flexibility.

"Ashiatsu is a safe technique allowing the therapist to apply graduated deep pressure to chronically shortened muscles," McDonough said. "This in turn increases spinal muscle flexibility, breaking the cycle and restoring range of motion. Because of her precise footwork and knowledge of balanced pressure, Ruthie poses no threat to the spinal column or surrounding soft tissue."


Florida Doctor of Chiropractic Jeff Beytin is convinced Hardee's tech-

nique will enhance massage therapists' skills in deep tissue work, and enable them to deliver hours of deep work while still protecting their well-being. Massage therapists often come to him complaining about practitioner burnout.

"The constant overuse of their lower backs, wrists and thumbs is a major concern of mine since I am a strong advocate of preventative health care through the use of correct body posture by the therapist," Beytin reports. "Ruthie's knowledge and research of this ancient form of Oriental bodywork is outstanding and truly a wonderful adjunct to the routine of any massage therapist who specializes in deep tissue repair."

In addition to the work Hardee has undergone to certify her work, she has been creating relationships with spas interested in this new look at an

ancient therapy. Noting the tough working conditions many therapists in spa settings undergo, Hardee is eager to bring them her work "I know what it's like to be a work horse in a cattle call," said Hardee. "Learning my method will take precious hours off overworked hands and keep fatigue at a minimum."

Hardee sends a word of caution to people considering getting an ashiatsu massage. "There are some therapists out there doing back-walking just because they saw it in a James Bond or Bruce Lee movie. Make sure your therapist has had formal training and specific study of the spinal column nerves and lumbo sacral muscles before letting anybody jump up on your back." 

Footnotes

- 1 Yamamoto, Shizuko, *Barefoot Shiatsu* (Avery, 1998).
- 2 Menon, Prabhat and Asokananda, Brust, Harald, *One Rope, Two Feet and Healing Oils* Editions (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1999).

Ruthie Hardee has been practicing massage therapy since 1991. She is a category A provider and her Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy® course has been approved for 24 continuing education units by the NCBTMB. She is state board-certified in Florida and Texas, registered in Colorado, holds current licenses in all three states, and is a private educational trainer recognized by the Colorado Division of Private Occupational Schools of Higher Education. Hardee is the founder and author of Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy and is its only instructor in the United States. She travels around the country offering state-approved training seminars and has certified therapists from Florida to New Hampshire to Colorado, where she now lives and operates her training center. A second training facility recently opened in Tampa, Fla. For more information on her technique and seminar dates, visit her Web site at www.bc-city.com/deepfeet; e-mail her at Deepfeet@msn.com; or telephone 303/300-2511.

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