

# Happy Hour at the Bar

# Ashi-Thai

by Ruthie Hardee

**Y**ou're invited to a top-notch bar—one that serves no alcohol. This bar provides a popular support system for massage therapists who have become physically burned out in the way they deliver massage techniques.

As the founder of the barefoot massage technique Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy®, every aspect of better posture and movement for me changed when I stepped up to the bar more than two decades ago and started using my feet for all my deep, Swedish effleurage.

Even today, it's difficult to persuade me to come down off the bars and stand on the floor to deliver massage with my hands. I admit it, my lower lumbar is spoiled rotten because I no longer lean forward or bend at the waist to generate any kind of pressure for my clients. And believe me, their number-one request during a session is, "You can go deeper."

## What is Ashi-Thai?

Before Ashi-Thai® progressed into its own therapy, close cousin Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy



COURTESY OF RUTHIE HARDEE

had been resonating with therapists all over the world since 1995. We have attracted many practitioners who specialized in everything from Rolwing® to Thai massage. The common complaint in every classroom was mention of hand pain associated with delivering deep-tissue compression with wrists, fingers and palms. There is an army of no-hands articles out there, all claiming to change the way you work forever. But I ask you, if you're still using your hands, then why do they call it a no-hands technique?

This article introduces a new and innovative, rhythmic approach to delivering various traditional Thai exercises and movements without the use of hands: Ashi-Thai. With a splash of isolated stretching and a dash of Zen, this unique alternative to Thai yoga or Table Thai is making its way into the scene of modalities for people who want to work smarter, not harder.

Ashi-Thai is a mixture and expression of traditional Thai moves that have been modified to use with overhead bars. The technique is performed fully clothed without any lubrication. The client's head is firmly centered in a face cradle headrest for both prone and supine protocols. The therapist uses her hips, legs, ankles and feet to lift the client's limbs or body into any positions for stretching or compression—and every move is executed with flow and rhythm standing straight up.

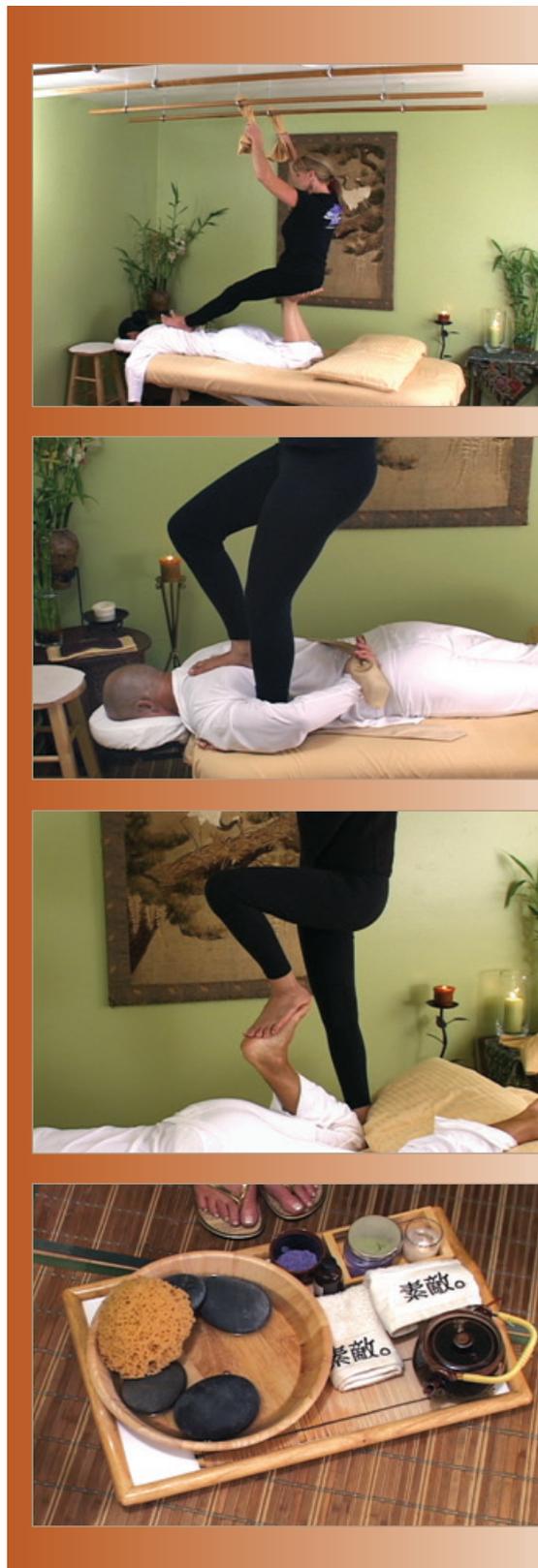
In the Japanese dictionary, the root word *ashi* means foot and *atsu* means pressure. The two words together symbolize foot pressure and thus became included in the idea for the trade name, Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy.

Having lived with hereditary scoliosis and lumbar disk protrusion, I tend to gravitate toward diagonal stretching and forms of therapy that focus on elongating my chronically shortened muscles. Aside from a deep, relaxing Ashiatsu session, my next favorite massage to receive has always been Thai work. When I'm in that zone of Thai rhythm compressions and stretches, my brain waves are thinking, "Too much of a good thing is fabulous."

## Avoid burnout

The "ah-ha" moment to develop Ashi-Thai came to me in two different whispers: one from many student requests and the other from my personal addiction to receiving Thai work.

Over the years, many certified Thai practitioners have walked through our classroom doors to study the Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy technique. Interestingly, one out of two would complain their hands and wrists were burned out from years of traditional palm walking.



COURTESY OF RUTHIE HARDEE

They longed to perform their favorite Thai sequences without using their hands, knees or torso for compression and wanted to be up off the floor. They longed to explore alternatives to traditional Thai methodologies for lifting and for balance, especially when it came to larger clients.

In the past, I did trades with a fellow Ashiatsu graduate who happened to be certified in northern Thai bodywork. It was during those sessions that the Ashi-Thai technique resolutions and ideas were formalized.

While I love receiving Thai massage techniques, I would start to feel guilty about 20 minutes into each session because I saw my colleague work so hard to lift and bend my body in various ways. As she would crawl around the futon bending her back and knees to make me feel wonderful, I had to refrain from saying, "You can go deeper" or "You can stretch further," even though I longed for deeper work. It was painful to keep my head on the floor mat turned to either side for long periods of time. When we tried to incorporate a face cradle on the mat, my mouth and lips basically made contact with sheets and sometimes carpet fibers.

Lying there while the stretching was performed, brain

This conclusion stems from my educational insights into the study of the Atlas Orthogonal technique, as well as my own uncomfortable experiences in past Thai sessions. The only exception to turning the head is when the actual scalene and cervical work is performed.

The start of any Ashiatsu or Ashi-Thai barefoot session should be done with clean, warm feet. Cold feet are a deal breaker and will ruin any session. We wouldn't want icy cold hands to be the first touch or impression our client experiences, and it's no different with barefoot massage. There are many fast and easy ways to warm up the feet before a session. Hot stones from a nearby roaster or microwavable hot packs are a practical source. However, the Ashi-Thai foot cleansing ceremony for both client and practitioner has become a favorite beginning to a session. The presentation of the tray is visually appealing and creates excitement for what's to come. If you enjoy selling products to your clients, make sure to incorporate your favorite candles, aromatherapy oils and salts into the ceremony.

There are more than a dozen varieties of Thai massage. Many organizations have noticed the popularity of Thai massage and created new approaches and forms of

## While many principles of Thai massage go hand in foot with the Ashi Thai adaptation, there are some differences as well.

waves started to formulate new concepts for helping Thai therapists go deeper and further without pushing their bodies to the limit. After a year of combing respectable vignettes of Thai principles and my perpetual search for easier, user-friendly body mechanics, Ashi-Thai was born. The technique has evolved into its own signature treatment and form.

### Modules

The Ashi-Thai program has been divided into two different modules: the posterior prone module and the anterior supine module. Both can inadvertently be switched from session to session and maintain constant fluidity in its application. Adjustments to traditional Thai moves have been modified to enhance the use of bars for leverage. The combination of techniques has been arranged to follow traditional energy lines. However, because Ashi-Thai is a Western adaptation, we refer to Zen lines as medial, center and lateral lines.

Ashi-Thai is designed for the client's head to remain straight in the headrest for both prone and supine work.

Traditional Thai standards. The blend of stretching and massage therapies has proven beneficial for many chronic conditions, including low-back pain, arthritis, bursitis, fatigue, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and more.

There are more than 200 variations of massage, bodywork and somatic therapies. I have no doubt that in years to come, Ashi-Thai will emerge as a respected and popular form of therapy, just as the barefoot bonanza took place with Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy when it was first introduced to the massage industry.

### Client benefits

Ashi-Thai has an amazing effect on stiff muscles and brings about better range of motion to the client. This is partly due to the fact that deep stretching takes place while the client experiences a dream-like state of vasodilatation.

The movements are liquid and fluid; it is actually quite intoxicating for others to watch an Ashi-Thai session being performed. We would not want to dismiss the beautiful wisdom and knowledge that goes into the teaching of traditional Thai massage as it is taught in Thailand. There

are differences between this Western version called Ashi-Thai and say, Northern Thai. Learning Thai massage at a young age is a common occurrence in Thailand, and this indigenous massage has been in the Thai culture and heritage for several centuries. Thai Massage focuses on muscles, ligaments, nerves, joints, as well as the *hara* and internal organs.

While many principles of Thai massage go hand in foot with our Western adaptation, we have some differences as well.

For example, in traditional Thai massage, the practitioner is asked to have a healthy body and a well-developed intuition. We, too, seek those qualities from all therapists participating in class—but in addition, we suggest they have a fitness level that includes balance, rhythm, grace and core-and-upper-arm strength, which will help them deliver the application as it was designed to be given.

### Step up to the bar

The next time you hear, “Step up to the bar” and you happen to be a massage therapist, you may want to consider using the bar as a beautiful prop to prolong your career.

Adding Ashiatsu and Ashi-Thai to your barefoot toolbox

of skills can not only increase the number of massages you do per day without pain, but it will offer a way for you to stand above the rest, when it comes to marketing to your client base.



Read a comparison of traditional Thai massage principles and Ashi-Thai principles, as well as contraindications, at [www.massagemag.com/ashithai](http://www.massagemag.com/ashithai).

Ruthie Hardee is CEO of Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy ([www.deepfeet.com](http://www.deepfeet.com)) and created the first nationally approved course study for Western barefoot effleurage using bars on the ceiling. Hardee pioneered the gravity-assisted barefoot-bar treatments used in today's spa and massage industry. She invented the Hardee-Ashiatsu Portable Bar apparatus, which is currently used worldwide. The courses are approved by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork. 

THE SHAPE OF COMFORT

Curve

Relax into luxury with gently conforming memory foam and a unique shape that offers more comfort than traditional facecradles.

**STRONGLITE**  
Professional Massage Tables  
since 1986

stronglite.com 800-289-5487