
Bamboo Massage: An ancient modality

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Bamboo Massage: An ancient modality

Introduction

When describing massage, one must understand that it is a natural, almost instinctive, therapeutic action performed automatically, even by children when they fall. In modern first aid the use of hand pressure is taught as means to reduce blood loss. Obviously, therapeutic massage is much more sophisticated and has documented historical roots thousands of years old found in several cultures including the Greco-romans, Chinese, East Asian Indian, and Native American, to name a few. These ancient roots and modern usage point to the universal applicability of hand touch and manipulation for many health related dimensions of human experience.

The ancient cultures developed sophisticated models and procedures for bring balance into the individual with the understanding that balance between the environment, the body, and the spirit was essential for health. Today's mind-body medicine likewise postulates a connection between physical illness and mental outlook. Within this broad model of health many methods of treatment are available from changing thought patterns through meditation to complex surgical and chemical manipulation. For most individuals, we will encounter a full range of these modalities throughout our lifetime. One might even view daily life habits as a constant way to maintain health, everything from proper sleep, diet, dental hygiene, and exercise. All the beneficial and harmful activities that an individual performs consciously and unconsciously result in what is commonly called a person's state of health.

To that end, many individuals choose to incorporate noninvasive forms of personal health care. Without question the increase use of natural health care is positively correlated to the desire of individual to prevent critical diseases from appearing. According to the National center for Complementary and Alternative medicine (NCCAM) about 38 percent of all adults use a CAM therapy of some type (<http://nccam.nih.gov/health/whatisacam>). Among those therapies available is massage therapy, and its many modalities. The list of massage modalities is extensive, including over 50 types of massage. Among the various types of modalities are a sub-group that use massage "tools." These tools may include stones, plasters, oils, wood of bamboo or rosewood, electronic stimulation, cupping devices, application of heat and/or cold, and other manipulatives.

The most common tools involve oils, and "hot" stones. Lesson common, but widely used, particularly in Asian based practices, are cupping devices and bamboo implements to effect greater muscle penetration. While the use of implements to aid in the process of massage is not uncommon, the use of specific tools by practitioners is limited to training and cultural background. Bamboo massage is a newer phenomenon in the West, but has a history associated with Asian practice. It was been suggest by Kapke (2004) that Asian Bodywork Therapies share three common criteria: They treat the whole human being through the agency of manual contact; they have a basis in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) principles and assessment; and they use traditional Asian techniques and protocols to bring about balance.

The Bamboo

The bamboo plant is native to many tropical parts of the world, but is dominate in Asia, where hundreds of species grow, even a rectangular variety. While there is a lack of information available about bamboo's use as a tool for massage, it is clearly evident that is has been used in all aspects of Chinese culture for thousands of years. "Long before paper was invented, the Chinese recorded their history on thin slivers of bamboo. In fact, the material was used in a multitude of ways, ranging from musical instruments to elaborate decorations, artwork, and even agricultural tools. Since bamboo was incorporated into so much of daily life, it wasn't long before it was used as a form of creative and spiritual expression, which quickly took on ritual and healing connotations" (Osorio).

The healing connotations of bamboo range from the practical application of massage, its use as a dietary supplement, to more abstract five element theory. Asian myths refer to bamboo symbolizing life energy, prosperity, longevity, sexuality, and fertility. In China, stalks of bamboo still symbolize eternal youth, strength, prosperity, and peace.

Bamboo massage is a technique that incorporates bamboo, or modified bamboo of varying lengths and diameters to provide different levels of tissue work. In fact, one may use the bamboo techniques with a variety of smooth woods. Often practitioners combine elements of shiatsu, traditional Chinese medicine (where bamboo cups or the ends of the stalks are used in specific ways), Thai massage, lymphatic drainage, and even Ayurveda into the technique, and sticks are sometimes heated or essential oils are incorporated into the massage. In Traditional Chinese theory, wood has the quality of growth, it generates fire and is involved in balancing the element of earth. Similar to all massages, the results include improved circulation, lymphatic drainage, a sense of relaxation and well-being. "An added benefit for the practitioner is that using the bamboo sticks helps to reduce stress and strain on hands and fingers while still allowing for deeply penetrating maneuvers" (Osorio). The latter should not be ignored, as regular bodywork by a massage therapist is physically demanding. Therapist often report feel "drained" at the end of the day due to the constant physical touch required. Having an insulating element, such as bamboo, and using its leverage eases the strain on the practitioner's body structure. In fact, the developer of Bamboo-Fusion in the United States, Nathalie Cecilia, was motivated by this very issue.

Bamboo Fusion

Many of her clients were requesting deep tissue treatments that caused her to begin to develop pain in her hands and wrists. "I was giving a Thai massage to one of my clients when the bamboo pole display on my wall caught my eye. My client was in the seated position when the idea came to me to use them to practice tapotement on his trapezius. He loved it" (Cecilia).

Cecilia's approach incorporates a large 12-inch bamboo stick that she uses to knead the muscles and do a crisscross technique that stretches the fascia in all directions. She also uses two short pieces of bamboo, cut in half, the size of her hand, to work more specifically in smaller areas, such as under the scapula. Her technique includes the use of oil or cream when doing a full-body massage on the table. She warms the bamboo

sticks in a special heating pad before using them on her clients. "The bamboo is easy to heat and clean, unlike with hot stones since there isn't a Crock-pot or water involved," she explains. "With the heating device I use, the bamboo stays warm and clients love the heat, especially in cold climates." What also distinguishes Cecilia's technique is that her bamboo sticks are custom-designed and made from bamboo and rattan, both ecological and sustainable resources. "The small wood pieces that I have cut in half are made with rattan [a climbing palm tree], since rattan is solid. They also fit easily in the palm of my hand, which makes it easy to apply deeper pressure. For the larger sticks, I use bamboo, which is a great tool to deliver long soothing strokes" (Cecilia).

Another bamboo massage advocate, Ernesto Ortiz, developer of Tian Di bamboo massage, discovered the potential of massage in an entirely different way!

When I was in Bali about two years ago, I was walking one early morning in Monkey Forest in the town of Ubud. Monkey Forest is a park, a temple and the habitat for hundreds of monkeys that roam free and wild. It was around 6:30 am and was no one there, just me and lots of monkeys. I noticed one of them rubbing a piece of bamboo against a stone. He was filing the rough edges and then... He started massaging his body with the stalk of bamboo!!!

My eyes opened so wide. But that is not all; another monkey came over, asking the one with the bamboo stick to work on him. He turned his back to him and bugged and bugged until the monkey with the stick started massaging him.

I said to myself, there is nothing more primal and natural than this! That vision stayed within me. And that was the original idea for the creation of the new style of massage. Tian Di Bamboo Massage, is a modality that I have been successfully practicing and instructing for more than a year (Ortiz).

The Tian Di Bamboo Massage technique is designed to incorporate an understanding of the Chinese 5-element theory into the modality. Another approach, Tian Di Bamboo Massage was developed by Ernesto Ortiz, LMT, CST, who studied at the Upledger Institute and now offers workshops worldwide. Ortiz incorporates principles from traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), specifically the Chinese five elements theory, in which the principles associated with wood, fire, earth, metal, and water are applied to the massage technique. The massage uses bamboo cut in different sizes and the bamboo sticks (called cho sticks in this technique) are also used as an extension of therapists' hands, forearms, and elbows, enabling them to work deeper and more effectively.

Integration of bamboo massage with MTMX

Integration of bamboo massage with Traditional Mexican medicine (MTMX) and specifically massage can be easily accomplished with some considerations of basic principles. These principles of the relationship between body, mind, and energy flow are well understood by practitioners of Chinese acupuncture. However the same relationships between the traditional acupuncture points and MTMX is notable. The now classic work, *Wind in the blood*, by Hernán García, Antonio Sierra, and Gilberto Balám (1999) clearly documents the correspondence between Mayan and traditional Chinese systems. At its most fundamental level, the "accu" is a point that may be stimulated by any force, physical and/or environmental. The stimulation effects a modification of the nerve carries which in turn affect specific organs or systems of organs.

Dr Rojas' (2012) analysis of the correspondence between the spinal vertebrae (somatomas) and nerves in the skin and organs (dermatomas) provides a clear picture of this relationship. Thus massage performed, for example, on the abdomen area has a spinal correspondence with thoracic vertebrae through the thoracic nerves. Likewise, applying pressure, substances, or needles to these areas creates a corresponding stimulus. In MTMX the theory of balance was equally important. TCM also recognized the correspondence between the nerve system and related organs.

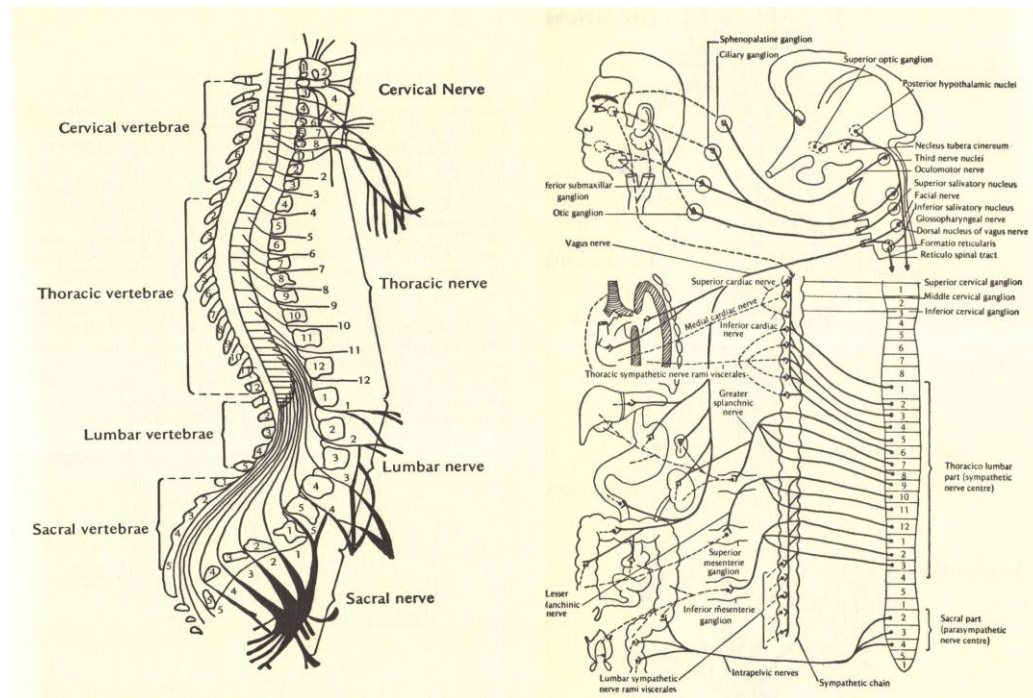


Diagram of spinal nerves and correspondence to internal organs. The complete book of acupuncture. Dr. Stephan Chang. 1976. Celestial Arts.

The classification of Mexican massage techniques is divided into three categories (Rojas): body massage for alleviating physical ailments, mental or psychic massage for addressing conscious and sub-conscious issues associated with the individual soul, and energy massage for attending to the spiritual or energetic levels of the individual. While bamboo massage may play a role in any of the three categories, it is principally concerned with the physical and energetic levels of the individual. The "Malinalli" represents the center of the directions and is associated with the navel of each individual. It is from this center point that the life energies (qi) flow into or out of our bodies. "Como en el universo, las fuerzas del cielo y la tierra se comunicaban por la vía de malinalli, en el ombligo" (Rojas).

Integrating the movements of the bamboo massage with the general movements of Mexican therapeutic massage is accomplished naturally. There are eight principle directional movements in Mexican massage plus reflexology. The first pair of movements is circular, consisting of a counter-clockwise circle around the navel (yin) for

dispersal and a clockwise movement for stimulation. This is accomplished using the shorter small bamboo sticks in the palm of the hand.



Bamboo tools

The second pair of movements is spiraling into or out from the navel. The counter-clockwise yin movement is always associated with a dispersion of energy, while the clockwise yang movement is associated with stimulation or augmentation of energy. Again, these smaller spiral movements are best accomplished with the short bamboo sticks placed in the palm of the hand.



Bamboo positioning for circle and spiraling

The third pair of movements is called the small cross. The cross intersection begins or ends at the navel, with either a movement outward from the navel (yin) or a movement inward towards the navel (yang). The first yin movement begins at the navel with movements upward towards the upper abdomen and downward towards the pubis. The next part of the yin small cross begins at the navel and flows outward left and right towards the spinal column. The yang small cross begins at the upper abdomen and pubis and joins at the navel; the second movement begins at the spine and flows towards the navel from the right and left.

Images: The small cross:





The fourth pair is called the large cross. Like the small cross, the intersection begins or ends at the navel, with either a movement outward from the navel (yin) or a movement inward towards the navel (yang). The first yin movement begins at the navel with movements upward towards the upper abdomen and downward towards the pubis but then moves down the arms or legs respectively towards the hands and feet. The movement is towards the extremities. The yang large cross begins at the hands and feet and moves up towards the navel. The movement is inward, towards the navel. These movements are repeated several times. The large cross movements can be best managed with the small or large bamboo sticks.

Images: Two bamboo techniques for large cross movements:





Reflexology performed on the feet can take many forms. In general warm elements of bamboo can be used to provide an even pressure with the longitudinal surface of the bamboo or the ends can be used to focus the pressure and circular movements. Mexican reflexology, using the "olote" is an ancient version of this therapy as is the application of warm herbs and even stones wrapped in towels.

Images: Various foot reflexology therapy techniques



Prior to and after each massage it is recommended to practice some form of physical and spiritual cleansing. The physical cleaning is as simple as washing the hands and being sure that the tools are free from any harmful or irritating substances. The spiritual cleansing can take many forms depending upon the practitioner's preference, but my experience leads me to suggest qigong. The spiritual cleansing will reenergize and balance the therapist so that she or he may continue working without fatigue and draining energy. The use of a tool, such as the bamboo, also creates an insulating barrier between the patient and the therapist.

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