

RELAXATION

## Robert Wootton returns to Athens to teach an ancient art



Robert Wootton, a native of Oconee County, performs a Thai massage, which allows the client to be completely clothed as the practitioner takes her through a series of stretches. Thai massage, also called Thai bodywork or Nuat Boran, is an ancient practice Wootton learned in Thailand in the 1970s.

Dinne Cebula/Staff

# Spiritual traditions

By Julie Phillips

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With his hands, Robert Wootton offers healing. With his words, he, speaks peace. And in his actions, he encourages acceptance.

A massage therapist living in Asheville, Wootton grew up in Oconee County. At the age of 24, he became a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and in fulfilling his alternative service, went to Thailand as a teacher for six years - though he was also a student. His time there informs his life today: his practice of Thai massage learned from Thai masters, his hope for peace in the world no less present than it was then.

Wootton returns to the area often, regularly visiting his 91-year-old mother, who benefits from his Thai massage work on her pained and aging body.

"It helps her sleep," he says, adding he usually works on her in the evenings, though she may request it several times a day during his visits, depending on how she feels. He says the massage can bring her blood pressure down 20 points within 10 minutes.

In bringing his work home, Wootton shares his technique with others as well - he periodically teaches Thai massage workshops in Athens and will teach one this weekend at Earthsong. Anyone can learn, he says, though it helps to have some background in body work (licensing laws for massage therapists vary from state to state).

"I think of (Thai massage) as a framework," Wootton says, "and you can certainly use other techniques. But I like it because it uses touch and works with muscles and movement, and feels more complete than touch without movement," he says in comparing Thai to other massage techniques.

The movement he refers to is a series of stretches the therapist moves the client into during the course of the massage.

Starting at the feet, a Thai massage works its way up to the head in a rhythmic flow of touch by the therapist, who, along the way moves the patient through stretches in the legs, arms and back. For this reason, Wootton says, Thai massage is often confused in name as Thai yoga. The technique actually has several names in the West, among them Thai bodywork - aside from the Thai name, Nuat Boran.

Thai massage differs from Swedish massage in part because the client is fully clothed and goes through supine, side-lying, prone and sitting positions. The end result can be as energizing as it is relaxing, as it releases blockages in the body's natural flow of energy.

Wootton trained with several different masters, studying extensively with three who each used different styles. His first teacher was especially forceful and deep while the next used such light touch, "By contrast, at first I didn't think he was doing anything," Wootton says.

Practicing since 1988, Wootton has found his own way of working: "I find that through my devotion to my own meditative practices that it's possible to have a deep effect (on a client) without using deep pressure, through my own breath and the meditations." This, he adds, has allowed him the ability to work on many different body types.

The meditative and spiritual aspect of the practitioner, he says, is especially important to him.

"In Thailand, it (was originally) carried out in Buddhist monasteries where the virtues of respect, compassion and generosity were incorporated into the way of doing the massage," he says. "It's a meditative practice of opening the heart and sending out loving kindness and the energy of healing to others."

Wootton embraces this practice in his work, though it colors his outlook on the world as well. Conscientious objection, he notes, is a spiritual position, and was his choice after finishing his classes as a student at Florida Presbyterian, where he attended college and learned about a number of different cultures and religious practices.

It's based on spiritual wisdom rather than conventional wisdom," he says of conscientious objection. "Conventional wisdom says you have to meet force with force, and the only way to achieve something is through violence .... But spiritual wisdom has always been that compassion and love are the strongest forces."

The means to peace, he says, is making it the process. "It may be an Asian way of doing things to focus on the process without being anxious about the end result," Wootton says. "But I believe peace has to be the means to doing anything. The process to peace has to be peace itself."

In college, Wootton says, he learned about many different religions and cultures, which also carries over to his work today and his interest in interfaith dialogue. Working with both Christian and Buddhist principals, he says he ultimately wants to "get away from labels, because labels are what divide us and cause hatred and war."

He'll lead another workshop in Athens in October, this one on mindfulness, incorporating practices from the spiritual traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American and Christianity.

"The process for me," Wootton adds of his own spiritual practice, "is expansion, in finding that there is wisdom in all spiritual traditions. The core teachings are very similar and the different styles are beautiful. We find beauty in different music and languages and cultures," he says, noting it's perhaps fear that leads us to treat religion differently. "At our core, we are all humans. And we all respond to love."

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