A photograph of a woman with dark curly hair lying on her side on a massage table, eyes closed in a state of relaxation. A therapist's hands are visible, one resting on her shoulder and another on her back. The background is a bright, out-of-focus window. A teal curved banner is at the top.

spa a la carte

Ancient Energy Massage

By Katherine Stewart

In a small parlor in New York City, I found and fell in love with the ancient healing technique of Amma massage.

I DIDN'T HAVE A NAME FOR IT BACK THEN. I JUST KNEW IT FELT GOOD. When the stress of New York City got to be too much, I'd head to the Lower East Side, to Chinatown, for yet another dose. There, in a humble storefront massage parlor, I'd lie fully clothed on a table while a woman who spoke no English massaged my back, neck, and extremities with a delightfully vigorous and rhythmic finger-point technique. At the time, I assumed this style of massage was simply her marvelous invention. She was my urban angel, smoothing my jagged edges week after week.

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early two years ago, when I abandoned New York for the West Coast, I missed that wonderful masseuse and her ingenious technique almost more than the city itself. I also despaired of experiencing her unique brand of bodywork never again. That is, until one day last fall when I had the good fortune to walk through the doors of San Francisco's Kabuki Springs & Spa.

A study in earth tones and teak, with a menu that tilts to the Far East, Kabuki Springs & Spa is located in San Francisco's historic Japantown district. I had come to research an article about Amma massage, the ancient form of Eastern bodywork that I then believed I had never experienced. But I was in for a surprise. Colette, my Amma therapist, worked with the same elegantly choreographed movements and the same rhythmic precision as my beloved Chinatown masseuse. Starting with my upper back, she kneaded and pressed her way along energy meridians, pausing to stretch my limbs with graceful adroitness. By session's end, I felt as light as air. It was as if I'd spent a long weekend at a spa, rather than a mere fifty minutes on Colette's table.

Amma massage is more than 4,000-years-old. Amma, meaning push-pull and sometimes spelled as "anma" or "anmo," is the oldest Chinese word used to describe massage. Amma's Taoist philosophy of healing dates back to the ancient Chinese medical text, *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* (2697–2597 B.C.). Like many traditional Asian massage therapies, it is based on the principles of Chinese medicine and the idea of *Qi* (pronounced "chi"), or life-force energy that flows through the body. As Amma developed, it spread through Southeast Asia, taking different expressions in Japan and Korea and becoming further refined into therapeutic art forms.

Through "*kata*," or choreographed movement, Amma demonstrates the value of rhythm, pacing, and precision in massage. The series of pressure techniques and percussive manipulations is performed along the body's fourteen major energy meridians. The aim is to restore and promote health by removing energy blockages.


Amma also increases circulation, improves flexibility of joints and soft tissue, circulates and drains lymphatic fluid, and strengthens the immune system.

As with Shiatsu, perhaps a better known form of Japanese massage, Amma is performed fully clothed. But no one who has experienced both types of massage would confuse the two. Amma is faster in tempo, and its rhythmic sequences feel as well-choreographed as a martial art.

"Qi moves very quickly," says Rylen Feeney, a certified Amma instructor and the founder of the Wellspring School for Healing Arts in Boise, Idaho. "With an Amma massage, some of that briskness, that rhythm, is at the level of the qi moving in the body. That's one of the reasons why after an Amma treatment people report feeling alert and energized."

Although presently offered in only a few American spas, like many ancient therapies, Amma is ripe for rediscovery. Leading the pack is the Santa Fe, New Mexico-based Ten Thousand Waves, a Japanese-inspired destination spa with a day-spa component. At present, their popular "Nose to Toes" treatment includes an Amma foot massage. Ten Thousand Waves is currently training their entire staff in full-body Amma massage techniques, and they plan to introduce an Amma-based facial to their menu this summer.

"Amma is incredibly therapeutic and invigorating," notes Courtney Morris, director of the therapy department at Ten Thousand Waves, "and this is the direction of our treatment development. It's important that we offer our clients Amma in its true form, giving them an experience that they could get in Japan without actually having to go to Japan."

Indeed, Amma lovers don't even need to leave the airport—at least, if they happen to be in Paris. At the Air France terminal lounge at the Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport, the on-site Clarins spa offers complementary ten-minute Amma massages, bringing the ancient art to a new generation of frequent fliers. Now that's traveling light! 

SPAS OFFERING AMMA MASSAGE

Ten Thousand Waves

Santa Fe, NM
(505) 982-9304
www.tenthousandwaves.com

The Greenporter

Greenport, NY
(631) 477-0066
www.thegreenporter.com

Kabuki Springs & Spa

San Francisco, CA
(415) 922-6000
www.kabukisprings.com

The Miyako Inn and Spa

Los Angeles, CA
(213) 617-0004
www.miyakoinn.com

Gurney's Inn Resort, Spa, & Conference Center

Montauk, NY
(631) 668-2345
www.gurneysinn.com

Delta Sherbrooke Hotel

Sherbrooke, Quebec
(888) 890-3222
www.deltahotels.com