

Massage Tools Through the Ages – Hot Stones and Other Massage Therapy Tools

By Eliana Trinaistic

Massage and other forms of hands-on healing therapies have been part of human culture for thousands of years. The use of myriad massage tools as extensions or supplements to the use of hands, as well as to enhance the massage experience, is also an ancient practice.

Herbs, flowers, crystals and stones are examples of some of the earliest massage tools. The late Robert Noah Calvert, founder of *Massage Magazine* and author of *The History of Massage*, wrote that the "oldest massage tool yet to be discovered is supposedly a Neolithic jade ritual blade from the Longshan culture of China, dating back to the Shang dynasty (circa 2000-1500 B.C.E.). The stone is believed to have been used either hot or cold for placing on tired and sore muscles".

But even a thousand years before this, there is evidence of the application of massage tools. In Mesopotamia and Egypt various lightly curved scraping instruments or strigils (from the Latin strigilis; akin to stringere, to touch) were used. In ancient Greece and Rome, the strigil was also used to scrape oils from the body and produce friction as part of the process of massage. For superficial tapping (tapotement) the Greeks and Romans found ferules (from the Latin ferula or giant fennel) quite effective.

However, it was in ancient China, with its elaborate medicinal traditions and high sophistication in body treatments, that the greatest number of actual massage therapy devices were developed. For example, swan's feathers were used for light tapotement, massage clubs and bats (made of bamboo and mulberry wood) for heavy percussion. Knuckles made of jade provided a deep pressure for the client and gave relief to the practitioner's own knuckles, while Chinese wooden needles were used for vertical pressure on acupuncture points.

Chinese massage tools also included a variety of stones (jade, marble, volcanic) that were placed on the body either heated or cooled. The temperatures used in treatments also fluctuated according to season and individual body type: from *Yin* (stones placed or simply held to penetrate the surface) to *Yang* (stones rubbed and moved to activate the circulation).

China is still an important manufacturer and promoter of massage and esthetic tools such as jade rollers, bongers, massage balls, medicine pillows filled with seeds or herbs, and massage knuckles, as well as various types of advanced Gua Sha tools. Gua Sha, one of the most effective Chinese massage techniques, involves very deep friction and scraping and can provide immediate relief from pain, stiffness, fever, chill, cough, and nausea. Unfortunately it is still virtually unknown in North America.

Because of its history and archeological artifacts, many believe that China is the true originator of stone therapy. However, some practitioners and historians of traditional Chinese medicine such as Andrew Pacholyk, DAc, believe that stone therapy dates back as far as 5000 years, combining the influences of both China and India, and draws from the Mayan culture as well. For example, Yogis practising within the tradition of Ayurvedic medicine worked with the Pranic (life) energy that is equivalent to Chinese Chi, and used breathing, meditation and massage to alter consciousness for healing and longevity. In this tradition, hands are applied on the body for manipulation, as well as crystals and stones to enhance body treatments.

Another influence on modern stone therapy could be the Hawaiian stone massage tradition that was developed mostly independently. Volcanoes and volcanic stones are abundant in Hawaii. Smooth basalt stones and guava tree sticks were traditionally used in so-called Lomi-Lomi treatments. Balls of raw lava used prior to the treatment were one of the first known exfoliation tools.

In Europe and North America no significant massage tool development was seen before the beginning of the 20th century. Europeans did use brushing techniques and other tools such as Russian face rollers and porcelain rollers to enhance beauty. Still, it would seem that the conservatism of the Middle Ages virtually wiped out any remnants of the ancient Greek and Roman massage therapy tools.

Some of the first electrical massage devices, as well as other mechanical tools, were created more recently, mostly in the United States. Many of them, such as the bull muscle beater, were invented by Dr Kellogg, who himself ran a successful retreat centre that incorporated regular Swedish massages (rapid, short and intense). The popularity of electrical devices grew significantly, especially in the 1930s due to endorsement by various medical doctors.

Stones – The Therapy Tool of Choice

The enormous popularity of massage therapy stones and hot stone therapy shows that both therapists and clients enjoy using hot massage tools in therapy, basalt stones in particular. These seem to be a perfect choice for therapy because of their density and ability to retain heat.

In terms of density, basalt stones are seven where diamond is ten, while their ability to retain heat lies in their dramatic volcanic origin. As lava, they were initially able to retain heat, and then they cooled in a slow process over many days or even months, making them chemically compact, with no room for heat to escape.

This is also the reason why it would not be wise to use river or any other type of sedimentary stone in therapy. Sedimentary stones not only lose heat very quickly (as stone sediments are very widely layered) but will also, in the process of reheating, eventually break down. Basalt stones, on the other hand, also have the ability to retain cold very well, which makes them an excellent and quite rare alternation massage tool for both stimulating and sedating applications.

The expansion of hot stone therapy in the early 1990s was initially attributed to the work of Mary Nelson of Tucson, Arizona, who introduced what she called LaStone Therapy in 1993. LaStone Therapy, according to Mary's own testimony, was channeled down from her Native spirit guide, and this may be the reason why hot stone therapy is often associated with the Native tradition. However, the Native tradition itself did not include the use of stones for massage, especially not in the way they are administered in LaStone therapy treatment.

Over the past 12 years, many different schools have been established and theories produced (including the one we have) to explain how and why we as therapists and clients fall in love with hot stone therapy over and over again. With a few rare exceptions, most of us respond well to heat, so well in fact (especially in the cold winter months and in countries with extensive winter seasons), that we easily become addicted to it. Well, when hot stone therapy becomes a sort of addiction, it is usually a healthy one to have. Heat, after all, improves metabolism and slows down the nervous system. For the same reason, hot stone therapy has often been called "the ultimate massage treatment". Once you've tried it, you come to believe this might very well be its precise definition.

As therapists we certainly appreciate a natural hot or warm tool that serves as an extension of our hands. This tool can be easily engaged in deep tissue treatments or just to promote relaxation in large muscles by transferring the heat from the stone to the body. Stones also warm up the therapist's hands and therapy room producing plenty of negative ions and making us happy and calm too.

As a hot stone massage client, one quickly finds out that there is nothing to compare to the sensation of warmth gliding over ones tired arms, legs and backs. On the massage table, under the hands and other trade tools of the massage therapist you are safe, pampered, and will feel yourself retreat into a place of perfect peace.

Eliana & Slaven Trinaistic are, among other designations, stone therapists. They have been teaching certified hot stone therapy courses since 2001 and have a clinic at Summehill & Yonge in Toronto. You can also join them in September of 2007 for a unique type of Yoga Holiday on the Mediterranean Sea (Hot Yoga and Hot Stone, Croatia, Europe). For more information please visit www.stone-waters.com or www.olivegroveretreats.com or call 416-878-5392.