





HAWAIIAN STYLE *massage*

LOMI LOMI CAN BENEFIT BOTH THE
MESSAGE THERAPIST & THE CLIENT

By Katherine Jamieson



WAVES ROCKING THE PLACID OCEAN. *Palm leaves flouncing*
on the breeze. Black lava stones hot from the sun. Eddies of water swirling as
the undertow pulls the tide home, into the silent deep.

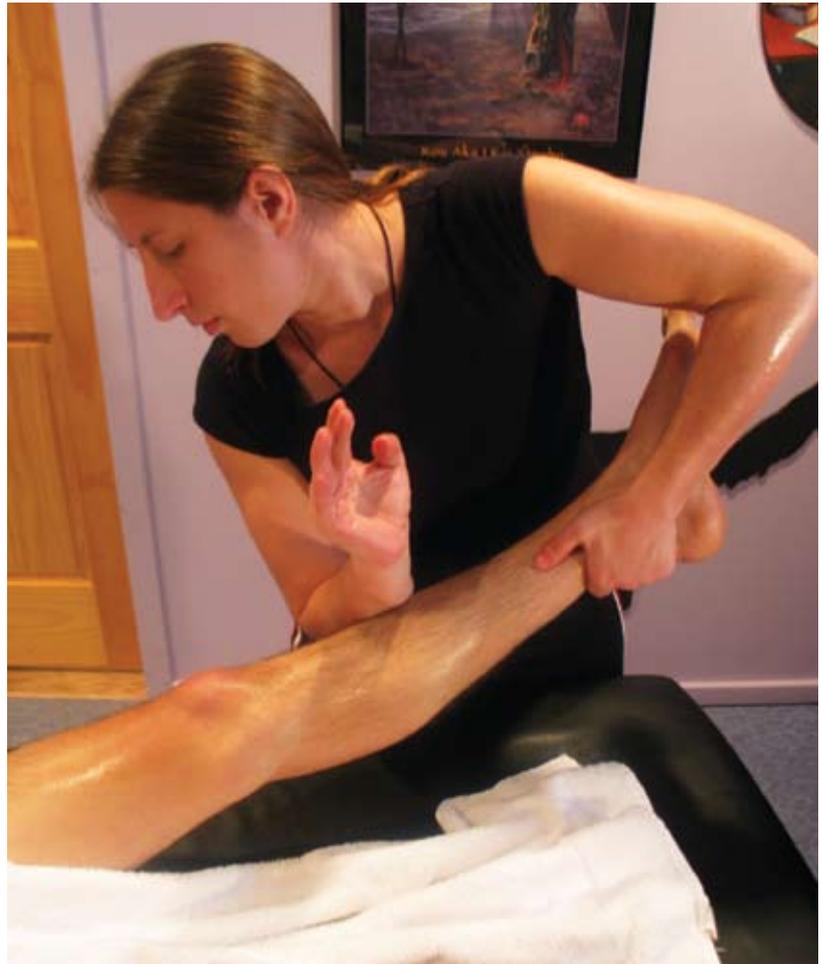
This is Lomi Lomi, an ancient style of massage resonant of Hawaiian landscape and spirituality. Various translated as “to break into little pieces,” “to create space” or simply “rub rub,” the practice was first taught by *Kahunas*, or shamans. Using long, flowing strokes with the forearm, Lomi Lomi originated as a communal, family-based healing practice, used daily to maintain health and aid digestion during luaus and feasts.

BEFORE PRACTICING ANY NEW MODALITIES OR TECHNIQUES, CHECK WITH YOUR STATE'S MESSAGE THERAPY REGULATORY AUTHORITY TO ENSURE THEY ARE WITHIN THE STATE'S DEFINED SCOPE OF PRACTICE FOR MESSAGE THERAPY.



>>THE LONG STROKES USED IN LOMI LOMI MAKE IT PARTICULARLY BENEFICIAL FOR IMPROVING CIRCULATION IN THE BODY.

UNLIKE OTHER STYLES OF MASSAGE WHICH TEND TO FOCUS ON ONE SECTION OF THE BODY, LOMI LOMI USES LONG, FLOWING STROKES TO CONNECT THE LOWER AND UPPER EXTREMITIES.



A natural outgrowth of the lush surroundings, this practice incorporated all aspects of the community. Young children walked on the backs of adults to access deep muscles. Massages were given in the grass or sand, which served as a natural exfoliant. "It was a way of life, of healing life," says Karen Reifinger, a nationally known massage therapist and educator of Hawaiian healing arts who just completed a decade-long traditional style Lomi Lomi apprenticeship.

THE ROOTS

Originally, Lomi Lomi was taught by observation alone. Students apprenticed with a Kahuna for decades, and learned by mirroring their teachers. According to tradition, they were not allowed to ask questions, but were required to learn by watching, listening and feeling with all of their

senses. Carrie Rowell, an international Lomi Lomi teacher, first studied the practice with a Kahuna in Hawaii.

Struck by her teachers' profound reverence for the earth, she came to see this as an integral aspect of the massage. During her training she was asked to make a *lei*, or garland of flowers. "We had to ask the trees for permission to take every flower," she says. Hawaiians believe that the presence of divinity is in everything: plants, animals, stones. "It's all living, breathing, conscious energy," Rowell says.

Belief in the universal presence of divinity shapes the way Lomi Lomi is practiced. "You approach the body as if it's the most precious thing you've ever laid hands on, as if it's your child," says Rowell. Lomi Lomi considers the client to be vulnerable during a massage, and *pules*, or prayers, are used to create a sacred space at the beginning, and close it at the end. "Your thoughts and intentions should be as pure as possible while giving a session," says Rowell.

Traditional Lomi Lomi has been adapted to the West, and the current styles have traded beaches for massage tables. Depending on the quality and complexity of their training, Western practitioners vary widely in their adherence to the original form of Lomi Lomi. "The common thread is *Aloha*: respect, honor, sacredness and unconditional love," says Reifinger. The practice is based on the philosophy that all things seek harmony and love, including the body.



LOMI PULE (PRAYER)

E aloha mai
E mana mai
E pono mai
E ola no!
Amama ua noa.

Let there be love.
Let there be power.
Let there be harmony.
Let there be healing.

So be it, it is done.





THE MODALITY REVEALED

Lomi Lomi is quintessentially holistic. “Most modalities work on only one level—muscles, bones. Lomi Lomi works with muscles, bones and everything in between. We’re composed of liquids and density,” says Reifinger. Other styles of massage tend to focus on one section of the body at a time, while Lomi Lomi uses long, flowing strokes to connect the lower and upper extremities.

To facilitate these types of movements, clients are draped lightly and copious amounts of oil lubricate the strokes. Practitioners use the space in the room creatively. “It’s impossible to tell where the person is around the table—you think they’re one place and they’re another,” says

Rowell. The focus is on the breath, which sets the rhythm for the massage. Reifinger says that it’s not about applying compression with hands, fingers and shoulders. The use of the forearms allows practitioners to apply more pounds per square inch, but still be “fluid from the feet up through the fingertips.”

Rowell says she has found that the flowing movements allow her to do deeper work on the body. By creating a wave with her forearm, she distracts the body from the work she’s doing on the shoulder or foot. “It spreads the attention, so people don’t react by clenching up against it,” she says. Reifinger notes that Lomi Lomi works with the neurology of the body. “The body goes into a shift with the alternating movements on the left and right. The sensory stimulation forces the body to relax,” she says.

Specialized movements play a crucial role in Lomi Lomi. Reifinger says that her first teachers initially showed her what looked like a beautiful dance, and insisted that she learn it before embarking on any bodywork technique. “I wanted to learn massage, not dance,” she recalls. Later she learned that the movements help align the practitioner’s body, preparing it for the work of the massage.

A dancer by training, Rowell found the practice to be a natural match for her massage technique. She uses hula dance movements to set the flow and



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pace of the massage and “generate electricity in the body.” Hula originates from the base of the spine, through the ribs, radiating through the arms and ribs, often in rhythm to chanting or drums. “In hula, there’s no arbitrary movement,” says Rowell.

The energy created from the movements invigorates her, allowing her to stay energized throughout the session. Giving a massage “feels like a dance around the body,” she says. The emphasis on body mechanics, as well as the use of the forearms rather than thumbs or hands, makes this modality a good choice for massage therapists who need a technique that is less strenuous and easier on the body.

Warmth is another important aspect of the practice. Melissa Stratton, a massage therapist who has been practicing Lomi Lomi since 2006, says that keeping the room at least 85 degrees facilitates a better experience for her clients. “The fascia doesn’t have a chance to re-tie the knot when the room is warm,” she says.

HOW CLIENTS BENEFIT

Practitioners agree that clients respond very positively to Lomi Lomi techniques. Reifinger says the practice is easy to integrate with Swedish or deep tissue work, and clients notice the changed technique. “They’ll say, it felt the same but something was different about it,” she explains. She’s found that incorporating Lomi Lomi can rejuvenate an existing massage practice and enhance client loyalty. “It adds an element of surprise that allows you to get into those muscles,” she says.

The long strokes used in Lomi Lomi make it particularly beneficial for improving circulation in the body. Increased blood flow may enhance detoxification and stimulate the lymphatic system. Clients often report more clarity and a heightened sense of well-being after massages, and Rowell says that

this experience of “calm euphoria” can last for up to three days. Stretching the connective tissue creates a gentle myofascial release, accompanied by a sense of deep relaxation. Rowell believes that the flowing aspect of the practice is particularly suited to supporting women during pregnancy and labor, and also might help shed excess blood and water from the body after childbirth.

Though the spread of Lomi Lomi to the West has benefited many, there is growing concern that the traditional practices are being watered down. “You don’t get everything from one class—if you want to be good at doing this work, you have to really study it,” says Stratton. Like Reifinger, she believes that Lomi Lomi should be integrated into a practitioner’s life to be truly effective. For Western practitioners, learning the style divorced from its cultural context, this is a particular challenge. But Reifinger cautions against trading the therapeutic benefits for the spiritual. “A good Lomi Lomi practitioner is hard to find. Many people practice it but few understand it.” ■

Katherine Jamieson is a freelance writer based in Western Massachusetts. She writes about health and food for a variety of publications, including Yoga+ and Newsday.