

The *magic* of tulayoga

As a brand new, therapeutic style of the ancient practice launches in the UK, **Lucy Fry** finds out if it can heal old wounds

One Saturday morning earlier this year, in a very quiet, spacious and private room at Central London's Light Centre (lightcentremoorgate.com), I learn what it's like to fly. Well, at least, this is how I imagine

it might feel – my back arched, helping my spine to lengthen, arms extended behind me, allowing my chest to open, the soles of a gentleman's two feet placed neatly against the skin covering my lumbar spine, holding me up, keeping me safe.

My eyes are closed, face looking up at the ceiling while my legs dangle in front, relaxed, feet tingling with sheer, childish exuberance. This feels amazing; it is so freeing to trust another person to hold me up, to follow his instructions as we move

from one pose (or, in yoga terms, asana) to another, each time encouraging my muscles, brain and back to slacken and let go.

Such is the nature of tulayoga (tulayoga.com), whose name comes from the Sanskrit language, and is a combination of the words balance and union. And, whether you're new to yoga or have been practicing ashtanga, vinyasa, jivamukti, or any other variation of it for decades now, I'd be willing to wager that tulayoga will offer both of those things (balance, and union) as well as a fresh perspective on what you might need, right now, to be truly well.

Founded some 14 years ago in Barcelona, tulayoga is inspired by the teachings and

mentoring from pscho-corporeal therapist Marie Lise Labonte and is the brainchild of Berlin resident Louka Leppard. It begins with 'tula' massage, essentially a deep tissue massage, taking place on the floor and longer – around 90 minutes, and more luxurious – on a blanket, in candlelight – than I'm used to. This part is all about putting me at ease, so that my body can prepare itself for the release to come. It's more like a cleansing all-body health treatment, perhaps, than my weekly yoga class where I'm in a group going through a sequence of movements and holding postures. Here I really can breathe easily, though that's not to say it's always comfortable; Louka will push bodies as far as he thinks is appropriate for

each individual and for me this is an invigorating and powerful treatment, probably one of the best I've ever received (and I've had a fair few massages in my time).

By now, I'm not surprised that, since its inception, tulayoga, in this case preceded by tulamassage, has attracted some fairly high-flying and stressed-out people such as Hollywood actresses, Parisian fashion designers and European CEOs, who tend to use this unique practice at least four times a year to reset and realign both their spines and their selves (the health of which, of course, most yogis believe to be inextricably linked). The results of Louka's tula method include: increased mobility; opening of the psoas and release of tension in the chest, pelvis and lumbar spine; release of neck, shoulder and facial tension; and increase in breathing capacity; decrease in blood pressure; reduction in depression and stress and a release of emotional blockages and trauma.

And, speaking of trauma... the massage part of this session is particularly educational for me. I've flirted with the idea that trauma is held in the body, unsure until now whether I truly believed in it or not. But recently, I've found myself locking up in similar areas (the thoracic spine, or around the hips, for example), suffering both injury and discomfort, almost non-stop over the past six months. But it's not until Louka works hard on my upper back and shoulders, as well as around my hips and gluteals, that I realise just how much the tension in this area relates to my lifestyle, history and psychology, as well as to my exercise regime. It's as if I begin to see – as Louka does – my body

as a map, telling a story of my 32-years of struggles, achievements and mishaps.

For example, my chest is supremely tight, which, says Louka, relates to a strong protection (a fearful, overprotectiveness, perhaps) of the heart; a reaction to previous hurt, a physical manifestation of the determination, perhaps, not to be destroyed by love again. The tightness in my upper back is 'old' Louka suggests, because it's so knotty and takes twenty minutes of massage to even begin to disperse a little. This relates often, he says, to guilt and shame from earlier years – as a teenager and in my early twenties, most likely – as well as an excessive sense of responsibility, for others, caregivers perhaps...

It's an emotional moment for us both. I feel mind-blowingly connected to this beautiful, grounded and insightful man, unthreatened by his touch and wholly supported by his words. The rapport that is built allows for his ensuing piloting of my 'flight' – one has to trust the practitioner in order to fully enjoy the acrobatic, enlivening 30-45 minutes of tulayoga that follow, designed to slowly and blissfully open the spine, chest and hips, as well as free the mind.

Afterwards, I emerge onto the inner London streets feeling brighter, stronger, taller. Sometimes, when the fullness of life makes our heads and hearts noisy with pleasure, pain, and just pure resistance, it's hard for us to truly listen to ourselves. But right now I feel a clarity I haven't for months, and a fresh resolve to take care of myself and to try and stay open, in both my muscles and my mind, in my head and in my heart.



FIND OUT MORE

Louka Leppard offers one-to-one sessions in Berlin, Geneva, Paris and London (a city he visits approximately four times per year), though tulayoga is also offered by the 100+ European practitioners that he has trained over the years. There is a weight limit of 80kg but this does vary from practitioner to practitioner and you do not have to be extremely flexible since tulayoga adjusts to and gently increases your individual limits of flexibility. Costs £300 for 2.5 hours one to one. Email louka@tulgayoga.com to get more information.

