



IT'S YOGA BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

Seasoned fitness and wellbeing writer **Ahmed Zambarakji** experiences the life-changing effects of Tulayoga

The pre-treatment consultation with Louka Leppard is little more than a courtesy. By the time we have paused for a much-needed breather – after no less than two hours of intensive massage – this relative stranger knows me not just at a physical level but, it feels, at the very core of my being.

He makes passing reference to guilt and fear locked in my hips, the bullet-proof vest that is my chest, the burden of responsibility weighing on my shoulders. He's less concerned with exactly how these layers of psycho-emotional 'armouring' came about as he is with dismantling them by way of Tulayoga, a technique he founded 14 years ago.

Described as 'meditation through motion', a concept that both yogis and long-distance runners will be familiar with, Leppard's work has two distinct phases. First is a deep massage that is an exercise in surrender. It's a far cry from the kind of treatments we're used to in the West, where therapist and client are as connected as two passers-by on a train at rush hour. This is human

bonding at its most primal, a prospect that will be as unnerving for some as it will be moving for others.

While there is relief on a physical level, the way Leppard handles my body has less to do with wrestling my tight muscles into submission, more about nurturing them into giving way. His touch – meditative, gentle, devotional – prompts involuntary streams of silent tears and, at times, bursts of laughter. For the most part, I'm barely aware of what's going on as the gentle rocking motions with which he begins the treatment gently lull me into a meditative state that feels a lot like lucid dreaming.

I'm aware of his breathing, his every movement, as he repositions himself around the futon on which I'm lying naked. He arches over my back, pushes up from underneath me, interacting with muscles in weird and fascinating ways. Any attempt to suss out his technique is futile, as I fall deeper into surrender, ever more enraptured by the sensation of touch.

There are momentary pauses when he decides to apply sustained pressure

and I assume he's stumbled on a trigger point. But then he reverts to continuous, hypnotic strokes, the kind that create the illusion of several hands working on you at once. It reminds me of Lomi Lomi, the Hawaiian shamanic massage known for its fluid, wave-like strokes.

I hear him hum along to a distinctly 'Acoustic Ibiza' type of soundtrack that wafts from the stereo and sneak a glance. He's enthralled by the way in which his hands are working, seemingly of their own volition. No nook or cranny is left uncharted and I get the distinct impression that, in addition to being highly intimate, the whole interaction is completely spontaneous.

Touch and trust

'During a treatment, I trust,' Leppard says. 'My hands find their shapes, their timing, their patterns and paths.' He's walking the 'landscape' of my body, rather than imposing any kind of predetermined routine. He talks of 'natural stream lines' and 'pathways' that don't seem to fit any school with which I'm familiar. He has a strong kinesthetic >>>

>>> sense and a keen emotional awareness that effortlessly guide him through a treatment. Most striking is the reverence with which he uses touch. 'Effective massage can't be a repetitive process of preconceived movements,' he says. 'Massage is a meditation, an art. [One must] move out beyond the repetitive tracks of a method into a unique, caring communication with an individual.'

Hands are only part of it. After I get into my yoga gear, Leppard is on the futon, his legs perfectly vertical, as in the Uttanpadasana pose. He tells me to rest my six foot two frame on the soles of his feet. A bizarre but relaxing mix of acrobatics, yoga, meditation and massage follows. I feel weightless, as if I'm in a flotation tank, as he guides me into a series of flying asanas – mostly inversions – in which my body opens up further. Not once does it feel unsafe, like I might fall on my face (or, worse yet, on Leppard's face). This has as much to do

with his strength as it does with the trust he unlocks in people. It's not long before I'm moving in and out of poses.

Far more is going on than just pretty shapes, however. Blood circulation is given a kind of boost manual therapy alone can't achieve. This helps detoxification, renewal and repair. And, as in hatha yoga, each pose has an impact on the body from the inside out. The endocrine and nervous systems get a boost; heart rate and blood pressure are lowered. Crucially, gravity is also at work, stretching out muscles and providing deeper release. The full length of my spine is decompressed as I'm suspended upside down. I sense each vertebra naturally fall back into its right position and breathe a sigh of relief. My thighs and psoas lengthen as blood flushes through my body, flooding every inch with a fresh supply of energy.

The experience is, well, *trippy*. 'Floating through space with your eyes closed,



without external references, frees you of notions of time, space and responsibility,' he says. 'This brings about a deeper connection with the sensations and feelings at the core of your body.' It also seems to provoke an uncontrollable fit of the giggles at one point.

If the confidence involved in moving from one pose to another is about mastering a masculine energy, the receptivity in having someone *hold* you is about exploring the feminine. 'The more you trust, the more your body releases, opens and aligns. The more you release, the more effortless it becomes for the person supporting you.' And this is at the core of the bond that's been created over the past two-and-a-half hours.

It should be pretty obvious at this point that a willingness to surrender is a prerequisite for Tulayoga. Not just because this guy is balancing your entire body weight on his feet, but mostly because he's holding you at the point when you're at your most vulnerable, emotionally speaking. And, in Leppard, you couldn't find for a more trustworthy pair of hands. Or feet.

Treatments are a mixture of Tulamassage and Tulayoga. A session with Louka Leppard lasts 2½ hours and costs £300. See tulayoga.com for more details

PHOTOGRAPHS: SERGE ANTON

THE NEW YOGA REVOLUTION

To the annoyance of purists, an increasing amount of styles and variations of yoga have evolved, but I think that the Westernisation of yoga is no bad thing. Traditional schools weren't intended for modern lifestyles, concerns and bodies. And the foundation of yoga is 'union', an ability to embrace all religions, people and countries.
ACRO YOGA Cultivates a sense of trust, balance, connection and, maybe most importantly, the ability to let go. acroyoga.org

FIERCE GRACE A new brand of hot yoga from Michelle Pernetta. Her 5-class interconnected system lets you mix and match classes instead of following rigid sequences. fiercegrace.com
JIVAMUKTI This has a distinctly spiritual agenda. Developed by New Yorkers Sharon Gannon and David Life, classes include brief discussions on philosophy, meditation and chanting. jivamuktiiyoga.com
AERIAL YOGA 'Anti-gravity' yoga sees

people suspended in silk hammocks, letting them to fly through a sequence, gymnast-style. The hammocks allow for easier inversions that decompress the spine and increase blood flow. antigravityfitness.com
ANUSARA An Anusara class is underpinned by Tantric philosophy. Teachers encourage students to reveal their goodness rather than attempt to 'correct' aspects of their practice. anusarayoga.com