



Tulayoga

An interview with Louka Leppard
By Teresa Pinto

Much has been written about **Tulayoga** these days and no matter whom the practitioner is, Louka Leppard is always the name behind it. I booked a session with Louka some years ago in Haarlem. I announced myself at the reception of the hotel where he was giving the treatments, and after a few minutes I saw this slim young man, dark hair and a broad smile coming down the stairs. You wouldn't know you were in the presence of an English man were it not for his impeccable accent and his gentlemanly manners. I found Tulayoga very special. It felt like an experience of total surrender in which I lost all notion of my body, space and time. So now starting a magazine online (in the air!) and having 'the body' as theme, what else could I wish for than to interview Louka Leppard himself? Louka suggested we meet in Amsterdam for breakfast but due to a change in his schedule he asked later if we could 'meet' on Skype. And there he was, sipping his tea, comfortably seated on the couch in his apartment in Berlin. I also put my teapot on the table and as if we were sitting there drinking tea together, started our lovely conversation.

Tulayoga: how did it all started?

When I was young I didn't feel comfortable in my body. I had a negative idea of what my body was like. I thought I was weak and "skinny". I had been living in Holland for some years and moved back to England when I was 25. On the first week of my return I stopped smoking and started practicing yoga in the evenings. It wasn't something I consciously decided to do, I was alone in the house and I just started to stretch in the evenings and listen to music, just for the pleasure. I am naturally flexible so it wasn't the painful process that it can be for some people. Also in that first week two friends came by one evening who had just taken a weekend course in Acrosage and they wanted someone to practice on. Although I had began practicing massage a few years before I had never heard about the idea of aerial bodywork and the 5 minutes of floating freely in space that she was able to give me, however short, was something completely out of the ordinary. The lights were low, there was a slow repetitive trance track playing softly in the background and I experienced some kind of "return to the womb". I then saw her giving a treatment to her friend and the aesthetic quality of the postures struck me. I connected with the idea immediately on many levels. it was very clear and instant. All I said to her was: 'you have to teach me everything you know....' 15 years on it's obvious that this was the birth of something but back then I only felt a strong "click". There was no thought of a long term goal. It wasn't a career move. It was just the excitement and the discovery of a new practice. Over the following few weeks she taught me the little she new and together we became confident and able to float each other for longer periods. It then continued as part of my daily life, I practiced on anyone and everyone that was open to it. The joy of being more deeply in touch with my own body and seeing the reaction in other people was deeply satisfying. It was wonderful to find something I could do well with my skinny/flexible body type that people enjoyed and admired and that brought me so much pleasure.



Is there any resemblance to Acrosage and your work?

Two years after starting to practice I went to have a weekend workshop in England with Paul Terrel who trained in Acrosage with the originator Benjamin Marantz and had re-named it Inversion Therapy. After that weekend I realized that although the core postures were the same I had began to develop something of my own. I had added postures and was practicing with a more slow, meditative and gentle approach and my practice purposefully does not contain any new age ideology. So I decided to continue developing in my own way and to call it Tulayoga. There's no doubt in my mind though that the roots of Tulayoga began in the great idea that Benjamin had back in the 80's. I am very grateful to his genius.

How did you come to this name, Tulayoga?

I was looking on the internet for a word, in Sanskrit, to describe what I was doing and so I looked up words like rebirthing, floating, inversion etc.... ideally I would have called it rebalancing but this is already the name of a bodywork technique, I like the unpretentiousness and simplicity of it. Anyway, in the end I found the word Tulayoga which is the word for the use of, or harnessing, balance. This was perfect because during a treatment you are not using muscle strength to carry a person but rather using balance points to transfer their weight to the ground.

Did you have any difficulties or big learning experiences along the years?

I think I was born into difficulties. I was a very emotional and sensitive kid. It's only when I hit my 30's that things started to become easier and more understandable. But if you are talking about defining moments I think the most critical one was the year my mother died. This was a huge initiation for me. Prior to that moment I wasn't completely happy about being born or living an embodied life. I was a dreamer, I experienced physical life as happening to me, a series of events that I had little control over or understanding of. I wanted to escape into fantasy, back into the ether; I didn't understand the beauty of being physical, of living in the world or of my own creative capacity. I spent the last 3 months of my mother's life with her at her home on the coast. Watching her leave woke me up to how fleeting and precious life is and how final death is, at least on the physical plane.

2 years later, after sorting out my mothers' affairs with my sister Sacha, I took a break for a year and we went to India together. It was like coming home, I had no culture shock what so ever. From the first day there I started to offload years of stress and grief and to feel the enjoyment of just being alive. It was a complete and welcome break from the stress of paying bills, trying to gain a foothold of financial security and acquiring and identifying with possessions. It was the first time I didn't have any stress. and from that new state of mind and feeling I started to understand that life is too short to be doing a job that doesn't make me joyful, or that doesn't fulfill or nourish me. I started asking myself, what makes me happy? If I had no limits or fears, what would I be doing with my time? And I started to see that the things that fulfill me are giving massage and aerial bodywork, drawing and writing. These acts bring me happiness in the moment.

After this year of feeling and introspection in India I came back to England. That was a shock. When you live in India you start to come into your body and heart and to slow down into the moment. Returning to a city like London, to the western mind set, full of fast thinkers, made me feel like I only had cotton wool between my ears. So I decided to move to Barcelona and to start making my money through bodywork. It sounds so easy when it's put in a short paragraph like that but it took a lot of courage. At the same time, I really didn't feel like I had a choice. I had to move forward and out into the unknown or I would have stagnated in the known.

And how was it in Barcelona?

Everything that happens in life, seems to me to be the play between the choices one makes and what comes back to meet you because of those choices. I made the choice of going to Barcelona and to do what I really love instead of staying in England doing "jobs" I didn't feel connected to. I took the risk, and life came back to me with some beautiful coincidences. On the bus from the airport to Barcelona centre I sat next to a Chilean girl and she said she had some friends that wanted to rent their apartment. They happened to be yoga teachers in one of the nicest schools in the centre of Barcelona, aptly named "Happy Yoga". So there I am, I knew no one, I didn't speak Spanish and suddenly I had an apartment and connections for a place to work. It's as if life said: ok you jumped, here are some wings to help you fly, enjoy! A year later I was again fortunate enough to meet the psychotherapist and author Marie Lise Labonté. She is the founder of the technique, MLC - Méthode de Liberation des Cuirasses (www.marieliselabonte.com/). She gives seminars and courses throughout Europe and Canada. She received a treatment with me and had such a strong and positive reaction to the work; she was vibrating and flying all over the place. She said: 'right! you're coming with me!'. She started inviting me to her seminars and she would introduce me in the beginning saying: 'this is Louka Leppard, his work is amazing and you have to try it'. I don't have any qualifications from large organizations; I only had my practice and a natural feeling for what I do. So to have someone in her position supporting me was a great lift. I was giving more than thirty treatments a week and my fee rose to a more serious level. It was an interesting time. Marie Lise's work centers on how repressed feelings and emotions build up in different areas of the body, how they affect the posture and how to liberate the body and mind from these tensions. For me it was a great education. Since then I have continued to travel to give treatments and have lived in various countries. For the last 4 years I have lived in Berlin.



How do you experience your body?

How do I experience my body? That's a big subject... The first thought that comes to mind is the idea of body and spirit; for me they are not separate. I have a bit of a problem with this idea of the spirit being high and light and the body being something low and animalistic. Or the idea that sex is not spiritual. When you are conscious sex is a way of expressing love, caring and your whole being. I have a problem with these thoughts because that is how I was brought up to see it, through the Christian ideology. It took me a long time to realize it isn't like that. To realize that "My animal" is me. Even to use the word connection would be misleading because it would mean they are separate and that they have to come together to meet. There's a lot of pink between red and white. I prefer to think that our bodies are consciousness expressing itself through matter. We are whole. I see our consciousness as an axis or a filament that manifests and permeates out into physicality. Our feelings, ideas and thoughts emanate out into space. Being in my body is an experience of feeling, of sensation and emotion. Of expression and reception. I read my body. It talks. Everything I feel and thinking gets expressed through my body weather I want to share it or not. When I don't breathe fully, when I don't have a free flow of expression, when I hold or repress my feelings, I begin to accumulate tension and to become denser. For example, if I am angry but not expressing it, those chemicals, those feelings running through my body, I feel them getting stuck in my body. It's essential that I remain free, to vocalized clearly or express myself through movement. I think this is another reason people find massage intimate. People talk about the intimacy of massage and it's because there is no hiding. In the hands of a good masseur you can't hide. You might wear certain clothes, act in a certain way, or hold certain physical postures that give the appearance of being a certain way, but if a good body worker starts to touch you it's quite clear where and who you really are. I'm not talking about judging anybody; I'm just saying that it becomes clear through tension and density in the body where there are tensions in the personality. That's why some people don't want to be touched; it brings them into contact with their true nature and vulnerability. The beauty of good bodywork and conscious touch is that in that exposed space, there is the potential for release and deep healing.

How would you describe the effect of Tulayoga on people and yourself?

Everything is in the opposite when you receive Tulayoga, where gravity is usually compressing you, suddenly gravity is running through your body in the opposite direction, you begin to decompress and space is opening up inside you. All your receptors are relieved and your body starts to feel light, elongated and open. The perception of up or down, left or right fades away and you become consciousness in an undefined space.

It's hard for people to understand if they haven't had the experience. Tulayoga is not about active postures or positions or doing something. In fact it is an undoing. People get attracted by the aesthetic of the postures, as I did, but in the end it has little to do with the experience. Tulayoga is a way to transcend the physical, to return to your centre and enter into silence.

Sometimes, in a really beautiful session, I don't know who is floating who anymore because we both go into the balance point and we both start to relax very deeply. The more the person above me relaxes the more I relax and the more I relax the more they relax. And suddenly you are in this place where you are so deep in the balance that you stop feeling the body above you as separate. Your thoughts settle into silence. I feel their weight descending through my legs and sacrum into the ground like a flow but it's hard to know who is floating who? And it's very, very peaceful. What surrounds you drops away and there is a pure and timeless connection. It's an honor to have someone relaxing so deeply into trust with you. Everything seems right in the world and I feel a lot of gratitude.



It is a totally surrender, isn't it? Surrender to... actually to nothing, to whatever. Just not knowing and not needing to know. Yes, it's quite different being with someone when you're both quietly surrendering. You both help each other somehow and it's comforting to have company on the journey with you. It's a quiet and subtle expression of understanding and care.

That's what I felt in the session. At a certain moment there was no Louka Leppard there; there was only pure love.

I feel that as well. It's important to go out of your mind, out of your personality and to return to breathing and being in the heart. It's more complicated to achieve that in conversation. I find that thought and words can often get in the way of loving and feeling.

Back then in Haarlem you showed me the wonderful drawings you make. Are you still doing them? And are there any plans for this work?

In 2000 I made a decision to put all my focus into Tulayoga. And I had the idea that when Tulayoga was successful I would then have the financial stability to complete some pieces. I only realized last year that it's hard to measure success and Tulayoga will never be complete. It will continue to grow and evolve as I refine it. So now I am back to spending time drawing as well. I'm also starting to see that there is some connection between all the creative things I do. The similarity between Tulayoga, massage, my writing and drawing is clear. Perhaps you remember they both have the same continuous lines and clear space... (yes, I do remember: to me they were like movement in quietness). They all come from this place without thought. It's a meditative process through action. I am fulfilled when I create. There is nothing more I need in that moment. If I've given a good free flowing massage or if I draw some lines on my work that interact with the whole in a harmonious way it makes me feel deeply fulfilled. I have a number of apparently separate projects on the go but I feel like all these things are starting to converge. Massage, Tulayoga, writing, drawing, and designing. I have the feeling it's coming together in some kind of book. But as with most things in my life, it's not linear. So I just keep working on the different projects I enjoy and as they expand I assume they will merge at some point.

Can you tell something more about what you write?

I enjoy writing about my experiences. Human anecdotes about learning processes that people can relate to. I also enjoy reducing experience and ideas to the minimum of words. Beyond Haiku, to seed sentences or even just a word or two that may grow in people's minds. And poetry, about love, of course, what else?