

Like floating on a cloud

Could a little human touch help melt your stress away? Apparently it can, as **Nilufer Atik** found out when she tried Tulayoga

It looks like something that could have been pulled straight out of the pages of the *Kama Sutra* or a contemporary dance magazine – sensual, intimate, with just a touch of playfulness. But this isn't a quirky mating ritual or risqué form of ballet. It's actually a unique kind of yoga. And it's gathering a small army of devotees around Europe.

Tulayoga, as it's called, is described as "a journey inwards, towards your axis" and "a return through sensation into union with your body and the present moment" by its founder Louka Leppard.

The Devon-born practitioner first began devising his method – which combines traditional Hatha yoga with therapeutic massage and movement – back in 2000.

"I was 29 and had just lost my mother," he recalls. "It changed me. I realised I didn't want to waste my life doing corporate jobs any more. I wanted my life to have meaning and to give others the same."

Louka went to India and began practising yoga. He also learnt about inversion techniques, which

'They all leave after a session saying that they feel lifted and nurtured'

involve using upside-down postures to lower the heart rate and create a deeply relaxed state.

"I practised on friends at first, using my feet and arms to support them while they breathed into various positions and relaxed so I took their entire body weight," he explains. "The more I did it the more I felt a sense of healing and connection with them. They would describe the experience as euphoric and very calming and I realised then that I was creating something special."

Louka began incorporating deep-tissue massage into his method too. Even though he'd had no formal training in the therapy, he found he was a natural. "I could just find the places where there was tension and knew instinctively how to release it," he says.

In 2001 he moved to Barcelona to launch Tulayoga, as a one-to-one treatment combining massage, inverted yoga, mindfulness and breath meditation with the aim of releasing, realigning and opening people's physical bodies and



Levitation situation: Nilufer's cares are lifted from her by Louka Leppard

reducing stress. One of his first clients was psycho-corporeal therapist Marie Lise Labonté, who was so impressed she invited Louka to travel around the world with her and provide his services to her clients.

In 2006 he decided to go it alone and later moved to Geneva to expand his business and gradually bring Tulayoga to the UK. His clientele now includes Hollywood actresses, top fashion designers and multi-millionaire CEOs from all over the world.

The actress Sienna Miller describes her sessions with Louka as "one of the most calming and restorative experiences I have had in a long time". Helena Bonham Carter says Tulayoga is "a bit like playing airplanes as a child but backwards and you fly and hang and let go, feeling safe at all times".

"Some clients experience a release of trapped emotions during a session. They start out laughing but then suddenly burst into tears half way through," Louka says.

It's difficult to explain why and how Tulayoga is so profound without actually trying it. The fact that you have to be naked for the massage means leaving your inhibitions at the door.

Louka now works from a studio at the Insens centre in Geneva but also travels around Europe, visiting London every two months to hold private sessions. He treats around 15 people a week and holds retreats in Turkey, Bali and Provence. The popularity of Tulayoga has increased so much in recent months that he is now training others to become master practitioners. One magazine article in Holland that reviewed the treatment attracted 400 reader enquiries in one week.

"Most of my clients come through word of mouth and Tulayoga does seem a strange thing to them at first. But within a few minutes of being with me they know they can trust me," he says. "The moment I start touching them they understand what it's all about."

"It doesn't matter what background anyone is from, they all leave after a session saying the same thing – that they feel lifted and nurtured. And I feel the same way."

The process may seem a little pricey at £350 per session, but the majority of people who try Tulayoga go back for more.

For information, go to tulayoga.com

My Tulayoga experience

I decided to give Tulayoga a try during one of Louka's recent visits to the UK. The session, held in a warehouse-style apartment in Shoreditch, east London, began with a sensuous deep-tissue massage using oils. It was a little nerve-racking being naked in front of a complete stranger at first, especially considering I'd forgotten to shave my legs. But all thoughts of unsightly stubble disappeared the moment Louka began gliding his palms along my spine. He was right – he did have a natural touch.

"You have a lot of tightness in your back," he later explained, "whereas your neck and belly are open." Apparently it meant I was shielding myself from the past but trying to open myself up to a new future. And that I was also a good communicator. Pretty spot on, I'd say.

The massage was a little painful at first. Some of the knots in my lower back felt more like boulders as Louka pummelled them. But he advised me to close my eyes and breathe deeply into my diaphragm and I soon felt the tension melt away. Then came the inversion postures.

I was told to stand facing away from him, lean back onto the soles of his feet and "let go", meaning I had to relax my entire body like a rag doll and allow him to use his limbs to lift and manoeuvre



me around. It felt very strange at first as he pushed his feet into my lower back and lifted me off the ground. I arched into a crab position and it was a bit like levitation. Then as he twisted my body one way and another, using his feet to provide support where needed, I could feel my spine stretching fully. "Keep breathing deeply," Louka whispered as he told me to grab my ankles and angled me into an upside-down lotus position. I thought I'd feel dizzy by now but I didn't. Instead, I observed, as I realised I'd been smiling the whole time, it was rather like floating on a cloud.

At the end Louka told me to release my arms and held my hands as he lowered me down gently onto his chest then held me for a while. "Ah, I guess this is where the very intimate bit comes in," I thought. But it didn't really feel that way. And there was nothing sexual about it at all. In fact, it was kind of like being back in your mother's womb – safe and nurturing. I opened my eyes to find myself curled up on Louka's lap, feeling slightly groggy, but very, very blissful. And thankful that I hadn't burst into tears.

