

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, JON ENDOCH

My session with the yoga teacher French women pay £350 to see

He's the alternative health guru Parisians are queuing up for. **Bridget Harrison** finds out why

It's an instruction I've heard many times at the end of a yoga class. "Take a deep breath. Relax. Just let everything go," says Louka, a darkly handsome 43-year-old with a body that can most accurately be described as "ripped". This time it was a little different. Instead of lying on a mat feeling, as they always tell you to, the solid ground absorbing the weight of my body, I am upside down in the air, my hips balanced on Louka's feet, my shoulders perched on his upturned palms.

My instinct is to tense and grab something to steady myself. But even if I look like an extra from Cirque du Soleil, I soon realise I should do absolutely nothing. In fact, the more I stop worrying, the easier it is to hang like this. The more I trust that Louka's strength can support me, the steadier I feel.

As I do "let go" I begin to feel rather amazing. It's a sensation of being weightless and perfectly supported at the same time. My limbs and muscles stretch out and all the tension in my neck dissolves. Keeping me in the air, Louka then gives me quiet instructions: "Relax your left knee... Bring your hands to your heels... Let your ankles drop," while he moves me from position to position in a slow aerial dance. We pause in each posture — 22 in all — while I let my body just flop above him. My thoughts drift off, I breathe a huge internal sigh of relief. When he returns me to the floor, I feel supple and calm, as if fresh from a hard Ashtanga class but without any of the effort.

Inverted postures in yoga are good for the lymphatic system and circulation, and these particular moves will

also help elongate and realign my vertebral column, Louka tells me. But the real point to them is more cerebral. They come as the finale to a session of Tulayoga (Tula is Sanskrit for balance), a new hybrid massage that aims not just to ease aching muscles but to give you a feeling of freedom from responsibility. Tulayoga is supposed to be an experience not just for the body, but for the mind.

I'm in Paris to try it out, where its founder, Louka Leppard, has a large following. Parisian celebrities and CEOs pay £350 for a two-and-a-half hour treatment. He also treats high-end clients in Geneva, Berlin and Amsterdam. One-to-one sessions with Louka will be available in the UK at the super-chic Akasha spa in the Hotel Café Royal in London, from September 15-18, October 20-24 and December 1-5.

Louka is in fact British, but he moved to Paris 14 years ago after finding clients more open to the idea of a massage for the mind. With a mane of black hair, a sculpted yogic body and an intensely gentle demeanour, he's the kind of yoga teacher Hollywood would invent. When I arrive at his chic, minimalist studio in Boulogne-Billancourt, I can see why he is so popular with Parisians. I feel an immediate connection with him, as though I've come to meet a favourite old boyfriend. Although Louka clearly has a gift for helping people feel close and understood, there is nothing sexual about our interaction. It's intimacy on a psychological level. "I am here to look after you," Louka says.

Tulayoga may look acrobatic, but Louka says he can practise on anyone of any body type and flexibility, up to 80kg — no yoga experience necessary. You just have to be willing to let go and trust him. "Usually it takes less than five minutes for your body to work out that if you relinquish control the postures become effortless and enjoyable," he says. This "relinquishing" is also helped by a preceding massage on the floor during which Louka targets knots of tension with the idea, he says, of releasing blockages, opening energy flows and freeing repressed emotions that are held in the body. I am not sure I am storing much repressed

emotion, but he homes in on the spots on my neck that have been troubling me since I got whiplash on the bumper cars with my son a few weeks ago. After an hour of this, I'm seriously relaxed.

But simply relaxing me is not the point, Louka stresses. Hence the upside down bit. "What I want you to feel is the experience of being freed, protected and cared for, because there are very few places we get to do that in modern life." He likens the experience of Tulayoga to being a sleeping child carried to bed from a car late at night — limp, trusting, loved. "After the age of about six it's rare to get that sensation of surrendering yourself to someone else who is carrying you," he says. "It's an experience of deep tenderness."

It sounds cheesy, but I can grasp what he means. By the end of our session I am back on the floor, curled up in the foetal position, thinking that the rest of the world can go to hell, while Louka offers me a cup of ginger tea and a plate of figs.

Tulayoga is one of a new wave of hybrid massages aimed at those with stressful lifestyles who want to try something other than yoga, Pilates or a lavender-oil body massage. Another therapist offering a hybrid is Anwar Ravjani, based at Marylebone's smart Indaba Yoga, where the toned and beautiful take classes with world-

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renowned practitioners. Ravjani has recently developed an embodiment massage, with help from the leading life-coach and mindfulness expert Donna Lancaster. He uses Thai and western massage, plus breathing techniques all with the aim of helping you "get in the moment with sensation", as he puts it. He says his regulars are high achievers so goal-orientated they worry they have lost connection with their bodies.

In the flesh, Ravjani, too, is one of those softly spoken, ethereal guys

on to whom you immediately want to unload all your problems. "My aim is to get people to move from a place of passively consuming a massage to actively engaging with felt sensations," says Ravjani, who asks for constant feedback on what you are feeling as he works on you. A session with him felt more like psychotherapy than massage.

Back in Paris, I finished my ginger tea and floated out of Louka's studio straight into the rush hour. Perhaps it was all that letting go, or perhaps I'd simply had an exceptionally good stretch, but I did feel in an unusual state of peace. I was blissfully unruffled by the honking traffic and crowds in the Métro. I felt mentally rested. In letting go, I was ready to start afresh.

tulayoga.com



Louka Leppard