

HEALTH AND FITNESS

Stress-busting in Marylebone



Let's face it; you're almost certainly over-stressed. You probably don't get enough sleep, it's likely that you work longer hours than you should, and there's every chance that your commute to work takes at least thirty rage-filled minutes. But, hey, that's modern life. It's not something you give any thought. I mean – it's not as if there's some treatment capable of completely alleviating your stress, is there? Except, in a little corner of Marylebone, there is...

Chi Yu is based in a small, unassuming building near the corner of George Street. It styles itself as a Wellness Centre, which is a phrase vague enough to set off alarm bells in the heads of 'alternative therapy' skeptics – myself very much included. The foyer is staffed by an impossibly serene and soft-spoken receptionist, and filled with incense, vaguely Eastern ambient music, and complimentary puffed rice snacks. It feels cozy, but I am unable to shake off the lingering concern that someone is about to read my aura, and then use an obscure mix of homeopathic tinctures to communicate with my dead cat.

My practitioner arrives – Chi Yu's founder Mami Tsang, an impossibly petite Japanese woman. She leads me into the dimly lit treatment room, where she quizzes me on my life. Am I stressed? Of course I am. She nods, sympathetically. Any other pain? Well, as it happens, I'm recovering from a broken ankle. She immediately glances at the ankle, assesses my posture, and decides what must be done. Clad in a towel, I lay down on the padded table, and my worries instantly evaporate – along with a good portion of my stress. Chi Yu's speciality is integrated therapy – a bespoke combination of different forms of massage and acupuncture, tailored precisely to the needs of the patient.

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needle-averse I am tempted to beg that my body remain unpenetrated, but there is something in her beatific tone of voice that calms me. The needles are painless – tiny, tingling slivers that briefly tickle the skin. She sticks them in both ankles, the minx, and I conscientiously don't count how many are inserted. With the needles in place, Mami returns to my back with increased vigour. Using scented oils (black pepper, spike lavender and rosemary, since you asked) she deftly teases apart the knotted muscle tissue in my shoulders using shiatsu, deep tissue massage and Thai yoga. She switches techniques fluidly, without ever stopping the treatment. At one point she physically climbs onto my back and pulls on my arms and shoulders, extending them behind me. Perversely, it's one of the most soothing sensations I've ever experienced. The slowest element of the treatment – and the part that veers closest to the domain of wild and wooly hippiedom – comes after the acupuncture needles are removed, and is called craniosacral therapy. It involves Mami simply holding my ankle, and allowing the transference of heat (and, in theory, 'energy') from her hands into my foot, enabling my fracture to heal faster. I do some research later that evening and discover that there is little-to-no scientific evidence that the practice works. Be that as it may, the experience at the time felt quite genuinely blissful.

The entire treatment lasted 90 minutes. At the end Mami quietly leaves the room, as I begrudgingly re-clothe and contemplate re-entering London's slipstream. On the way out I'm given a mug of Japanese tea, which I sip whilst chatting to Mami and the receptionist – her serenity seems more plausible now, and far less irritating. My posture and my mood have both wildly improved – it feels as though Mami has added three inches to my height, as well as having scraped off at least one of the calloused layers of bitterness and hostility that, as a commuting Londoner, coated my soul. I step out into George Street feeling happier, healthier and, for the first time in a long time, genuinely relaxed.

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