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Once exclusively the domain of the adventurous, “alternative” Eastern remedies are now being embraced by more mainstreamers who need effective stress busters for their busy Western lives.

I was a real mess.

A stressed-out, exhausted, attention-deficient, information-overloaded, incapable-of-being-in-the-moment-or-sustaining-meaningful-contact-with-anyone mess. An unspecified agita gnawed at my guts; I felt a pain with no localized source. I staggered, zombie-like, through my days, propelled by Kit Kats and Diet Coke. I tried to keep moving, because whenever I stopped I collapsed. And, each time I fell down, it was harder to get back up.

I tried the things that once helped soothe my soul: a pedicure, French Onion soup, listening to Yo-Yo Ma. No go. It was clear: I didn't need a re-alignment—I needed a new axle. But where was I going to go for that?

Me and My Shaman

BY REGAN S. HOFMANN PHOTOGRAPH BY DEBORAH ORY

Finding Answers

When I have a specific physical complaint I go to one of two places: CVS (if it's minor) or the doctor's (if it's really bad). But with my life force worn down to a nub, I decide to take a different route and call my friend Gala, a yoga teacher in Santa Fe.

Gala's skin always glows, she's always in a good mood, and she's never reapplying eyeliner, talking on the cell phone and opening her fourth Diet Coke of the day while driving down a dark twist of country road, swerving like a lunatic to avoid deer, as I was as I sought her advice.

I was raised in a "if it hurts, take an Advil/Midol/glass of Chardonnay/maybe all three" household; Gala grew up in India, at an ashram in Tibet, and in San Francisco. She's never taken an aspirin—when she's in pain, she drinks lotus flower tea. But she's not a total freak. She keeps one Jimmy Choo'd toe in the real world, which is why I thought she might be able to recommend an approach that I—who am not exactly the ashram type—might be able to swallow. I share my dilemma.

"Sounds like you definitely need a new type of help," she says. "It's great you're open to it, because that's the first step." Her tone is that of someone used to welcoming people to the other side.

She suggests Feng Shui (to soothe my head by encouraging a better flow of energy through my life), acupuncture (to balance my body), and a session with a shaman (to reconnect me with my spirit).

A shaman?

The only other time I took a non-Western approach to feeling better was six years ago, when I went (kicking and screaming) to an acupuncturist for a vertebrae problem. When one appointment alleviated the pain, I was sold.

Feng Shui was now so mainstream that I'd have no trouble there. But the shaman? The notion of someone tranced-out to drumbeats, traveling to other worlds to retrieve my errant soul, seemed a little far out. We'd see about that.

Better Living Through Better Living Space

Laura Benko, a master practitioner of the Black Hat sect of Feng Shui, looks more like a fashion model than an alternative healer. Tall and thin, with long, shiny brown hair and pale blue-green eyes, she stands in the corner of my apartment, peering into a pitch-black closet while making notes on her clipboard.

"What's in here?" she asks.

"I have no idea," I say.

"Does the light work?"

"Nope."

"Do you ever use this closet?"

"I'm afraid to go into it."

She holds the clipboard to her chest, arms crossed.

"This closet sits at the heart of your 'knowledge gua,' or the section of your living space that corresponds to self-awareness. It's dark, you don't know what's in there and you're afraid to go look. See what I'm getting at?"

She's just illuminated my repressed little life with a 100-watt bulb. She must see the apprehension in my eyes because she says, "Don't worry. I'm not going to judge you. I'm just going to tell you what I see. What you do about it is up to you."

I nod and smile.

She consults her Bagua map—a diagram that divides my living space into nine tidy sectors (or "guas"), each associated with a different aspect of life: knowledge, family, wealth, fame, relationships, children/creativity, helpful people/travel, career and health—and walks to the bathroom. En route, she holds a little black box with what looks like a speedometer on its face up to various appliances. Turns out it's a tool for reading EMFs (electromagnetic frequencies) which, in excess, are very bad for inner peace.

As she takes in my bathroom, Laura explains that the basic idea of Feng Shui is to arrange a living space in a way that encourages the flow of energy (or Qi, as they refer to your essential life force in the Far East). When Qi moves freely, life is usually good—you feel lighthearted, calm, healthy, happy. When

Qi gets blocked, you can experience illness, depression, bad finances, and difficult relationships.

"Once you start moving things around, your life will change immediately," she says.

"What if it changes for the worse?" I ask.

"If you do as I suggest, the results will be positive. But you have to be ready for some serious change."

I wonder if I will happen upon a big bag of gold bouillon after fixing my malfunctioning commode. (Laura explains that running toilets allow emotional and financial energy to run out of control.) Unfortunately, I don't think Feng Shui works quite like that. I think it's more likely to help me remember to pay my next phone bill.

We move to the bedroom.

She bans the TV in here and indicates that my copy of *The Seven Secrets of Highly Effective People* might rest easier in the "career gua" of my house. "The bedroom should be a serene haven for only two things: sleeping and making love," she points out while pulling on the wobbly headboard of my bed. "What is this attached to?"

"Nothing," I say.

"Well, you want to secure it, as it will enhance the stability of your relationship." Check that.

We spend the next two hours wading through my physical

and emotional clutter, and she leaves me with pages of notes and the feeling that my emotional laundry has just been washed and hung up to dry. After she leaves, I put a lightbulb in the closet and, with a single flick of the switch, feel lighter and freer. This may have something to do with the fact that, after close inspection, there appears to be nothing too terrible in my closet.

Let the Spirit Move You

After re-orienting my external surroundings, it's time to focus inward. Next stop: a shamanic healing circle at the Princeton Center for Yoga and Health, led by Jyoti Chrystal, founder of the Star Seed Center for Yoga & Wellness. Star Seed, based in Montclair, offers many alternative healing tools from meditation to spiritual training and counseling to yoga and past life regression. Basically, Star Seed's practitioners use ancient methods, materials, and rituals to help you cope with modern maladies.

Jyoti, who has a vibrant beauty, is known for her work in "deep soul retrieval." The thesis is simple: All of us are born innocent and intimately connected to our spiritual selves. As we grow up, that connection gets buried—maybe even severed—by the pressures of everyday living. Her goal is to reconnect us to the idyllic state in which we were born—a feeling of "oneness" with nature, or Spirit.

As I arrange my yoga mat, I check out the others who have come to be healed. They range from 7 to 70 (there are three kids in the room). There are maybe 20 of us, including four men. Jyoti's helpers—a drummer from Mexico, a Reiki expert, and a woman who will be applying essential oils as needed to our feet and wrists—set up.

As I lay down on my back with my head pointing to the center of the circle, I reflect that we are like the petals of a single flower, wilting in our respective states of ill-health, waiting for the restorative force of a shamanic soul retrieval. That, or we're all nuts.

A gentle drumming begins and Jyoti takes one of many rattles she will use during the two-hour session, visiting us individually to assess our healing needs. As she moves around the room, she chants, sings, and shakes her lithe body in a primordial dance.

I don't know which is more eerie: the high-pitched yelps she makes while channeling power animals and working with the spirits she encounters, or the sight of her feet and legs, pumping up and down with a rhythm that is only loosely connected to the beat of the drums. I won't go so far as to say she's possessed, but I will say I'm pretty sure she's not dancing alone.

Only once in the magical journey does the skeptic in me rise up. I hear that little voice in my head scoff, "C'mon now. Do you really think shaking a bunch of goat hooves over my stomach is going to de-stress me?" But the sound of Jyoti's voice—at once both soothing and electric—chases my doubt away. At one point, I see myself flying around snow-capped mountaintops in the Far East, high on the astral plain.

Somewhere between Jyoti putting her open mouth above my

heart, breathing into my lungs (which she claimed were "weepy with unresolved grief") and her clattering the goat hooves above my belly, all traces of my stress, malaise, and blues vanish. I feel weightless, awash with a feeling that everything's going to be okay.

I'm learning that if you're willing to let go, you open up a whole new world of options. The trick is to maintain this sense of blissful connection to Spirit while walking through the everyday world. To learn to do that, I have one more stop to make.

Breathe Easy

It's one thing to have healing done to you; it's another to learn to heal yourself. Teaching self-healing through the ancient practice of Qigong is Henry McCann's calling.

While known primarily as an acupuncturist, Henry, a former Fulbright scholar, also teaches Qigong. He explains that Qigong—traditional movement and breathing regimens designed to strengthen and move the body's Qi—are basically a way for a person to rebalance the flow of the energy inside their own bodies without the help of needles. "If everyone did Qigong, there would be no need for acupuncture," he says.

Still, I had such a great experience with acupuncture the first time I tried it I didn't want to skip this step.

He feels my "hara" (the center of the body around the navel), and takes my "energy" pulses (there are six points on each wrist that act as a veritable laboratory of information for an acupuncturist with sensitive fingertips). He also looks at my tongue. The thing about alternative healers is that even if you can get them to explain what they're doing, it often doesn't make sense to you. Or it sounds perfectly reasonable when they explain it to you, but you have no idea how to explain it to someone else.

He slides some needles under my pinkie fingernails. You have to suspend your disbelief that inserting little slivers of metal into tender body parts doesn't cause searing pain, but it doesn't hurt. I swear. He inserts several patterns of needles—on my front and after I turn over, my back. I fall asleep. When I awake, I feel like I've slept for 50 years.

After rousing me and giving me some preventative Chinese herbs (often after an acupuncture session, the body experiences a "healing crisis" brought on by sudden corrective shifts of energy; herbs help make the effects of this less intense), Henry, who also administers Chinese herbs, introduces me to Qigong. With his guidance, I breathe deeply into my nose and out of my mouth while visualizing that I am drawing a stream of brilliant white light into my lungs every time I inhale. I hiss like a snake on exhalation. I feel wonderful, if weird. The best part is that I can do this any time or place.

"Any disease, pain, or malfunction is a manifestation of imbalance," he says. "Acupuncture places needles along the body in patterns that mimic the ideal balance of energy in the body. The stimulus is so strong that jumps starts the body to balance itself. It almost always works," he adds. "Qigong works the same way,

once you learn to do it.”

I'm not sure I understand the methods behind the madness, but I do know that being a human porcupine and inhaling ribbons of light lead to a sense of easiness and vigor that last far beyond my visit.

Light and Free

Days pass. I continue to move things around in my house. I do my best to stay connected to Spirit. I practice Qigong whenever my blood pressure rises, or tension twists my neck into a knot of pain. The rest of my life has not changed—the cell phone still rings like mad, deadlines loom, the bills roll in, I power down Kit Kats—but the way I experience it has. My soul feels present; my spirit feels light. For the first time, I have real hope that maybe there are ways to keep crippling stress at bay without checking out, dressing in a diaper, and sitting silently on a mountaintop.

I found my spirit. Now, where did I put that Diet Coke?

Helping Hands

Laura Benko

Benko Feng Shui
100 Douglass St., Brooklyn, NY
646.236.2454
benkofengshui.com
laura@benkofengshui.com

Jyoti Chrystal

Star Seed Center for Yoga & Wellness
215 Glenridge Ave.
Montclair
973.783.1036
Starseedyoga.com
jyotichrystal@starseedyoga.com

Henry McCann, L.Ac., Director

North Jersey Center for Acupuncture
and Oriental Medicine
37 Kings Rd., Suite 205
Madison
973.660.0110
newjerseysacupuncture.com

Princeton Center for Yoga & Health

50 Vreeland Dr., Suite 506
Skillman
609.924.7294
pcyh@mindspring.com