

HURTS SO GOOD

FAR EASTERN THERAPY MAKES ITS WAY TO CHICAGO

BY ARI BENDERSKY



Ready for a good beat down?

Some people are into S&M; others bondage, whipping and other forms of, um, pleasurable torture. But why pay good money to end up with bruises, burns and bloody spots when you can get walked on—and actually leave feeling refreshed, revived and rejuvenated? Sir Spa recently introduced Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy, and while it might sound like a bout with torture—complete with a medieval-looking wood apparatus—it’s anything but.

The session sees therapist Joél Muñiz working your muscles through a serious deep-tissue massage using only his feet. Yes, you read that right. The whole point of Ashiatsu is to work your back and leg muscles with long, soothing strokes to the point of mush (“ashi” means “foot” while “atsu” means “pressure”)—essentially it’s an amazing deep Swedish massage, but the therapist uses his or her feet instead of their hands. By using the feet instead of the sharp edges of elbows or knuckles, the therapist can cover a larger surface area at one time and work pressure points that are normally harder to reach. And the result is heavenly. Sure, while you’re in the middle of the session you might hold your breath and pray to Jesus to whisk you away from the seemingly tortuous session, but you’ll emerge looser than you’ve been in ages.

Muñiz stands on your back but holds onto overhead wooden bars to a) relieve the pressure of his body weight (don’t worry, he’s actually a slim guy and weighs less than 150 pounds) and b) to push down deeper into your knots. The effects might not be noticeable straightaway, but Ashiatsu has been known to help increase circulation and blood flow and allow for minor adjustments in your back. The modern movement’s founder, Ruthie Piper Hardee, even overcame her severe scoliosis with Ashiatsu helping relieve disk pain in her back following years of performing more common deep tissue work on her clients, according to Muñiz.

The practice, while created thousands of years ago in Asia, was modernized for Western practice about 10 years ago when Colorado-based Hardee was the on-set massage therapist for a movie shoot. After a day of massaging cast and crew, her hands were toast. She had one last client, a 250-pound stunt man who was in dire need of a good rub down. Unable to turn him away, she had him lie face down on the table and noticed a metal grid with holes attached to the ceiling. She decided to climb onto the table and use her feet while holding onto the grid. The client never knew, but said it was the best massage he had ever received. After some tweaking, Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy was born.

And when Muñiz gets up on the table, you’ll likely not know he’s using his feet—it’s that good and that relaxing, once you get used to the pressure and allow yourself to breathe regularly. You’ll dose off, slip into an ethereal state and emerge a new person.

At least that’s what happened to me.

Ashiatsu Oriental Bar Therapy is available at Sir Spa (5151 N. Clark, 773/271-7000) for \$110 (60 mins) or \$160 (90 mins)

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