

Ashiatsu

The Healing Power of Heels

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By Toby Osborne

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When Nancy Sinatra sang "these boots are gonna walk all over you," perhaps she was describing ashiatsu. This ancient practice -- which involves a massage therapist literally walking on your back -- has been performed by Buddhist monks for centuries and is now available in various forms across America.

Turning the tables on those who love a good foot massage, ashiatsu asks the feet to return the favor. Meaning "foot" (ashi) "pressure" (atsu), ashiatsu recipients are simply calling this technique "heaven." And although ashiatsu sessions may appear unconventional, with practitioners often holding on to specially-attached ceiling bars to maintain their balance while walking on a client's back, this type of bodywork is being heralded as a luxurious, deep-tissue massage.

Beginning in the East, ashiatsu's history spans several continents and more than 3,000 years. Many different styles of barefoot massage have originated from India, Japan, Thailand, China, and the Philippines, some are practiced on a floor mat, others require balancing props, such as ceiling bars, chairs, bamboo rods, poles, and even ropes and chains.

Nevertheless, when ashiatsu was first started, its followers were more interested in "chi," or energy, than soothing aching muscles. "Asian bodywork is based on Chinese medicine and an energy body map," explains Barbra Esher, director of education for the American Organization for Bodywork Therapies of Asia (AOBTA) and a certified ashiatsu instructor. "We get a lot of education in Western anatomy and physiology, but our main concern is treating the energetic body. And because of that, a huge amount of our education is in those theories -- like yin and yang."



Laura St. John of Texas treats a client to an Oriental bar therapy session. Ashiatsu and its offshoots are entering the U.S. mainstream thanks to qualified practitioners and spas such as Canyon Ranch. Photos courtesy of Ruthie Hardee and Canyon Ranch.

In traditional ashiatsu, "people follow the flow of the yin meridians coming up from the earth and then the yang meridians coming down from the heavens," Esher says. "How my clients describe the therapy is that it reaches them in a different place -- it kind of connects them with this greater whole. There's a Zen aspect to it."

With links to Zen and chi, it is no surprise that many of the early forms of ashiatsu were not even considered massage. Instead, this therapy was recognized as a healing art, passed down through the generations. From the Buddhist monks, who would only massage through clothing, to India's Chavutti Thermal, which uses oils on the body and a single rope for balance, barefoot massage is ancient history in many cultures, yet relatively new to North America.

Brought into the mainstream U.S. spa and massage industry as ashiatsu Oriental bar therapy in 1999 by Ruthie Hardee, this Western application was derived from a myriad of classic sources. "The first time I saw ashiatsu, I had wandered off from my parents in the lobby of the Hotel Menora in Manila, in the Philippines. I was only 13 years old," Hardee says. "I went around the corner, and I saw a woman holding onto bars, walking on a man's back." After that, Hardee saw many different styles of barefoot massage in Africa, India, and the Philippines, traveling with her parents who were medical missionaries.

But, Hardee says, "ashiatsu Oriental bar therapy is truly Western. It is blood, bone, meat and potatoes, orthopedic surgeons, chiropractors, doctors. That's my world, that's where I came from. So, our technique -- even though the roots are Asian -- it is Western." Hardee's barefoot massage also pays homage to the Swedes -- using long, lowing strokes and lubricants. "Traditional hand Swedish is the same thing, but we do it with the feet," Hardee explains. "We call it gravity-assisted effleurage. And, because the work is so deep and flowing, we're able to send a signal to the brain within the first 10 minutes that says 'I have to surrender, I can't even fight this!'"

The Western spin on barefoot massage is known to improve posture, relieve pain and stress, treat spinal problems, and provide an incredibly deep massage, all while still being gentle. "With regular massage, the No. 1 complaint is that the therapist didn't go deep enough," Hardee says. "People are yearning for deep tissue work, and -- in ashiatsu -- because the therapist is standing straight up, using her center of gravity, and her thigh, knee, and leg are working up the lumbar and the erectors, that's like six hands duct taped together."



Ashiatsu is available in the heartland, too. This treatment room belongs to Terry Ritter, owner of Fascia Works in Evansville, Ind. Photo by Rick Giase.



The Blue Hills Spa staff in San Antonio, Texas, work their way through a class. Photo courtesy of Ruthie Hardee.

Today, there are more than 1,700 certified U.S. graduates in ashiatsu Oriental bar therapy, which means it's likely that a spa near you is offering this new trend in barefoot massage. Like, for instance, the prestigious Stein Eriksen Lodge in Park City, Utah. Judith Sullivan, spa director at the lodge, says, "If you need the deep work, this is the best. The key word here is if someone says 'I just can't find someone who can go deep enough,' you know, that's the kind of person that it's great for."

The Canyon Ranch SpaClubs offer Ashiatsu Deep Oriental Barefoot Massage at its health resorts in Tucson, Ariz., the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, and onboard the Queen Mary 2 cruise ship. Shawn Smith implemented ashiatsu at the Venetian, as the manager of the massage department for Canyon Ranch SpaClub. She says the technique is proving particularly popular with athletes. "If they're very muscle-bound, then they really need the deeper tissue massage to penetrate. With a regular hand massage, it is very difficult to leverage that much weight on someone who is muscular and thick," Smith says. "There's not a whole lot of resistance that can be offered, however, when someone is standing on top of you."

Esher is quick to point out that the original Asian forms of barefoot massage are available in North America, too. "There's a whole scope that's different from Western massage and not all of them use bars," Esher says. "Ashiatsu is actually very similar to what an acupuncturist studies, and it really takes years of training to treat people using those principles."

Just like traditional ashiatsu, which was refined and passed down over centuries, Esher notes that in China, even now, the doctors who practice massage must study for years and years. "They give them a sack of rice and say 'turn this into flour with your hands, and then maybe you can start practicing.'"

Turning rice into flour using only your feet is probably just as difficult, but the idea emphasizes the proud Asian roots behind this massage trend and the importance of, in the words of Esher, "taking the time to develop your own sense of chi. That is valuable and essential."

Of course, whether you try ashiatsu because you want to recharge your chi, or relax your body, barefoot massage has an illustrious past that's worth celebrating.

Toby Osborne is a freelance health and fitness writer based in Canada.



Mobile training units help teach the therapy to instructors at such top-notch spas as the Golden Door, Canyon Ranch, and the Bellagio. Photo courtesy of Ruthie Hardee.