

Knife Massage: Try the Traditional Chinese Treatment

It looks like an average massage parlor with four comfy beds. A small aquarium boasting tropical fish stands in a corner of the room. Pink floral sheets cover the beds.

The masseurs, however, practice knife massage, an ancient Chinese folk remedy for body pain.



Instead of rubbing in oils and perfumed lotions, Pan Wen-hsiung and his three masseurs deftly pat affected parts of the client's body with the edge or the back of a kitchen knife.

Among Pan's regular customers is 51-year-old Peng Lan-ying, a printing designer with chronic neck and back pains due to an old motorcycle injury. She is also troubled by menopause and hyperthyroidism or overactivity of the thyroid gland.

Ms. Peng says she used to go to a Chinese medical clinic specialized in spinal injury cure. "That helped little," she adds. She switched to knife massage after seeing a TV report on the old Chinese alternative medicine a couple of weeks ago.

"I had to drag my husband along for my first treatment because I was afraid of having a knife rubbing my

body," Peng recalls. "I was sweating and tried not to scream for help, but actually it wasn't as painful and scary as I thought." Her pain has been mitigated. After five sessions, she seldom has headaches and tinnitus or a ringing sensation of sound in the ear.

Peng represents the majority of Pan's customers – women aged between 30 to 70 who are suffering from chronic muscle, joint or spinal pains. Others have turned to knife massage, or Dow Leo, for insomnia, hyperthyroidism, stomach and intestines problems or even just to reduce weight.

At Pan's parlor in Taipei's Sungkiang Road, Taiwan, the light pitter-patter of the knife patting the body is mingled with the conversation between the four masseurs and their customers. Some scream for pain when their very sore spots are patted, but most others, like stay-home mother Huang Chia-chen treated for insomnia, fall asleep during their sessions.

A session runs from 20 to 40 minutes, depending on a customer's condition. Clients are advised not to take food at least one hour prior to a session and drink lots of water afterwards.

Explaining how knife massage works, Pan says, "The theory is similar to that of a lightning rod. It diverts pain away from the body through the knife. When the knife touches the skin, the negatron from the metal's edge will interact with the positron released from a problematic spot and a patient will feel a slightly piercing sensation. Then, the pain is relieved."



He adds that knife massage is also linked to acupuncture, and in place of needles, a knife performs the function of a bunch of them without actually piercing the skin.

The 62-year-old master masseur's tool is a stainless knife, 20.5 centimeters long and 8.5 centimeters wide. Its handle is covered with layers of black insulation wrap. It is a little heavier than a regular kitchen knife.

Dangerous as knife massage may appear, Pan says no wounds are inflicted, even when the blade vertically touches the skin. Those under treatment have to remain perfectly still. "That's why children are unsuitable for knife massage because they can hardly keep still," he adds.

Pan admits that most customers, although drawn to the mysterious knife massage healing, tend to be nervous before their first session. So he usually has to give a brief demonstration on himself.

A microbiologist by training, Pan received his first knife massage some 20 years ago from a Japanese Buddhist monk who later became his mentor. His teacher used a Japanese samurai sword.

Legend has it that "knife treatment" was practiced by monks in the Han (206 B.C.–226 A.D.) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties in China. It was later introduced to neighboring Japan.



The master masseur had mostly conducted knife massage for relatives and friends until he chanced to treat a partially paralyzed young man during a trip to Malaysia six years ago. That experience has

prompted him to start his practice in Taiwan and Malaysia.

In 1999 Pan established the Chinese Dow Leo Healthcare Association in Taipei. He has trained about 500 masseurs over the years. About 50 of them are active practitioners.

One of his proteges, Lo Mei-hua, has been practicing knife massage for four years. The woman practitioner in her 50s says she was talked into learning the skills by her sister and had to overcome her initial fear of knives.

"It's quite a challenge to deal with different symptoms," she says, "because some customers have tried various alternative remedies in vain before coming to us for knife massage."

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