

Hands on

A devastating family tragedy led Katherine Hall on a journey to China and, from there, the path to a new career in shiatsu therapy, she tells Leo Benedictus

A working life: the masseuse

by Leo Benedictus The Guardian, Saturday January 12 2008

I am sitting in the waiting room of a grand Harley Street office and I don't quite know what to expect. Type "masseuse" into the internet and a throng of possibilities appears, most of them with only the tenuous connections to massage. But this, with its high ceilings and its roaring fire, is clearly a respectable establishment. And when Katherine Hall arrives in a Shiatsu Society T-shirt, offering courteous greetings in a clipped home-counties accent, I feel ashamed to have harboured such schoolboyish ideas.

"Come through," she invites me, and leads the way into a small, softly lit room at the back of the building, where, beneath the gaze of an assortment of oriental ornaments and pictures, a futon and pillow are carefully laid out. "All I need as a shiatsu practitioner are my pair of hands and my client," Hall says proudly. "People can work on a couch, and I've done work with people sitting on chairs - or with people who are really ill and in bed. But predominantly, 90% of the time, shiatsu is done on a futon on the floor."

So what is all the equipment for, I ask, surveying the charts, balls and trinkets that line her shelves. "They're not must-have parts of shiatsu," she says, adding that while she occasionally dabbles in acupuncture and ear-candling, most of the apparatus belongs to the other practitioners with whom she shares her room.

She takes some rather medieval-looking smoked-glass globes out of a display cabinet. "I don't use cupping, but that's what they are," she explains. "Oh, and here's one for you ... erm." She struggles to remember the name of another obscure art. "What do you call it? Pipes up the bottom ... Ah! Colonic irrigation! There's all sorts of different things going on here."

With her jovial, no-nonsense attitude, Hall is very far from the hippy stereotype normally associated with complementary therapy. For her, the discovery of oriental medicine marked an abrupt departure from a very different life. In the early 1980s she was a successful designer of fashion books and magazines, and then suddenly and shockingly, her mother committed suicide. In the aftermath, she decided to go travelling, ostensibly to work on a project interviewing women around the world, but also so she could visit China - a country that had fascinated her ever since she glimpsed the hills of Guilin on a book cover that a colleague was working on.

"I saw that and something really appealed to me about it," she recalls with a faraway look in her eye. "I don't know why, because I hadn't really thought about China before. I'd certainly never read about it ... But something really connected with me, and I thought, wow!" And when she did start to read about it, her fascination simply exploded. "That rocked my boat," she says. "Just looking at things from a very different point of view, from that more Taoist perspective of looking at emptiness and space. It took me off the rails of western thinking."

In China, Hall learned tai chi, a martial art concerned with qi - a central concept in oriental medicine, loosely defined as a kind of spiritual energy. "Then I studied Thai massage in Bangkok," she says with a grin, "which is a good one for getting a lot of laughs."

Contemplating her return, Hall already knew that life could never be the same again. "During that time away," she says, "I thought, I can't really see myself coming back to London and working in the fashion world and thinking about hemlines." When she did return, in fact, she suffered what she describes as "a complete nervous breakdown", from which she emerged with the decision to train in the Japanese art shiatsu, a massage discipline similar to the "tough tendon" technique she practised in Thailand. "I wanted to be doing something a bit more nitty-gritty," she says.

And nitty-gritty was what she got. She left her Chelsea pad and moved to a flat in Brixton, and took on a job in a wholefood shop while studying shiatsu for two years. "I guess I'd always been quite a touchy-feely sort of person," she says when I ask if learning to work with the human body was a difficult transition. "I'd been quite at peace with my own body, so it wasn't something I felt intimidated by doing. And maybe because of being reasonably relaxed myself it wasn't intimidating for other people."

It also helped, no doubt, that in shiatsu massage, the client's body need not be naked. "I keep people with their clothes on, which is very nice," Hall explains. "It's not lots of hairy backs and stuff like that. Actually it doesn't really matter if people have got clothes on, because I can still feel what I need to feel through them. There's quite a lot of movement - rotations and stretches - so being naked isn't very dignified."

A great deal of Hall's work, moreover, does not involve touching her clients at all. In fact, it begins the moment that they walk through the door. "You're learning to observe," she explains, "look at people, smell people, watch the way they move, and then diagnose from the energy perspective." This diagnosis takes the form of a short conversation to assess the client's physical problems and their emotional state. Hall then uses her training to assess which parts of the person's body she ought to focus on. "If they have got sciatica, for example," she says, "I will be thinking, maybe this is to do with the bladder meridian ... But if they're talking about just being bereaved I might look at the lungs and large intestine meridians." This consultation usually takes up the first quarter of a one-hour session.

"Then they lie down," Hall continues, getting on to the futon herself, "and I'm observing how they lie down - is it open, is it a bit floppy, is it on one side? And then I do the hara [stomach and abdominal area]. Then it's kind of a mixture between palming, maybe working with rotations and stretches, and working the meridian lines and points for specific problems." She gracefully demonstrates some simple leg extensions before climbing back into her seat. It looks like a pleasant, but quite physical experience.

To many people, of course, talk of "energy" and "meridian lines" will sound like hokum, but Hall believes it utterly. She does accept, however, that some of the more mystical elements of her work will not be everyone's cup of tea. "It's part of the training for a shiatsu practitioner," she says, "to gauge what feels appropriate for somebody, and not to go into working on the more spiritual points, perhaps, when someone comes for just a cricked neck. There's a lot of theory with shiatsu, but I think on a really elementary basic level, a major part of the treatment is just quietly being present and really listening to somebody's life."

In the process, Hall gets to talk to some quite interesting people. Among her clients, for instance, whom she sees both in Harley Street and near her home in Northamptonshire, are a life coach, an 80-year-old former City gent and a retired headteacher. Through the charity Mind, she treats some people with serious mental health problems - often heavily medicated.

Besides this, Hall brings in extra money teaching and doing corporate jobs - providing "energy workshops" for companies such as Accenture. Nevertheless, because shiatsu massage is not offered by most health insurers and is only very rarely available on the NHS, she has really had to learn to hustle to make ends meet. "I do all sorts of different bits and pieces as I

attempt to keep the wolf from the door," she says. "There's no real guaranteed income, there's no career ladder. You're very much out on your own."

For all that, at the age of 44 and after 16 years in the business, Hall has finally been able to chisel out the life she wants for herself, leaving plenty of time to spend with her dog and her garden. She works roughly five hours a day, earning up to £16,000 a year. Enough, just about, for her to live on.

With trepidation, I admit that I have a final question to ask. It seems silly, but I want to know. Do people, how can I put it, ever get the wrong idea about what she does? "Oh God!" she recognises this territory. "It's not been a problem. I have had one or two phone calls, especially when I first started, from gentlemen." She speaks the word satirically, with excessive refinement. "Sort of saying, 'Um yes, well I saw your card.' You can tell within two seconds if it's a dodgy phone call. And they'll say, 'Do you do any um ...' And being an evil person I'll say, 'Do I do any um?'" She grins. "I've never had anybody actually come in who is after 'extras' or 'finishing off' or anything like that." Now she laughs out loud. "I think being clothed may help."

Curriculum vitae

Current position Shiatsu practitioner and teacher

Qualifications Member of the professional register of the Shiatsu Society (MRSS)

Salary Up to £16,000 a year

Hours Flexible. Around five hours a day

Career high "Introducing new students to the amazing world that is Chinese medicine."

Career low "Thinking, 'I've bitten off far more than I can chew,' 'This is not a financially easy way to make a living,' and 'How am I going to pay my pension?'"