

Cranial therapy combines modalities

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Donna Olmstead / Journal Staff Writer



Anil Poovadan demonstrates a Tibetan Cranial healing treatment on his wife, Janice Gorman, who also offers the therapy at their Atmabodh Studio in Bernalillo. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

A combination of spiritual and physical therapy known as Tibetan Cranial has helped several local people reduce stress and maintain function in the face of chronic illness.

Poet and retired Albuquerque psychologist Paula Amar Schwartz says she has had some relief from the stiffness and tremor related to Parkinson's disease since beginning Tibetan Cranial treatment with Anil Poovadan of Bernalillo about two months ago.

"I found that after the second session, I had a greater range of motion in my head and neck, allowing me to turn my head while backing up my car and relieving some of the stiffness in my shoulder as well," Schwartz says.

She says her neurologist has encouraged her to try alternative treatments. To maintain her flexibility and mobility, she does acupuncture, yoga, meditation, tai chi and swimming, along with whatever medication her physician prescribes.

"Tibetan Cranial has the advantage of combining meditative with physical practice and Anil is expert in both," she says.

Poovadan and his wife, Janice Gorman, have both completed their apprenticeships in the ancient art of

Tibetan Cranial, they said recently at their home and yoga studio, Atmabodh, in a historic adobe in Bernalillo.

Both practice Zen, with its focus on meditation, and yoga. Gorman is also a nurse and Poovadan has taught yoga in his native India and the United States.

In hourlong sessions, recorded mantras play to invoke the spiritual side of both the therapist and the client, they say.

“We work with the person where they are. The physical, the mental and emotional all come together. We bring it all into the present moment,” Poovadan explains.

Gorman explains the technique involves balancing pulses on the head to bring the body into balance: “We hold a person in a sacred place.”

Lori Hoffman says she’s practiced yoga with Poovadan and knows and trusts him and Gorman: “I really trust them. I walk out of there and I feel transformed.”

Hoffman, 53, who suffered a severe head injury as a child, has issues with her right eye. A tendon pulls and distorts her vision, she explains: “The Tibetan Cranial helps keep the distortion down and balances everything, so I’m better able to see out of that eye.”

A surgical solution would keep her on her stomach in bed for two weeks and she hopes to avoid that, she says. She also had troublesome headaches and those are mostly gone. “I rarely have a headache. Like yoga and massage, it helps you maintain and feel renewed.”

Poovadan, who has also been a cranial-sacral therapist, says he hasn’t been offering those treatments as much, because Tibetan Cranial offers more whole body solutions for his clients.

Both therapies work on the head, but have little else in common, Poovadan says.

He has been a student of alternative healing strategies for about 50 years, he says.

Poovadan first learned about the therapeutic benefits of yoga after his mother had gone to the internationally known B.K.S. Iyengar for yoga therapy for her arm. In the following years both he and his mother would study with Iyengar in Puné, India, both becoming teachers. He also completed Raja Yoga Pranayama training with the late Swami Poornananda before moving to California and then New Mexico in 1989 with Gorman.

Poovadan and Gorman apprenticed in Tibetan Cranial with Shar Lee, who teaches and has a school in Colorado.

Lee studied the technique in 1987 with Lama Dorje in Kathmandu, Nepal, as she traveled the world to seek out alternative healing methods. Lee has been a Zen practitioner, a certified yoga teacher and a massage therapist for almost 50 years.

In a YouTube video of her experiences, she explains that she did not speak any Tibetan and her teacher did not speak any English, so her education came through practice and physical corrections if she did something wrong.

She learned that the healing technique, very popular in the area, was about 3,000 years old and had been handed down through generations of Tibetan monks, until that temple closed when the Chinese came to power in Tibet, she says.

Lee learned the work had these physical components: “taking the pulses, moving the cranial bones in specific ways and sealing the cranium when the work was finished. Everything else was progressively more subtle and out of the realm of language,” she says on the website, tibetancranial.org.

Gorman says the therapy is physically challenging, because the therapist does the session on her knees. She says that her experience with it, has been unexpected: "It was the oddest thing. I gave up meat and I quit drinking alcohol. I wasn't thinking about doing that."

Poovadan, who is president of the Tibetan Cranial Association, says his experience has been subtle, a deepening of his spiritual understanding and meditation: "I perceive things differently. It's transformational. This is a way of stepping out of the box. It's a way of being more than our symptoms."

While more than two dozen people practice the ancient art in neighboring Colorado, Poovadan and Gorman are so far the only two people registered in New Mexico.

Client Tara Woolfe, 36, who lives in Nob Hill, says she used the therapy to help with her grief over her husband's death. She would recommend it to others. She says she found "relaxation, comfort, and healing achieved through human touch and caring spiritual connection. For me at least, there seemed to be a heightened sense of awareness, mental, or maybe spiritual awareness. The after result is a state of relaxation comparable to a massage, and a euphoric state comparable to post-acupuncture."

Client Carolyn Poole, 71, says Tibetan Cranial relieves her tension. She says it helps her husband, who has Alzheimer's, with agitation and anxiety.

"After one session, I started crying," she says. "I felt extremely happy another time. It's a great emotional release. I generally felt better, lighter."