

Simple technique lets life force flow

Rippling motions rectify posture

Energy replaces pain, tightness

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

After more than three decades of pain I finally found relief from a most unlikely source – the subtle, rippling movements in the spines of desert nomads riding camel-back.

Called the Mitzvah Technique (*mitzvah* is Hebrew for good deed) the series of movements that became my salvation, re-educating my body and posture, was developed by Jerusalem-born Nehemia Cohen.

Cohen, now a youthful looking octogenarian, started his professional life as a dancer and choreographer with the Inbal Dance Theatre of Israel.

After suffering a debilitating back injury, he studied many different approaches to treating back pain including the Alexander Technique.

Eventually, by studying the movement of children and animals, the Inbal dancers and nomadic Bedouins, Cohen found the interplay of physical forces between the pelvis and spine these groups had in common.

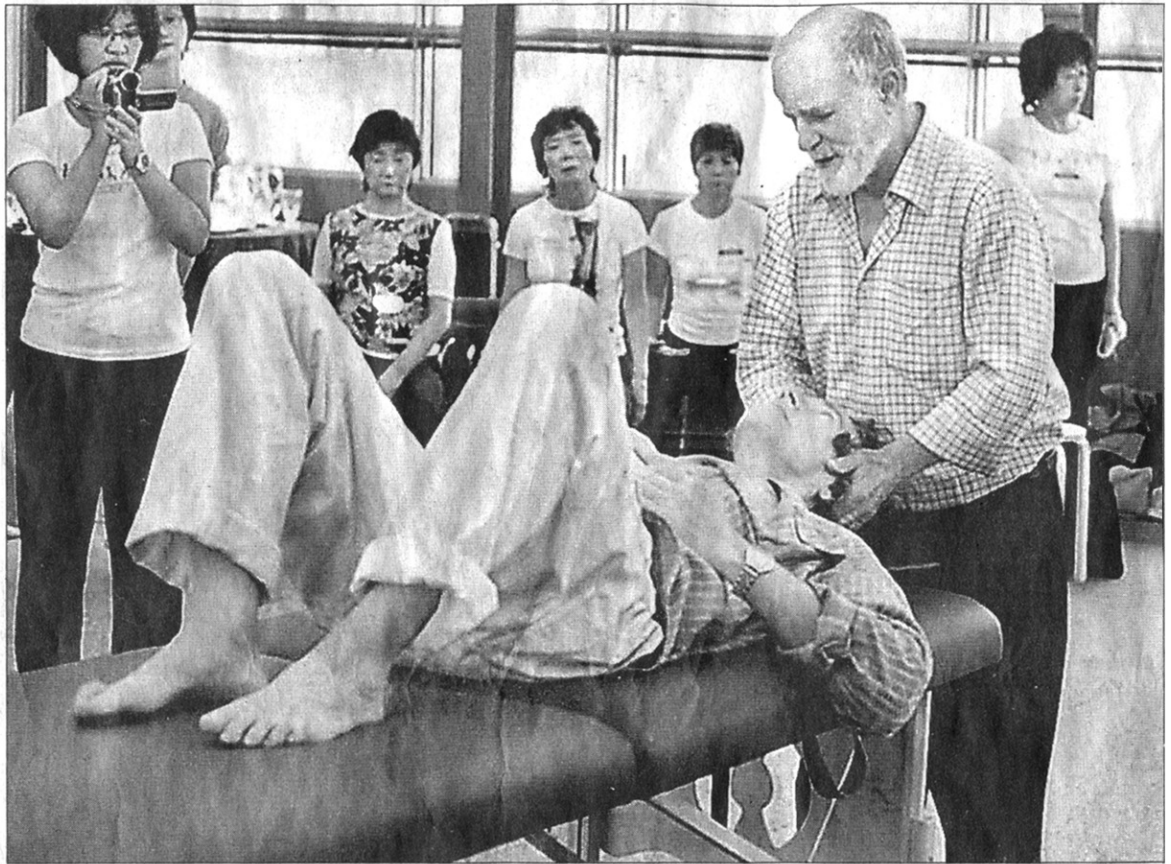
From this he developed a series of simple exercises designed to rectify poor posture caused by sitting too long at a desk or lounging on a soft chair or sofa at home while watching TV.

When practised on a regular basis the exercises lengthen the spine, expand the chest and widen the back. These changes let the head balance freely on the top of the spine.

The results are remarkable to say the least and have given me a new lease on life.

Before learning Cohen's technique I could barely open my mouth or sit or walk comfortably. I had three fairly common conditions, for which treatment was generally available.

Physiotherapy was recommended for the jaw restriction known as temporomandibular joint syndrome (TMJ). For my repetitive stress disorder plantar fasciitis (an inflammation of the fascia attachment to the heel) they prescribed cortisone



MYRNA BLACKMORE PHOTO

Former Israeli dancer Nehemia Cohen demonstrates the Mitzvah Technique, which he developed after suffering a severe back injury. The exercises lengthen the spine, expand the chest and widen the back, allowing the head to balance more freely on the top of the spine.

tar fasciitis (an inflammation of the fascia attachment to the heel) they prescribed cortisone injections and orthotics.

Nothing, I was told, could be done to ease the discomfort caused by scoliosis, an inherited curvature of the spine.

Over the years, I had sought relief through yoga and Pilates. During hatha yoga classes I stretched and learned more effective breathing. I tried bikram yoga, held in 37.5 degree Celsius temperatures, to facilitate loosening of tight muscles.

In Pilates, I learned a series of technical exercises that help develop flexibility and strength. However, despite classes and medical treatment, relief turned out to be only temporary.

Then the gym added Mitzvah Technique classes. Although increasingly doubtful that anything could help on a permanent basis, I consulted with instructor Toshie Okabe, who was trained by the Mitzvah Technique founder himself, and subsequently decided to begin with

some private sessions.

Surprisingly, I soon felt more relaxed and also energized, and the severe discomfort in my jaw, back and feet began to abate. My body had embarked upon its rejuvenating journey.

According to Cohen, his technique stimulates the body's defence system, working with gravity and, at the same time, releasing tension and stress during motion.

With the technique, "One feels as if lubrication has been applied to all of the joints in the body," he says.

At a recent Canadian-Japanese Mitzvah Technique conference, hosted by Toshie in Ontario's Hockley Valley, Cohen gave demonstrations.

"We were not born to ache so much but we grow up not knowing there is a natural solution," he told about 50 participants. "With Mitzvah, you will feel the life force flowing through the body like a fountain."

Sometimes simply practising the Mitzvah exercises alone

can't reverse years of sustained poor posture. In such cases, during one-on-one sessions, practitioners use gentle guided touch to activate the rippling motion that brings spine, pelvis and head into a fluid yet upright relationship. While the Mitzvah Technique does incorporate aspects of other disciplines, its unique feature is facilitating awareness and change through the body itself without concentrated thinking or having to memorize specific positions.

As for me, the TMJ has disappeared over about three months and I am once again able to chew, sit and walk freely and easily. The scoliosis curvature has decreased noticeably. Next summer I plan to hike up to 5,500 metres in the Andes, while practising the Mitzvah Technique along the way.

The Mitzvah Technique Downtown Studio can be reached by phone at 416-596-7426 or through the website www.betterposture.ca.