

Alex Scrimgeour, Dien Chan 2015

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Facial reflexologist Alex Scrimgeour carries out treatment on Jeanette Wang at The Spa at Mandarin Oriental. Photo: Bruce Yan

You can tell a lot about a person's emotions and feelings by looking at his or her face. To Dien Chan practitioners, the face represents much more: the entire human body, to be precise.

By using a variety of specially developed massage tools to stimulate different areas and reflex points on the face and head, Dien Chan facial reflexology is said to have potent healing effects for back or neck pain, poor digestion, migraines, stress, hormonal imbalances and even mental or emotional conditions such as anxiety and depression. The therapy is also said to enhance sleep quality and boost calmness, as well as stimulate facial rejuvenation by creating a natural facelift.

Created in 1980 in Ho Chi Minh City by Vietnamese professor Bui Quoc Chau, Dien Chan has slowly spread across the world. Last month, it arrived in Hong Kong through London-based practitioner Alex Scrimgeour, who served as a visiting therapist for two weeks at the Mandarin Spa at Mandarin Oriental hotel.

Dien Chan is based on the theory that the face is the command centre of the whole body. "If you look at modern research into the facial muscles and nerves that govern expression, they're very much connected to the nerves that govern the heart and lungs as well. In many ways, these are the basis of good health, circulation and breathing," says Scrimgeour, a licensed acupuncturist and massage therapist. "Also, because of the close proximity of the face to the brain, Dien Chan is seen as affecting the brain neurochemistry as well."

According to traditional Chinese medicine, the face is the area which stocks yang energy, and all the yang channels pass by the face.

In traditional acupuncture, it's believed that a person's face represents all the vital organs: the ears for the kidneys, nose for lungs, eyes for liver, lips and mouth for the spleen, and tongue for the heart. By acting on the face, the acupuncturist can regularise organ function.

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Bui, now 73, had worked as an acupuncturist specialising in treating addictions at a drug rehabilitation centre in Saigon in the 1970s. He availed himself of the large number of patients to validate his theories and, in 1980, established Dien Chan, complete with the face map of fixed points and their relationship with the body's organs.

In 1986, he stopped using acupuncture needles and created specific Dien Chan tools which did not penetrate the skin. There are about 20 different pen-sized metal contraptions with features such as pointy ends, comb-like teeth, small knobby balls and rollers.

"Dien Chan has a slight similarity with foot reflexology and the idea that a small part of the body can affect the whole," Scrimgeour says. "But there's also quite a big difference in that foot reflexology uses just one map, whereas with Dien Chan, there are up to 20 different maps of the body that are imaged onto the face. This gives the therapy a more dynamic and flexible approach to treating things."

There are about 250 different points on the face and head that Dien Chan practitioners can choose to work on, depending on the client's needs.



The tools for the job. Photo: Bruce Yan

Scrimgeour, who has a bachelor of science in traditional Chinese medicine from England's College of Integrated Chinese Medicine, discovered Dien Chan a few years ago while in Ho Chi Minh City on a clinical internship at the Institute of Traditional Medicine.

He learned the technique from Dien Chan master Tran Dung Thang, a 94-year-old who had studied directly under Bui and treats up to 100 people a day in his home clinic.

Scrimgeour integrates Dien Chan with his knowledge of Chinese medicine from acupuncture theory, as well as different styles of massage. So while the main treatment focuses on the face, he also works on other body parts to help integrate the therapy through the body.

For my complaints of intense stress and achy shoulders from pushing a stroller and carrying my toddler around, Scrimgeour begins by gently scraping the scalp along my hair line with a rake-like tool, which is surprisingly calming.

Then the facial work begins proper. He uses his fingertips, knuckles, as well as the tools. Pressing down my cheekbones and onto the jaw, I am surprised at how sore and tight my muscles feel. He zones in on specific points on my face and ears with a precise pointed tool. He also makes quick tapping movements with what he calls a "stimulating and energising tool". The session finishes off with some brief kneading of my shoulders and feet.

Although I only experience a truncated version of the typical hour-long therapy, I feel uplifted. It is amazing that just a dot of pressure on the face can effect such significant relief and relaxation through the body.

"Usually, the treatment takes people into a very yin state similar to deep sleep," Scrimgeour says.

Treatments are tailored to the individual. For "very serious" issues, he says the general guideline is four to six weekly sessions for a course of treatment.