

FEELING GOOD

# EAST MEETS SOUTH

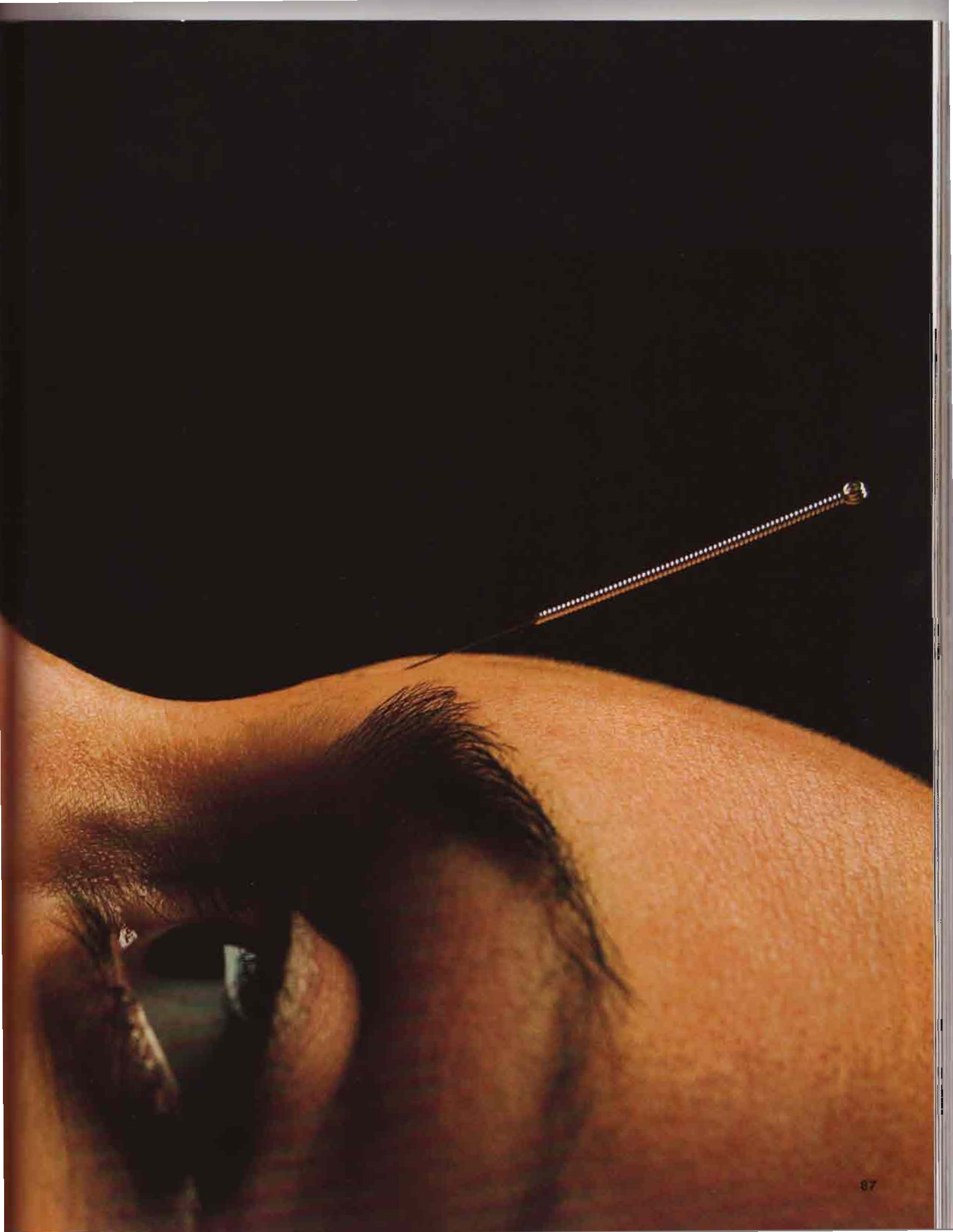
## ACUPUNCTURE FOR WELL-BEING AND HEALTH

BY CAROLYN MASON PHOTOS BY ROBERT SUTTON

It takes a few minutes before the tension, like a balled-up fist between my shoulder blades, slowly eases under the calm, spiritual gaze of naturopathic physician Sarita Elizabeth Cox. Her office and treatment room is a small, cozy space tucked behind an office building in downtown Tuscaloosa, and I'm there for an acupuncture treatment. I'm not exactly nervous, but it's hard to acclimate to the Zen-like peacefulness that is attempting to infiltrate my natural jittery state. We sit at a table, and she pours me a cup of tea as I

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give her a wish list of what I'd like to accomplish with the treatment: more energy, better sleep, inner peace, calm, enhanced well-being and, mostly, I don't want the flu that's going around. While I'm chattering, she inserts a needle in each ear and then sits across from me, smiling while I pause to touch the needles. The slight sting gives way to a feeling of relaxation.

Sitting there, surrounded by soothing music and her gentle ministrations, the ambience is more Far Eastern than Deep South. For Cox, originally from Tusculumbia, setting up her practice in Tuscaloosa completes a journey she began when she attended the University of Alabama, where she earned a degree in English literature in 1990. She said she always felt drawn toward alternative healing and decided to continue her education at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Ore., where she received a masters of science in Oriental medicine, studying acupuncture, qigong, diet and herbal medicine. Next, she completed doctoral studies with an emphasis on vitalistic, eclectic and naturopathic traditions — Western medicine pathology, diagnosis and pharmacy, hydrotherapy, nutrition, homeopathy and Western botanical medicine. She's nationally board certified in naturopathic medicine and acupuncture, although the state of Alabama does not regulate or license the practice of either medicine.

Her interest in yoga and spirituality led her to Santa Cruz, Calif., where she directed an ayurvedic wellness center and taught in the Western medicine department of Five Branches Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine. She has also worked in a medical clinic in India, outside Dehli. But she always wanted to come back to Tuscaloosa, and in fall 2006, she opened a private practice where she offers homeopathy, acupuncture and naturopathic treatments.

Because I didn't want to spoil the calming effect by grilling her on her every move during the treatment, she later explained each step of the process.



### THE INTERVIEW

**CM: What are you looking for in my medical history?**

SEC: First, I am exploring your past and current personal and family medical history. Second, your current health concerns — in order of importance to you — as well as your expectations of the visit. Third, any obvious obstacles to wellness, your lifestyle, your attitudes about your own health, support network, work, relationships and money.

**CM: Most people think of acupuncture as a "fix" for chronic pain. So is it OK that I'm here just to feel better?**

SEC: When people come in with specific health issues — pain, acute or chronic disorders — the vital force of the being is being utilized to heal that disease. The symptoms are a wise expression of an imbalance; they are a manifestation of the underlying cause or causes of the disharmony. When someone comes in free of symptoms, the next level of healing can be addressed. According to "Shen Nong Ben Cao," the oldest materia medica of China, three classes of treatment exist. The lowest class treats illness — corresponding to earth. The middle class treats depletions and emaciations

Carolyn Mason, right, speaks with Sarita Elizabeth Cox about acupuncture procedures.

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and focuses on prevention — corresponding to human being. The highest class governs destiny and prolonging years without aging — corresponding to heaven. When we treat at the level beyond symptoms, we are working in the realm of optimizing health, fulfilling our destinies, realizing our true natures.

### CM: What exactly is acupuncture?

SEC: Acupuncture involves the insertion of extremely thin, sterilized needles to various depths at strategic points on your body. Although scientists don't fully understand how or why acupuncture works, some studies indicate that it may provide a number of medical benefits — from reducing pain to helping with chemotherapy-induced nausea or simply encouraging a sense of well-being and relaxation.

People experience acupuncture differently. However, most feel no pain or a brief, sharp sensation as the needles are inserted, but generally the procedure isn't painful. It's common to feel a deep aching sensation when the needle reaches the correct spot. After placement, the needles are sometimes moved gently or stimulated with electricity or heat, where sensations may again be experienced. Some people are energized by treatment, while others feel relaxed.

**CM: Once I was on the table, you inserted the needles in my feet, forehead, hands and legs. I have to say that while I barely felt the needles on the right side, the left side hurt for a few minutes. Why one side and not the other?**

SEC: There is a blockage of the free flow of energy on the left side. In other words, there is an imbalance between the left and the right side. The cause may be a pathogen, a lifestyle habit, an emotion, a trauma. Other cases may present as an interior-exterior imbalance or a top-bottom imbalance. The classical diagnostic system of all Chinese medicine, recorded 2,000 years ago in the "Neijing, The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine," considers eight parameters, bagang: the balance of hot/cold, exterior/interior, excess/deficient, yin/yang. A familiar im-



Sarita Elizabeth Cox performs a series of techniques on a patient at her office in Tuscaloosa.

age for this scenario is the black and white yin/yang symbol. Instead of a dynamic balance, at this moment in time, there is relative more of one and less of the other.

### CM: What do the needles in the ears do?

SEC: The principle of holism applies here. The entire body can be accessed through the ear. If you look at the ear, it looks like an upside down fetus. The holographic paradigm reaches far back to the Daoists.



Front row, left to right: Partners: Teddy Neilson, Jordan Plaster, Clark Scarvey  
Back row, left to right: Wanda Rountree (Client Associate),  
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LaoTsu in chapter 1 of the "Tao Te Ching" suggests that all things are implicit in each other. In the West in the early 1700s, Gottfried Leibniz (discoverer of integral and differential calculus) proposed a similar model. You could also use the modern analogy of DNA, in which each cell in the body contains a blueprint of the entire organism.

**CM: You tapped my head and feet when we started. What was that about?**

SEC: Daoist philosophy suggests that human beings' proper place is between heaven and earth. When I tapped your head, I touched baihui, meeting of 10,000 things. This is the point where heaven enters human being. I ask you to be aware of you inherent connection. When I touch your feet, I touch yongquan, bubbling spring. This is the point where earth enters human being. I ask you to be aware of how the earth supports and nourishes you.

**CM: And the needle between my eyebrows?**

SEC: This is an extra point, yintang, which empirically is used for relaxation. Physiologically speaking, the pineal gland is activated by light and serves a biorhythmic function such as regulating the circadian clock and producing melatonin. It is often found calcified in X-rays. There is a lot of mystery and metaphysical references to this area. Descartes called it the "seat of the soul." This area is also associated with the area of ajna chakra, sometimes referred to as the spiritual third eye.

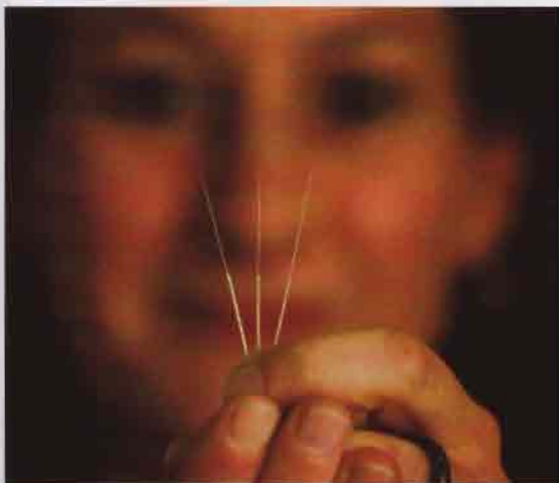
**CM: The ambience in the room is so soothing. Why did you choose that particular music?**

SEC: I chose a Chinese CD called Floating Spirits. It is an arrangement played on a shui-jin-qin, a xylophone-like instrument made out of crystals. It helps create a peaceful and clear atmosphere conducive to healing.

**CM: What was your goal for me with this session? What should my goals be?**

SEC: My goal was to introduce you to acupuncture. Your goals are your goals. As a health-care practitioner, I strive to meet patients where they are and engage in a healing journey together. I believe that self-care and development, awareness, evolution and love are principal techniques toward healing.

After the treatment, she removed the needles and we talked about my plans for increased wellness. I was going to give up artificial sweeteners and read through her information on better sleep techniques. The overall feeling of well-being and renewed energy persisted even as I resumed a hectic schedule. And, best of all — I didn't get the flu. 🌿



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