

Body Buddhism

by Bill Palmer MRSST

In the recent past, there has been an interesting discussion taking place in Europe, which is questioning why the status of Shiatsu seems to be declining. Several people identify the problem as the fact that Shiatsu is promoted as a system for helping specific conditions. They point out that this 'medicalizes' Shiatsu and puts it in competition with mainstream medicine. Since there is no controlled evidence that Shiatsu is effective at treating medical conditions, this creates conflict with advertising standards and loses the respect of health professionals.

The authors of this criticism suggested that we focus on the unique features of Shiatsu rather than competing with other therapies. But what are its unique features? Acupuncture also works with meridians. Osteopathy and Physiotherapy also work with touch and manipulation. What distinguishes Shiatsu?

One of the fundamental principles of almost all forms of Shiatsu is to use vertical pressure guided by weight and breathing rather than muscles. This article explores the profound effect of this quality of touch and how, by focusing on this, we can understand the unique resource that Shiatsu can offer. I will show how this form of touch activates the Yang Ming and Tai Yin, which express the relationship between the movements of Earth and Metal.

The Yang Ming and Tai Yin

The **Yang Ming** expresses the relationship between the **Stomach** and the **Large Intestine**. The Stomach is our capacity to feel need, to reach for something in the outside world that can satisfy the need and to receive it. The Large Intestine is our ability to release and reject those things that we don't need. So together, they regulate our boundary: our dependence on and independence from the environment.

The **Tai Yin** is the relationship between the **Spleen** and the **Lung**. Receiving what we need, the holes are filled and we feel internally supported. From this inner expansion we can spread outwards and express ourselves, which is the energy we call the Lung Qi. Without the inner buoyancy of the Spleen our energy has a tendency to collapse inwards and so move inwards rather than radiating outwards.

Thus the Yang Ming and Tai Yin give a sense of self-sufficiency and create our personal space but also allow us to receive energy from the environment when needed. Together their four constituent meridians form a family of functions that create a sense of Home: a place of rest that is supportive and safe - a secure space from which one can go out and be oneself in the world. For this reason I like to call them the **Home Family**.

Working with the Home Family.

The Six Forms of Touch is a training system that I developed in the 1980's to show how the quality of contact one has with a client affects their energy. *The quality of contact encompasses not only physical touch but the way in which you relate together.* This is often more important than the choice of tsubos and meridians.

The forms of touch associated with the Home family are fundamental to the spirit of Shiatsu because they focus on developing the client's capacity for self-support and self-sufficiency. But, although most practitioners would say that their work supports the capacity for self-healing, the way in which they practice can undermine this ideal. For instance, if a client comes to have Shiatsu for a condition like a frozen shoulder, they are really treating the practitioner as a doctor. The Shiatsu process may seem more holistic by supporting Kyo parts of the organism that are not being used. But the way in which it is done still follows the medical paradigm of expert diagnosis and treatment. In my experience, this does not help a client to become more self-reliant. The next time something goes wrong, they are likely to come back for Shiatsu to get better.

As the old saying goes: *If you give a person a fish, they can feed themselves for a day but if you teach someone to fish they can feed themselves for life.* If we follow the medical paradigm, then we

are giving a client a fish. They have not learned something from the Shiatsu that helps them in the future.

Awareness and Toleration

So what *is* special about Shiatsu touch? I think that the quiet, vertical pressure of Shiatsu is the pre-eminently effective at helping people to be **AWARE** of themselves and helping them to **TOLERATE** those parts of themselves from which they are trying to escape.

Toleration is not often talked about but I think it is the key to maturity and spiritual development. If you can tolerate discomfort then you can meet and face those parts of yourself from which you are hiding, so you can create a space for the Kyo energy to come to the surface. The deep stillness of Shiatsu touch gives you an opportunity to face your discomfort and make space for it to speak.

In Shiatsu practice, we frequently collude with the client's desire to escape from pain rather than helping them to understand its message. If we do this then we are maintaining their split state of being. On the other hand, if we can help a client to be simply aware, something magical happens. Paradoxically, by tolerating and accepting discomfort, we relax into ourselves and a profound change takes place. By focusing on cure and change, we subtly collude with the client's impulse to avoid discomfort so the overall pattern of ignoring the Kyo still remains.

Instead of promoting Shiatsu as a system for curing ills, we could present it as a method of self-development through the body, helping people to develop their inner resources and their capacity to fully embrace who they actually are. In this way it could be seen as more like meditation than medicine. People could come to Shiatsu to develop their inner resources rather than to cure themselves of problems. It could be something that healthy people do to strengthen their ability to deal with life.

These principles are very close to the essence of Buddhism, which is why I have titled this article 'Body Buddhism'. Buddhist philosophy sees the desire to change, even for the better, as an aspect of suffering because it is maintaining the divisions in yourself. The dualism between good and bad and the striving for perfection create a tension of dissatisfaction with the present. The sensations of the body are naturally in the present and provide a sure way of being aware of reality, so provide a natural way towards the profound peace that could be the fruit of a life spent learning to tolerate yourself as you are.

Front Door Touch

Practically, how do we help people to embrace themselves as they are? The most important thing is our attitude. If we see ourselves as experts, curing people of their ills, the client is disempowered and dependent on our expertise. Both therapist and client are caught up in the story of cure and change. On the other hand, if we see ourselves as assistants, asking questions that encourage a client's self awareness and helping them with our touch to give space in their body to sense those parts from which they have split away, then we are teaching them a skill they can use to become whole.

The way in which we touch and talk to the client is not a matter of technique. Our intention is transmitted through our touch and the client can feel our underlying attitude. So the first step must be to work on ourselves so that we no longer have the desire to rescue somebody. When I feel like rescuing somebody from their suffering, it is often because I, myself, feel uncomfortable with their pain. In a way, I too am trying to escape from myself by relieving their suffering. By learning to tolerate and accept myself, my touch changes and the client no longer feels my intention to rescue them. This helps them to stop feeling like a victim reaching for help and gives them space to really sense themselves. One of my past clients taught me how to do this in a way that I think is particularly useful.

Tamara came to me with multiple problems, both physical and emotional. Every session she presented new issues to deal with. She continually wanted me to advise her and projected a strong sense of need. One of her major issues was the failure of her love life - she felt that men found her 'too much' and her relationships ended quickly. For many sessions, I worked on one

problem after another, but we didn't seem to be getting anywhere. I noticed that I felt tense and contracted - and also somewhat helpless! Then, one session while I was working with her, I noticed that my own inner organs felt tense and contracted. I felt uncomfortable and overwhelmed. I thought that, if my touch was transmitting this feeling, then I was just confirming the pattern of rejection she felt in her relationships.

So, while continuing to work with her, I focused on softening and breathing into my organs, giving them space to tolerate my discomfort. Suddenly, without either of us saying anything, she burst into tears and said that something had changed. She felt I had met her for the first time and from then on the therapy changed course. She started expressing feelings simply, not as a story of complaint, but as an exploration of herself. In the process, most of her physical symptoms just disappeared.

Giving space for a client to meet themselves is the Yin aspect of working with the Home Family. I like to call it Front Door Touch, because it is similar to how you approach someone else's home. The natural process is not to try opening the door, but to knock on it and wait. If the owner feels like coming to meet you, they will open the door and invite you in.

In the act of touch, we can 'knock on the door' by making simple contact, expanding our own energy and then wait for the client's energy to meet your touch. If you go through that first contact too fast, it's like barging into someone's house. So the foundation of this form of touch is to notice your own contractions and tensions, to breathe into them and give them space to expand. This is a lesson we learn at the beginning of Shiatsu training, but being aware enough to fully practice it is taking me a lifetime!

In terms of relationship, this form of contact can be seen most clearly in the types of questions you ask. For instance, if your questions are fishing for information with which to make a diagnosis, then you are rooting around in the client's house rather than waiting for them to show you round. In contrast, if you invite a client to become aware of how they are in the present and you give them open space to express themselves, then they naturally come into contact with their physical sensations and the bodywork naturally follows from this. So both of you are collaborating in mutual exploration.

Front Door Touch develops the Tai Yin because it helps someone to expand into the present moment and to be aware of themselves as they actually are, rather than focusing on what they want to be. I think it is what makes Shiatsu touch unique and special.

Yang Ming Touch

However, the current culture is so goal oriented that many people only receive bodywork to solve problems. This attitude makes it difficult for them to open to the power of Front Door Touch. They feel that the therapist is not doing enough! The energies of the Yang Ming provide a good classroom to demonstrate the value of active awareness.

At the beginning of a series of Shiatsu sessions I often suggest an exercise where the client tells me where they want support or where they want touch. Then, when I am contacting them in the place they indicate, I encourage them to give feedback such as "Not so hard" or "Move a bit to the left. This activates their capacity for identifying what they need (Stomach) and pushing away what is not helpful (Large Intestine). I find that this form of interactive work is very powerful and shows people that they *do* know what they need, instinctively, without the help of an expert. After this practice, they are more capable of opening the door and inviting me in to explore the deeper aspects of their condition.

Conclusion

This article is suggesting that we could present Shiatsu as a form of self-development rather than a medical process. If we stop thinking about treating conditions and start thinking of helping people to be aware of their body and tolerate themselves as they are, then we are giving them a huge resource to use in their lives.

In this process, conditions often heal themselves: partly because being aware means that you naturally take more care of yourself but mainly that many symptoms are the outer sign of an inner division. However, a condition is sometimes simply a part of who you are. For instance, old age brings about many issues that may not improve. If you have already learned to let go of striving for an ideal state and have learned to tolerate discomfort and to listen to its message, then dealing with old age and other chronic conditions becomes much easier.

Many Shiatsu techniques are immediately helpful for acute problems without entering the spiritual work described in this article. I am not belittling these successes, but we tend to emphasise only these results in publicity and there are other therapies that are equally effective. I think that Shiatsu shows its uniqueness in the way in which it can help people whose problems have deep roots. Chronic issues may not be 'curable' but by following the roots, they lead us into areas from which we have split and provide an opportunity for learning how to be whole.

I want to finish by honouring my mother, who has shown me this philosophy is not just words, but a practical tool. She has had a difficult life, and spent a lot of it trying to change things, with passion and energy. But I never felt she was really happy until she had a stroke several years ago. She took the opportunity of being severely disabled to let go of striving for happiness and to simply endure her condition. As a result, she relaxed and has blossomed. She is radiant and content with who she is, despite chronic pain. She has not only found happiness for herself but provides a source of wisdom and spiritual support for the people around her.

If we could use the unique, still and aware touch of Shiatsu to help people to find the state she has discovered then I feel we would be providing a much more valuable resource for humanity than supplying yet another way of escaping from pain.

Pictures to be placed where convenient:



