

Watching Clouds Shift in the Sky

Akinobu Shinmei Kishi talks to Bill Palmer

Shinmei Kishi was born in July 1949 in the Gunma province of Japan and, at age of twenty started studying Shiatsu at the Shiatsu Technical College and at the Iokai centre, established by Shizuto Masunaga. Three years later he started teaching at Kyonhi University of Oriental Medicine and also travelled to Paris where he taught Zen Shiatsu throughout the 1970's. He holds a special but often unrecognised place in the history of Shiatsu in the United Kingdom. In the early days of Shiatsu in the West he was a major influence to Harriet Devlin, Paul Lundberg and Bill Palmer. In the UK, many Shiatsu teachers have extensively studied with one of his senior students, Pauline Sasaki. So directly or indirectly, Kishi was a quiet but strong presence in the birth of European Shiatsu. Since those days he has changed his style of work considerably, has been living in Brussels and has built up a collection of French ceramics. He is still a regular and popular teacher in England but of what? Here he talks to Bill Palmer about himself, his work and his vision.



Bill Palmer: When I first met you in 1979, you were well known in Paris as a teacher of Zen Shiatsu. Soon after that many things changed for you. Can you talk about that time?

Shinmei Kishi: Before that time I had a busy and successful practice as a teacher of Zen Shiatsu and as a health consultant for the Japanese Economic Mission. I was able to buy a house in Tokyo and I travelled a lot - especially to France but also to Russia, China, Bulgaria, Canada and England giving treatments and teaching courses. But, then in 1979 I resigned from the Iokai. (Masunaga's association for Zen Shiatsu)

BP: Why was that?

Kishi: I wasn't satisfied somehow. I was not satisfied with my technique, with what I was doing. I was getting very tired.

BP: Can you say what didn't satisfy you?

Kishi: At that time I did not know why I was doing Shiatsu. The people to whom I gave treatments changed, but myself, my life didn't change. I was using Shiatsu as a technique and I was successful, but I think Shiatsu is not only a business, not only a therapy, I was searching for more of a way - I don't know whether to call it a spiritual way or not - but some kind of way, yes.

BP: What happened then?

Kishi: In 1980, on 26th of February, I had a realisation. It was one of the most important times of my life. I gave up everything I had done in the past. I realised that Shiatsu therapy was not my way. I was not so interested in changing people's condition. After a treatment the client might get better for a while but then would again fall victim to their old habits. So what was the real nature of their illness? I asked myself where I was going wrong and realised I needed to change my technique. I discovered how to work with energy in a more subtle way, observing and feeling nature. Working intuitively with the process by which nature heals itself.

I left my old approach to healing based on trying to change the client's condition and started my new research into the dynamics of energy change. Now I just look, just feel, that's all.

BP: Is this what you call Seiki Soho?

Kishi: Yes. It means life energy guidance but I am not 'treating' people or their conditions. I only watch the movement of Ki in the body, like nature, like watching clouds change.

BP: You also studied with a woman spiritual master for some time, didn't you? Was she an influence in your development of Seiki?

Kishi: Oh yes, Hifumi Jinko Sensei. I did practice in a Shinto shrine with her for four years but I don't know if that is connected to my way (pause). She never explained anything - I was sitting in meditation and she was just sitting behind me. She didn't say anything, just making some kiai (energy sounds) or purification practices.

BP: When I first met you your practice was very mysterious. You moved your arms through the air in slow circles and, for the first time I felt the pure sensation of energy moving in my body, different from physical movement. Was there a Japanese tradition from which this style came?

Kishi: (Laughing) Oh yes. I was very dramatic then! Very different now. But this work with Ki is not really from tradition. It doesn't matter really whether we deal with energy or some kind of physical movement. I don't know exactly how to put it, but the key is the feeling of movement through the physical senses. By observing this feeling you allow energy to repattern itself in the body, creating real change.

BP: And do you work with physical touch more now?

Kishi: Yes - The human body has a natural tendency to correct its own imbalances but sometimes this process is stagnant. The task of the therapist in Seiki is to support the self-correcting tendency of the body. In Seiki we look for

certain energy resonances which are the signs of the energy trying to correct itself. Touching lightly on certain key points is like opening the gates allowing the natural process of adjustment to flow.

BP: What connection is there between Seiki Soho and Shiatsu?

Kishi: We often touch points on Chinese meridians. That is the same. But we are just touching, not stimulating, not pushing, not sedating. We are totally connected to that point and our inside is very quiet and harmonized. Just feeling the natural movement. This allows us to find dynamic movement. We touch the same places but in a different way.

BP: Much of what you are saying sounds similar to the Seitai of Noguchi Sensei. Have you had connection with him?

Kishi: Not so much. I visited the Seitai association in Japan, but they were not so open with me. To work with them, first you must be a member and attend the school. I think Noguchi is great, personally, but it's difficult to get to work with him without first going through the organisation.

BP: That seems a shame since you seem to be teaching the same thing as him, though he doesn't work with touch so much, just with movement.

Kishi: That's true, I think. But the Seitai association do not say this. They do not say how the feeling of movement is linked to spiritual life. I tried to make connection with them many times but it was not possible so I went away, but I respect Master Noguchi very much.

BP: And how do you see Shiatsu in the West now... in England and Europe?

Kishi: In England, mmm! Your technique is good and very systematic. More than Japan, I think. In Japan Shiatsu means something very limited. To a Japanese it seems strange to call many of the things you do here "Shiatsu". Shiatsu is a very small part of Ki therapy and is very young, only developed this century. Here it means more than in Japan.

BP: You have just moved back to Japan, haven't you?

Kishi: Yes

BP: How do you find that?

Kishi: I've been back in Japan one year now and have given treatments and workshops for many Japanese people. I think modern Japanese people want healing, they want people to make them better. That's why Shiatsu is so popular, you can have a short treatment in the office! But here you are trying to find yourselves - that's different. It's very much more interesting for me here, because my way is "find yourself".

BP: And "Find Yourself" is different from "Improve Yourself"?

Kishi: Yes - just look; just feel.

BP: So in some ways do you find the people in Europe to be more sympathetic to you?

Kishi: Yes, yes I do. But I speak Japanese well, I have easy communication there and here it is more difficult. But, in general, people are not so different in England, China, Japan, anywhere. They're Human. Same problems everywhere!

BP: Do you know that, historically, you have been one of the most influential teachers here in Britain?

Kishi: (Laughing) Well, I don't know!

BP: Well, you are certainly well respected here and you have now moved back to Japan where people are less sympathetic to your work. Will that be difficult for you?

Kishi: In Japan people look at me more as a spiritual master - but I am not spiritual, just ordinary. I have created an art-therapy & Seiki centre in my home in Japan, so it would be possible to settle there. But I need both cultures! More movement! If I stop, if I become rigid, then I can't feel, I can't see. (Laughs) That's why I want to be a nomad.

BP: To conclude, can you say how you see the future of Shiatsu, of Seiki, of all forms of Ki therapy in both Japan and the West?

Kishi: In both Japan and the West, special energy therapies have become very popular; very big business. But maybe more understanding of Ki, of its dynamics and its cultivation are necessary. Life has simple lessons to teach us when we look at the way it operates in nature. Being in nature, like here in the countryside, we can have deeper feeling and enough sensitivity to learn from life. I am not specially material, and not spiritual. I just come back to nature; I observe human nature. All nature is active; in movement - and the movement of energy in a human is no more, no less than the shifting of clouds in the sky.



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