

BODYWORK AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

By Alice Pitty

I was first introduced to Shiatsu by a dance teacher in New York City. She said, "Shiatsu is good for you and good for the planet." Well, she has a point. A simple room and a single mat are hardly taxing the world's resources. So, following her advice, I became a Shiatsu practitioner. But I have always experienced a tension in practising Shiatsu. I enjoy bodywork and therapy, but my interest in health and well-being is not so much on the level of individual dis-ease, but more collective or planetary dis-ease.

Ever since I was a student, I have had a passion for global studies, environmental politics and international relations. However from the perspective of personal growth, global interests can seem impersonal, abstract and distant - even avoiding the real issue! So whenever I mentioned planetary diseases in my therapy groups, such as nuclear waste or the third world debt, people would often wince, turn away, mutter about positive thinking and general New Age quotations. Eyes glazed over, newspapers were irrelevant, and we returned to childhood traumas and Spleen deficiency.

On the other hand, when I was with friends who were busy saving the planet, they couldn't see the point in all this personal introspection and navel-gazing. For them, meditation and personal growth were avoiding the real issues! Why take care of your individual health when there is a whole planet out there that needs to be healed? Better drink black coffee and work into the night. Why worry about your little itchy-bitsy insecurities with your mother when there are people out there who are dying of starvation?

I experienced these two polarities for a long time and I couldn't find a middle ground, until recently. The connecting link I found was in cultural communication. I have spent the last two years in Indonesia where I studied with the Javanese movement teacher, Suprpto Suryodarmo. During my time in Indonesia I became fascinated by the cultural interactions between myself, as a Westerner, and the Indonesians. Why did we frequently get into communication tangles even though there was good intention on both sides?

Cultural transference and counter-transference

I found that if I said certain things or acted in a certain way, my Indonesian friends would become very upset or sullen. Often they would accuse me of acting like a colonist. I felt hurt and offended because I didn't feel like a colonist. Conversely, I would become angry or distressed by things they said and did, and they would become hurt and offended. The communication between us seemed to be caught up in a much larger web, not only as individuals, but also between my country and theirs. It was as if our present patterns of communication echoed back in time as the relationship between our two cultures had formed over centuries.

This habitual pattern of communication, caught up in past history and past projections, reminded me of an important aspect of the therapeutic relationship called transference and counter-transference.¹ Transference is the projection of a

past relationship, with your mother, onto your present relationship, with your wife. Counter-transference is how your wife, in responding to you, starts to act like your mother did. This circular communication is often unconscious, so we become caught in always choosing the same sort of partner, or always becoming angry by particular things that our partner does. Therapy can help us to become aware of these dynamics, and potentially develop new patterns of response.

Bodywork also helps us develop new patterns of response, but at the level of our physical structure. Bodywork explores habitual patterns of posture that are also caught up in past history. If I learnt to stoop as a child because I felt ashamed of myself, my body will physically grow into these stooping patterns as I mature. As an adult this posture may be expressed as a sunken, hollow chest and an asthmatic condition. I cannot get a promotion at work because my physical posture doesn't match the job description. I want to move forward. I want to get a better job, but I cannot because my body is caught up in the past. The therapeutic skill of bodywork is firstly to help us feel the sensations of our habitual posture. When I stoop, I feel how my body contracts and my breathing becomes difficult. I feel the shame that is held in this body position. Through skilful touch, bodywork can then help us to explore new sensations and strengthen new pathways in the meridians and the nervous system. In time, we may be able to develop a new sense of our structure, and our sense of self.

Our life history is embodied in our structure. Our feelings of shame and joy, repeated traumas, learning to crawl and walk, read and write, these are all ingrained and imprinted upon our muscles, nerves and brains.² Our body memory holds these experiences. We are walking history. We walk our lives from the past into the present. And our footsteps today will shape our footsteps tomorrow. This means that the habitual patterns of communication that I developed with my parents are also ingrained in my posture. Transference and counter-transference is actually contained in my body sensations. Why do I always get angry when she looks at me that way? Why do I always get constipation when I don't feel like having sex? Our bodies constantly remind us of our history.

Cultural body postures

I believe that this same process happens with communication between different nationalities and organisations. Relationships between countries, cultures and organisations, may also get into fixed perceptions and fixed postures. The United States is developing a fixed and habitual posture towards the Middle East. This posture may also be caught up in their history with the former Eastern bloc. After the cold war, the US needed a new enemy. Their history, and collective body posture, needed to take an aggressive stance towards another nation. As an analogy, I have finally finished a relationship where we argued a lot, and we were always accusing and mistrusting one another. I don't want to go back into that sort of relationship, but - whoops - I accidentally fall back into it with someone new. "How did I fall in this hole again?" It is almost as if my body expects those sorts of sensations and experiences. Without them, I don't feel my familiar sense of identity - I literally do not *feel myself*. Perhaps the Americans do not *feel themselves* without this postural habit of aggression.

A friend of mine was describing the history of a certain country in Europe. The country had been repeatedly invaded and colonised over the centuries. It seemed to her that its people had developed a tendency to lie as a form of self-protection. The only way that they could maintain a sense of cultural identity was to constantly lie to their colonisers. A child, who is continually invaded and colonised by a sexual abuser, may also learn to lie as a form of self-protection. However, if he continues to lie as an adult, this may be detrimental to his adult relationships. The old pattern of lying is redundant, but it is a habit ingrained in his body memory. Therefore it continues to give him a sense of identity. So even if that country is no longer colonised, its people may continue this habitual pattern of communication simply because it reminds them of their familiar sense of cultural identity. The tendency to lie may perpetuate a climate of suspicion and distrust with other nationalities, even if both sides are seeking another form of communication.

During these last few months there has been a movement towards peace in Northern Ireland. However the emotional charge in people is still so strong, and the habits of relationship so fixed, that it will take time, at the level of people's nervous system and bodies, to actually make a lasting change. At Drumcree, the Orange Order have a physical and habitual pattern of walking. It is so much a part of the Protestant identity, and sense of self, that they cannot let go of it. Literally, new physical pathways are needed to create new choices in the same way that they are developed in bodywork. The process of creating new patterns of communication in Northern Ireland is slow and painful. They keep going back into old habits, sometimes breaking out of them, sometimes falling back in. It is exactly the same process that we go through in bodywork and therapy.

The Earth is one but the world is not. We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country, strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others.³

Many of the social and environmental problems we face nowadays are global in nature. Planetary sickness does not adhere to national boundaries. Global warming has no passport or visa restrictions. But these fixed perceptions and habitual patterns can block the channels of communication at the boundaries of nations, and organisations. This means that even if there is good intention, on all sides, to do something about these planetary diseases, communication can break down because of cultural misunderstanding.

Obviously I cannot work with whole nations, or even whole organisations. The numbers are too big and impersonal. So I thought that perhaps I could work with groups of people, who are involved in practical environmental and social projects, but the success of the project is struggling because of communication issues. Those issues may be personal differences, cultural differences or organisational differences.

As a therapist, I may work with the patterns of illness and disease in someone's spine, their voice, or their marriage. How do I apply the same work for the marriage between two organisations, or in the spine of a development project, or in the voice

of a community? How do I see the human organism, with its glands, its muscles and its meridians, at another systemic level of the human race?

This work does already happen, but it is more related to group psychology than bodywork and energetic diagnosis. Seeing habitual patterns in international relations is also not new. But how do we work with these patterns from the perspective of the body? Is it possible to work at the level of physical structure, the way in which habitual patterns of communication are embodied in our nervous system? This may mean working with people physically as well as emotionally and verbally, which is not an easy task. However I would like to offer two descriptions of using bodywork to explore communication issues. Neither example relates to environmental or cultural work and they are both quite simple case studies. However, I hope they demonstrate this theme.

THE BODY IN ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION

An example of kyo and jitsu

I was invited to teach Shiatsu to a group of chemists from a large pharmaceutical company. They were on a team retreat for two days. The initial atmosphere was one of fear and uncertainty because two people were going to lose their jobs, but they didn't know who would be asked to leave. The boss, or team leader, was a particularly autocratic figure and his normal process of making decisions was authoritative and domineering. The other team members were waiting for him to go for the jugular, blame and shame. During the first morning they worked together on team communication issues and the afternoon was spent practising Shiatsu, a new experience for all of them. I kept connecting the bodywork back to their physical experience of being at work. How did they physically feel in the work place? If they were stressed, or under pressure, how did this feel in their bodies?

The following day they spent a long time discussing who was to be made redundant. But the atmosphere was more relaxed and the communication dynamics had changed. This time, the boss hung back and didn't say very much. This allowed the quieter team members to speak more freely and with less fear of recrimination. After some time, they managed to reach a consensus decision about who would leave, including the actual people who would become redundant. This form of communication was markedly different from previous experiences.

From the perspective of kyo and jitsu, the boss seems to represent the jitsu aspect of the team, being visible, noisy and active. The quieter members were more kyo, their feelings were hidden and unexpressed. As the jitsu started to calm down and relax, there was more room for the kyo to become visible. Once there was dialogue and interaction between the two polarities, it was possible to develop a new relationship, or new pattern of response.

Connecting head and body in the work place

In this case I was invited to work with a group of human resource staff (personnel) on a similar two day event. This team leader was different to my previous example. He was a 'listening manager' well versed in the principles of 'guided leadership'. However he was also experienced as being rather abstract and distant. We did various forms of movement and bodywork, and in the last exercise I asked them to work in pairs with one person holding their hand lightly over their partner's belly, then their chest, and finally their head. The person lying down was invited to free-associate about work, just allowing a stream of images or thoughts to come. The most interesting revelation was from the boss. When he was touched on his forehead, he had a spontaneous image of a head, severed from its body, talking monotonously to an anonymous and distant group of people. It was this image that helped him to see how 'his head' operated in the work place. He had been told several times about being abstract and distant, but the bodywork gave him a personal experience. Many of them commented on how the bodywork was much more direct and immediate than working with the same issues through just talking.

THE BODY IN CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The Wood element as a cultural expression

For this example, I would like to return to Indonesia. I was involved in a joint project with British and Indonesian people. We wanted to bring a group of Indonesian artists over to perform in Britain. The project was complex and needed a lot of strategic planning. Difficulties in communication arose because we couldn't effectively collaborate and plan together. The Indonesians were not used to thinking ahead and prioritising goals. This meant that the bulk of the organisational work was done by the British side of the team. We found this hard going, because we felt as if we were having to do all the work for them, rather like lugging around a heavy weight. And they often felt patronised and told what to do, going along with our decisions but without being actively involved in making them. Our understanding of collaboration had cultural differences and caused a lot of friction on both sides.

The problems we faced seemed to be very connected to the Wood element and Liver Touch. In Movement Shiatsu, Liver Touch works with the collaboration between complementary opposites. It could be the collaboration of a pair of muscles around a joint, or the collaboration between therapist and client in their *joint* work. If one side of this partnership becomes dominant, then the other side will become submissive, going into passive resistance. In the body this passive resistance can be experienced as muscle tension, a feeling of holding back or clamping down in the body. In the therapeutic relationship, the therapist may become dominant, the expert who does everything for you, and the client may become passive and uninvolved. At first this might feel enjoyable, as the artists initially enjoyed having all the administration organised for them. But later it can bring up resentment and anger. As a client receiving Shiatsu, I might feel pushed around and told what to do.

In our project there was clearly tension, passive resistance, and a lack of collaboration and mutual dialogue. We were enacting the passive/active relationship at a cultural level. In the culture of Java, the home of our artists, being passive is actually a cultural value. Whereas in most Western countries, being active is the more normal cultural value.

This experience stimulated me to explore the Wood element as a cultural expression. In Western culture, especially nowadays, we place a great deal of emphasis on Wood qualities. It is the new and upcoming young people with vision, direction and creative new strategies, who are most sought after in the work place. The latest buzz words in many professions are - win/win scenarios, building partnerships, strategic planning, flexibility, collaboration and development. Just look through the job pages. They are littered with the Wood element.

But what about the Wood element in Java, a country which values passive, soft spoken and non-aggressive behaviour? In traditional Javanese culture, the role of the king is to express the vision and direction for the people. You hand over your individual destiny to him in the faith that he can shape the collective destiny of the whole society. This basic cultural value became accentuated, and even manipulated, during colonial rule. Kings remained kings, but became administrative puppets, whilst the overall organisation of the country was dominated by Europeans. People became increasingly disempowered, submissive and uninvolved. Life choices became reduced to a resigned belief in fate, rather than an active shaping of their own destiny. This created a collective posture, and cultural identity, of disempowerment and passive resistance.

President Suharto also behaved as a Javanese king shaping the collective destiny of his people. He was known for his abilities in strategy and, before he became president, he was an army general. In Chinese Medicine, all the organs are likened to administrative officials. The Liver is “an army general from whom the strategy is derived.”⁴ Suharto was clearly the Liver of his country! When Suharto resigned in May 1998, there was immense aggression and rage, and the storehouse of pent-up frustration was expressed in fires. These fires were not only in the forests, they were in the cities, the shopping malls, the warehouses and the garages. In Chinese Medicine, there is a medical condition described as Liver-Fire Blazing Upwards. ‘The most common cause of this pattern is a long-standing emotional state of anger, resentment, repressed anger or frustration. The emotional repression makes the Qi stagnate and implode giving rise to Heat’.⁵

Diagnosis and treatment

As a therapist, how would I practically work with this condition? I cannot work individually with every person. Neither can I work with the country as a whole. This is why I return to the middle layer of organisations, groups of people working towards change and planetary healing, but who are caught in certain patterns that are stalling the effectiveness of the work they are trying to do. Perhaps I can diagnose an energetic condition, but I cannot work with that diagnosis unless it is attached to practical issues with people working together on a day to day basis.

In terms of treatment, I might try to support the Wood element through exploring the cultural values behind people's experience of collaboration. I might encourage people to develop vision and strategies, but as a mutual and jointly creative process. I might explore the Earth element with people - are they becoming victims to their condition, needy, and unable to support themselves? Or are they over-caring, doing too much, taking care of someone else's home and ignoring their own home? The dynamic between those polarities is frequently found in development work.

I might also work with support from the Water element, the deeper source of motivation and willpower, emotional catharsis and the unfinished business which holds back the purifying power of Water. Unfinished business may include the historical patterns between my country and theirs. Of course it sounds big to talk about whole countries, but at the end of the day countries are made up of people, and each person will have their own particular story to tell. Cultural transference and counter-transference is embodied, grooved into our nervous systems. So I would have to include myself in this process of healing, my personal stories and my cultural background, in the same way that as a therapist I have to be aware of my own issues, and how they will affect my diagnosis and work with the client.

References

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