

# Health is a Dirty Word

By Bill Palmer

Ten years ago I worked with a woman, let's call her Barbara, who had a tumour in her brain. She was a beautiful, alert, alive woman and the doctors had given her six months to live. She came to me after three months of this sentence had passed and I started by asking her what she wanted to achieve in our work.

She answered by praising her illness. Before she knew she had cancer she said her life was dull and drab, her relationship had no interest for her any more but she stuck with it for lack of motivation to do anything else. Clinically she was depressed. Within weeks of being diagnosed with cancer, her life had transformed. She glowed with life, lived each day to the full and she had re-discovered an exciting sexual relationship with her husband.

Barbara said to me that her aim in working with me was to get support to maintain this level of aliveness; to cope with the fear of death so that it wouldn't freeze her zest and to relax into the enjoyment of whatever time she had left. She said that this illness was one of the most important gifts she had received and that she would prefer to live fully for six months than to squander a longer time in a panic to be cured. She was not being blindly fatalistic, she had agreed to a course of radiotherapy but had refused surgery and chemotherapy, feeling that they would weaken her so much that she wouldn't have a chance of enjoying her life. In fact she only died last year and relished nine more years of a full life.

What her example gives to me is respect for a person's own agenda in life. Often, when a client comes to therapy, particularly those forms of therapy which have a form of medical language, it is easy for the practitioner to pre-judge the aim of the therapy. Students and experienced practitioners have often asked me: "What is the best thing to do for such or such condition?". My answer is always "I don't know. It depends on the client, on the client's process, on the function of the condition for the client and on her choices in the matter."

If we have an underlying view that what we are doing is treating people to bring them into a state of health, and if that view of health is defined according to our own judgements, then we may easily miss the opportunity to help our clients to develop their full potential and to live a satisfying life. Health can therefore become a dirty word, a concept that interrupts our contact with the client's healing process. If I had assumed that the point of working with Barbara was to help her cure her cancer then I would have missed the most important point in her life process at the time.

## **Imbalance is Necessary for Movement**

Another dirty word in common usage in Shiatsu practice is 'balance'. Many people say that the point of Shiatsu is to balance the flow of energy in the meridians. I imagine that what they mean is that there are no extremes of excess and deficiency and that the body is communicating smoothly in itself. I like the idea, but in practice it is unrealistic. Most

people's imbalances are so deep rooted that one or even many Shiatsu sessions are not going to bring them into this ideal state of balance. As a result, because the practitioner is judging their state in contrast to the ideal equilibrium, the patient (along with practitioner) is very likely to view their condition as something that is *wrong with them*.

In my view, this is a major block to the healing process. In the medical model something that is wrong with you is an illness to be eliminated. This is a valid viewpoint but it is a limited one and does not take account of the fact that an illness or a neurotic pattern may be a driving force that pushes the person into a newly creative stage in their life.

Just as in walking you have to leave the static balance of standing in order to move, I believe that many 'conditions of imbalance' are the symptoms of someone trying to move forward in their life or signs of them trying to develop a new capacity.

If you eliminate this 'problem' then you have got rid of your driving force. Life without the problem may be more comfortable but in many cases less 'alive' and the underlying urge of the life process is still there so very likely another problem will appear.

### **Pain is part of the healing process.**

An Italian woman in her thirties lost her only daughter in a car accident. She was devastated and her life collapsed. She couldn't sleep, sat indoors all day in silence and started to waste away. Her doctors diagnosed severe clinical depression. They prescribed antidepressants and sleeping pills but she refused treatment. Her reasons for refusing fascinated me.

She said that she felt plunged into a deep dark tunnel by her daughter's death. Everything was dark and heavy but she felt that, if she didn't go right through the tunnel, then she could never reach the light again. She felt that the doctor's drugs might have helped her to feel better but that they would interrupt her journey. In effect, what she was saying was that her clinical condition was a natural event, a natural but difficult part of the healing process. She felt that if this process was stopped through treatment then she might feel better but she would be only half alive.

I believe that her view can be applied to most people with chronic conditions who come to me for therapy. In these cases the condition is part of the life process and my aim is not to relieve pain in the quickest possible way but to support the client to move through the process, to endure the discomfort and to finish the process completely so that they can emerge from the tunnel without unfinished business. **With this view the aim of therapy is to help the client to move forward and to overcome their natural resistance to change, not to bring them into a state of balance.**

Gestalt psychology sees the process of change as inherently paradoxical. The more you try to change the more you stay the same. On the other hand, if you just collapse into your condition and remain stuck in it then no change is possible. It's only when you let go of the aim of changing but remain present in your process that transformation occurs. Essentially this means that change happens when you are working in the present and

having a future aim like balance or health can take you away from the present and so block change.

### **Dealing with Chronic Conditions**

Most of my work is with people who are presenting chronic conditions in which it is difficult to disentangle physical symptoms, postural patterns and emotional disturbance.

- *My main aim in working with someone like this is not to try and find out what is wrong with them – I do no diagnosis. Instead I try to discover what process of development they are struggling with.* For instance, Barbara had discovered what it was like to be inspired and excited by life through her cancer. She wanted help in stopping her fear of death from freezing this inspiration.

- *My next step is to help the client be aware how they are supported or hindered in this process by the way in which they inhabit their body.* I was able to help Barbara because I was able to guide her to feel which parts of her body expanded and moved when she felt inspired and which parts contracted and froze when she felt fear. In fact, she discovered that she experienced her excitement in the Shao Yin Division (Kidney and Heart Meridians) and was aware of her fear in the Tai Yang Division (Bladder and Small Intestine). Her perceived problem was that every time she felt inspired and alive she couldn't find a way of going anywhere with it. She was held back by the contraction of her fear.

This part of the therapy is more like interactive discovery than treatment and the client feels able to take the experiments and discoveries made during the therapy out into their daily life. I am not trying to make a diagnosis but co-operating with the client to discover how they are using their body to experience their life process.

- *The last and most creative stage is to suggest experiments that the client can make to loosen up the fixed patterns in the way they use their body.* In this phase, Shiatsu techniques can be useful, helping a client to feel connections between parts of their body that are not integrated but I am concerned to help them *use* this connection to make fresh ventures into how they relate to people and live their lives.

These experiments can be very simple. In Barbara's case, I noticed that she was energised by excitement up to the throat but that her arms and voice were constricted by the tension in the Tai Yang division down the back. This meant that her excitement was not expressed and **people still treated her as a victim of fear rather than the alive, inspired woman she now felt.** We spent a couple of sessions exploring the place around the manubrium where the energisation stopped and I taught her how to breath directly into the soft tissues under the manubrium.

Once the manubrium started to expand she felt her throat release and the movement spread along the clavicle to her arms. Suddenly the life force she experienced internally was visible externally and she reported in the next session that her friends had stopped treating her as ill and started doing things with her. **She was no longer giving them the**

**message of fear and was able to infect them with her excitement.** Every time she started to constrict, instead of trying to control it, she now breathed into her manubrium and the excitement was not frozen.

Another range of experiments come from Movement Shiatsu's focus on the development of movement. The movements that babies make to learn to use their bodies are deep archetypes of physical behaviour which can be used by adults to re-discover lost connections within themselves.

### **Living fully as you are...**

This is an example of the beauty of bodywork. All our chronic conditions are etched into the way we use our bodies. But the body is very tangible, you can learn to move consciously. However intractable and problematic a life issue is, if you can discover how it is embodied then you have a handle on how to experiment, to loosen up, to become unstuck and to move within the body you are.

Whether you get 'better' or not then becomes irrelevant. Instead you are living more intensely, with more satisfaction and with deeper contact with others. As with Barbara, this may mean that your condition does get better or that you live longer, but that is not the aim.

Ideals like health and balance are dirty words to me because they take us away from the present experience of who we are, they dilute our present struggle to live fully now by making the present feel deficient and focussing on a dream of future perfection. The future may be too late. I believe it is better to learn to live fully as you are than to waste time trying to reach an ideal state.

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