

Embodiment of Energy

By Bill Palmer

One of my most important teachers was a five year old girl called Lizzie with cerebral palsy. I first worked with her in 1981, assisting a physiotherapist who was helping her to walk using caliper splints. Lizzie was hating it. Putting her feet down on the ground was hard enough, moving them in the right way to walk seemed impossible.

Every time she moved, her body turned in a spiral that caught my interest, so I suggested that she follow that movement when it happened. Suddenly, she started spinning round the room like a top, squealing with joy. The movement was chaotic but full of energy. After a few minutes she came to rest with a big smile and, when the physiotherapist suggested she continue with the walking lesson, she re-started the difficult task with enthusiasm and determination.

This is no miracle story, she still found it hard, but she had found spirit. Lizzie taught me to look first for where a person's energy is already embodied before working with areas that are problematic. Embodied energy feels good and empowers you with a feeling of life. Starting there gives the message that you CAN do something well and that good feelings are possible. From there it is easier to gather the courage to enter areas of difficulty.

Before I met Lizzie I had been following Masunaga's principle of finding the Kyo in order to treat the Jitsu. What she helped me to realise was that, in cases of chronic disability, the Kyo can be a place of incompetence, of impotence and even of shame and the client has a natural resistance to going there. Instead, if you start working with a place that is already alive and embodied, then this empowers the client and, from there, they have the confidence to go with you into the disabled areas.

So, what does it mean for energy to be embodied? Energy is the motivation underlying change so a part of the body resisting movement, or even passive within it, is not embodied. On the other hand, those structures that are moving with the breathing and other physical movements are embodying energy. Areas of disembodiment are more difficult to see because they can look simply relaxed. But by moving an area and guiding the client to be actively involved in the movement, one can feel the structures that are resisting or passive. In chronic situations, I start working in the places that move easily and then travel towards the more difficult.

The meridians connect and integrate areas of the body, so working with them can really help a client to make this journey. But I find that, in general, work on the meridians is not enough to help someone to manifest their energy in a chronically disconnected part of the body. In these situations, I find experiential anatomy to be invaluable. By teaching the client to sense their own anatomy, to feel the details of the joints, to differentiate muscles and to feel the underlying support of the organs and blood vessels, they can start to focus on exactly what part is resisting the Qi. It can be as specific as a group of fibres within one muscle.

Experiential Anatomy is a term coined by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen as part of Body-Mind Centering but is a way of learning anatomy which has been also been used in Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method and Movement Shiatsu. In general, it means that you not only learn the details of anatomy, such as the origin, insertion and function of muscles, but also how to feel and use your anatomy from inside. This awareness is facilitated by touch and guided movement. My approach focuses on knowledge of certain key structures and systems in the body, which are the most common areas where energy gets blocked. Examples of these are the menisci of the knees, the small bones of the hands and feet, the deep postural muscles and the autonomic nervous system.

A detailed knowledge of these means that one can feel exactly which tissues are stuck and help them to move in the ways natural to them. If you yourself have learned to experience them from the inside, and learned to consciously activate them, then you can, in turn, transmit that experience through your touch. This helps the client to open pathways to the embodiment of disconnected areas.

To give a common example, moving a joint such as the shoulder by rotating the arm you may feel stiffness during parts of the circuit. A simple response to this is to keep on rotating, hoping that the movement will help the muscles to release. A more interesting approach is to realise that tension often

comes from use of muscles to stabilise the proximal side of the joint and that, if the proximal side feels involved in the movement, then the holding muscles start to feel themselves as 'movers' rather than 'holders'. To facilitate this, you would actively move the scapula to rotate the joint as well as the arm so that the scapula and humerus dance together.

However, neither of these approaches take into account the resistance to change that is symptomatic of chronic conditions. Instead, you might realise that the stabilising muscles are holding on because they feel the joint to be insecure. Now the resistance to change makes sense. The muscles feel they are doing a necessary job! If the client can find deeper muscles to support the joint and to learn sensitive movements that don't threaten the socket then the surface muscles can let go with good heart. Experiential anatomy can help them to become internally aware of the deep shoulder-cuff muscles and the interaction between the head of the humerus, the glenoid fossa and the labrum. This gives the necessary message of deep support to the joint and dissolves the fear causing the obstruction.

The key to this work is exploration rather than treatment. By making base camp in a place which is well embodied, you encourage confidence to explore areas that are disconnected. Resistance to energy is usually carried out by gross muscular tension, but releasing the tension is not enough. One must learn to inhabit deeper muscles than can take over the job that the surface tension was performing.

I find that this work combines well with Shiatsu on the meridians. I see meridians as highways along which our Qi can try to use the whole body for a specific energetic function. Work on the meridians facilitates and indicates the path along which those connections could be made. But, while travelling down these highways, the physical structures may provide resistance to the journey. When this happens, experiential anatomy can help to find new ways in which the body can open up to the flow of life.

The School for Experiential Education is running an online course in Experiential Anatomy in several modules starting in November 2010. This uses video, amazing graphics, guided movement processes and online discussion to learn and embody deep and detailed anatomy. Hands on tutorials with trained teachers will be available throughout the UK. See www.seed.org/anatomy or email bill@seed.org for more details.