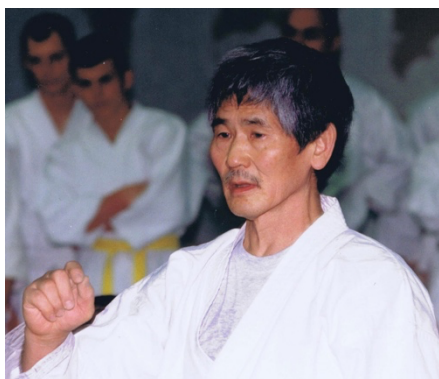


Aikido and the Development of Movement Shiatsu

A Personal Memoir by Bill Palmer

My first experience of Shiatsu was in the early 1970's when I was a student at London University and started to study Aikido. The aim of Aikido is *not* to disable one's opponent but to end conflict. One of its fundamental principles is that you don't need to meet force with force. Your attacker is already in motion and, if you can guide his movement, you can transform the aggressive energy into something peaceful. If you subdue someone in a fight, they are still your enemy, but if you can transform the energy of their attack into another movement, then the aggression disappears, and you no longer have an enemy. As such it can be seen as resolving aggression rather than conquering it and this is why I found it was also a path to learning a healing art.



My teacher, Minoru Kanetsuka, practised a simple but powerful form of Shiatsu, sometimes using it when we were injured. One time, when I fell awkwardly and broke my collar-bone, he gave me my first personal experience. He only pressed one point and held it for a long time. Something about his quality of touch made me aware of all my tensions, and I found I was able to soften and release the tensions around my injury. This changed the experience of pain and I could feel the blood flowing into the area and even felt the tissues

knitting themselves back together. It was a kind of contact that I had never experienced, and I asked him if he would teach me Shiatsu properly. He said that he had nothing much to teach but, in the following years, he taught me the basics and explained what he was doing while he worked with other people. More importantly, when commenting on my Aikido practice, he would frequently make references to Shiatsu.

For instance, when I was practising a technique called Kokyu Ho, he said to me something like: "Feel the direction of your partner's Ki. Then receive it and open yourself. Then suggest a direction. Don't try to change his Ki; just open yourself to it. That's also the principle of Shiatsu." Before then, my intention in Aikido had been to dominate my partner and trick him into submission. But when, following his instruction, I simply opened myself to receive my partner's intention, something changed in me, which changed the whole dynamic and we both flowed together without effort. It also changed my Shiatsu. Trying to fix someone's problem has a flavour of domination about it. Instead, I started to open myself to the condition and listen to what it wanted to do.



Unconditional Positive Regard

Some time later, Masatake Sekiya came to stay in London for a year. Sekiya Sensei was in his mid-sixties at the time. He looked frail compared to Kanetsuka's stocky strength, but he had a beautiful warm luminosity and a great sense of humour. His Aikido was like a slow and graceful dance. In one class, he told me to attack him forcefully from a distance. I rushed towards him, but when I got within striking distance, I felt like I had run into a wall of love. All my aggression drained out of me, and he gently took my arm and laid me down on the floor! I had no resistance. I felt his complete acceptance of me as I was, and this started healing me at a deep level. How could one fight a man like that!?

The lesson that Sekiya gave me was that the root of healing is *unconditional positive regard*ⁱ, as Carl Rogers puts it, not technical expertise. Techniques can resolve superficial issues that have not grown roots into the spirit of the client. But chronic trauma, disability, childhood wounds and old habits are part of the person. Trying to get rid of them is like trying to cut out an essential part of their being. These "problematic parts" resist change and any attempt to fix them increases the client's internal conflicts. Instead, those parts need to be valued, contacted, listened to and loved. Then they feel they can soften and they can start to change spontaneously.

From then on, the spirit of Sekiya was my chief guide in my Shiatsu. For instance, when touching a tense muscle, I would mutter "Well done!" under my breath, and I would open my heart to it. Instead of trying to loosen the tightness, I would help it to condense further with the feeling of "I'm with you". The more I let go of the desire to 'cure' or change the other person, paradoxically, change happened by itself.

If someone is alive then most of their symptoms are signs of life. An arthritic joint is painful but that pain is saying "*take care of this part of me*" or "*move me in a way that doesn't inflame me*". If we just try to get rid of the pain then we are ignoring what the body has to say and, more often than not, the condition will worsen. On the other hand, if we listen to its message, then our conscious mind stops trying to dominate the body and this usually means that we take care of the part that is suffering rather than trying to get rid of it.ⁱⁱ

Ki is Intention not Energy

In the late 1970's, when I started to practise Shiatsu seriously, I was doing a Ph.D. in the foundations of quantum physics. The ideas I was learning about Ki in Oriental Medicine didn't sit comfortably with my physicist's view of energy. I was, and still am, sceptical about the idea of Ki being a form of energy that flows through channels in the body. I prefer to interpret Ki as 'intention' rather than 'energy'. Another of my teachers, Kazuo Chiba, explained it as the alignment of intention and action. This does not mean that meridians have no meaning. In fact, my later research convinced me that they are the pathways along which intentional movement develops in babies.ⁱⁱⁱ However I think that, in practice, the intention behind your touch and the quality of relationship you have with the client have much more impact than the meridian you are touching.



Kanetsuka's Aikido and Shiatsu demonstrated this. I don't think he had fixed ideas about the functions of the points that he pressed while giving Shiatsu. My experience was that he transmitted his *intention* to the receiver through his quality of touch. In Aikido, he never talked about Ki as 'energy'. Instead, I could see him feeling his partner's intention before they started to move. Once intention turns into action it has an inertia that is difficult to change without conflict. He focused on flowing with his partners while they were preparing to act. Whilst their intention was unmanifest, it was still fluid and could more easily turn to peace rather than war.

How do you feel intention? When we are about to make a movement, postural muscles subtly brace the body and prepare

for action, the breath changes, the lens of the eyes focus on the target of the movement and our posture adjusts. There is solid research^{iv} showing that we are subconsciously aware of these micro-movements and interpret them as intention. I believe this is what is happening when we say we 'feel someone's energy'. Many different perceptions combine at a subconscious level to create a meaningful feeling.

Every part of the body has some form of intention, but our ego self is not necessarily conscious of it. Intention is a readiness to act or to move which, as we have seen, is frequently expressed in very small preparatory movements. When doing Shiatsu, I look out for these micro-movements in different parts of the body and, through touch and verbal guidance, help the receiver to amplify them into large movements so that they become conscious of that aspect of themselves.

Movement is the natural language of the body. I see the body as a community of people, each organ, each muscle and each bone having their own form of intelligence. Unfortunately, in modern society, we are not taught to sense these inner people and we don't know how to hear what each part has to say. As a result, the body and brain-mind are often in conflict and this results in the physical and emotional problems which people bring to therapy. By facilitating movement, we empower the parts of the body to speak in the first person.

A community of people, who all feel valued and empowered, can easily resolve conflicts through finding common purpose. In the same way, if we listen to the members of our internal community, then they can integrate and find common intention. This, for me, is the meaning of harmonising the Ki.

Working with Ability, not Disability

In this culture, clients expect a therapist to know what is wrong with them and fix it. If the therapist goes along with this expectation then they tend to go into medical-mode, which means to perform a diagnosis and treatment and the client remains fairly passive. For fairly superficial problems, this often works, but if the issue is chronic, or is a permanent disability, then the procedure is liable to fail, so can deepen the client's sense of being disabled.

A five year old girl with cerebral palsy called Lizzie taught me this lesson early on in my career. I was collaborating with a physiotherapist, who was teaching Lizzie to walk with calipers on her legs. She hated it and was visibly upset because she couldn't make the right muscles work. She was becoming dispirited and progressively less in control of her body. But I noticed that every time she tried to move her legs she made a rotating movement with her torso and had no difficulty doing that movement. I suggested that she sit on the floor and start making that movement. Suddenly, she was whirling around the room in a beautiful but chaotic dance. She was squealing with joy and full of energy. After a while, she came to rest, and I suggested that she use that rotation to start the walking movement. This was no miracle cure, she still found it difficult, but she had found her spirit and believed she could move, so she attacked the challenge with enthusiasm and optimism.

Lizzie taught me that, if I viewed her cerebral palsy as a problem to be treated, then I was not seeing her true self and was disempowering her. The cerebral palsy was an intrinsic part of her. Instead, she showed me that if you start by focusing on a person's abilities rather than their problems, then you are enlivening them and this creates a condition that nurtures new development. She reminded me of one of the basic principles of Aikido: to flow with the direction of your partner's movement instead of trying to force a movement that isn't there. The effect of this is to engage with the other person's spirit and this is the pathway to integration.



For two decades I specialised in working with children who were classified as disabled and almost all of them responded positively to working with their abilities rather than trying to resolve their disabilities. I felt they and their parents were growing to value them as they were rather than feeling the pressure of trying to move towards 'normality' and this gave them the space to develop their abilities in the way that worked best for them. Gradually I realised this might be true for everyone and the focus on exploring abilities rather than problems became a core aspect of Movement Shiatsu.

Working with Chronic Kyo

I have already said that I prefer to translate Ki as 'Intention' rather than 'Energy', but one of the effects of bringing one's intention into a part of the body is that it becomes mobilised and enervated. We perceive this as the body part being *Energised*. One postulate of oriental medicine is

that the symptoms of a condition are often signs of compensation for an aspect of the organism that is de-energised and not playing its part. This de-activation is called *Kyo* in Japanese and many forms of Eastern Medicine aim to treat the *Kyo* first, with the idea that if the symptoms are compensations, they will then disappear of their own accord.^v

But, in disabilities and other chronic conditions, the *Kyo* area is often a hiding place for traumatic emotions that may trigger painful feelings and shame. It therefore hides itself behind defences and resists attempts to contact it and energise it.^{vi}

In Lizzie's case, her legs were outside her control. The attempt to get her legs to work highlighted the emotional pain of her disability and, I imagine, gave her the impression that there was something essentially wrong with her core self. However, starting from a place that is already energised gave her the message: "*I can do this*". She then felt able to explore more challenging areas because she had found a positive sense of herself. Lizzie showed me a way of working with *Kyo* that empowered the client and, because they felt in control, they could explore their difficulties with spirit.

The key idea is to start by contacting an area that is already energised and then to guide the client to use its internal intention to move and to explore themselves. This exploration is highly interactive. The therapist is noticing the micro-movements that indicate that a part of the body is energised and ready to move. She helps the client to be aware of these movements, facilitating them to amplify until they start to spread through the body. During this journey of exploration the client eventually becomes aware of their own *Kyo*, which they experience as a part that won't join in.

But because they have started from a place of ability, they can start to embrace this area and integrate it into their sense of self. Sometimes this means that the symptoms disappear but, even if they don't, the condition stops being a problem and can even become a valued part of the self.

In the summer of 2022-23 Bill and his wife Teresa will be teaching two workshops in the Australian Shiatsu College, Melbourne. Contact the college to receive further news about dates and content.

References

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Pictures of O Sensei Morihei Ueshiba <http://aikidojournal.com>

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