

The Three Souls

Working with Chronic Conditions

By Bill Palmer

What is the difference between a chronic and an acute condition? The dictionary states that a chronic illness is one that lasts for a long time while an acute one has a rapid onset and lasts for a short time.

However, for our purposes, I would like to lessen the importance of time. The critical feature of chronic conditions is that they have become part of the patient's sense of self. They say things like "My bad back" rather than "I've injured my back" or "I am a migraine sufferer" rather than "I get migraines regularly".

Chronic conditions have always got long histories, because time is needed to embed the condition into the sense of self. However, not all long term conditions are chronic in our sense. It's possible that someone has had a recurrent condition for a long time without starting to identify it with themselves. Such a person, feels themselves to be basically OK but has a boring tendency to get the same illness again and again!

As Dr John Harrison observes, chronic conditions give the patient the opportunity to blame an illness for their deficiencies. His point is that illness can be very useful to some people, giving them a reason for feeling bad, rather than feeling that their core self is damaged. This means that chronic conditions are sometimes doubly difficult to cure since the patient in some way needs the illness to support or complete their view of themselves.

The style of treatment for chronic conditions is clearly different in nature to that of acute conditions. I feel that the traditional style of Shiatsu treatment, with the client being fairly passive in the capable hands of an expert practitioner, is especially suitable for acute conditions or for long term ones that have not entered the client's sense of self.

If the issue has entered the client's self-image, in general something radically different is needed to help the client shift their habitual sense of being. This style of treatment is what this article is about.

Chronic Kyo and Jitsu:

Kyo and Jitsu are Japanese words that have become common in Shiatsu from the time of Masunaga. Many people still identify Kyo with Chinese medical concept of deficient energy and Jitsu with excess. But, as several writers have pointed out, deficiency can exist on its own without a complementary excess appearing somewhere else. Kyo on the other hand cannot exist without a complementary Jitsu condition and, unlike deficiency, may be a healthy condition! Kyo and Jitsu describe an energetic dynamic not a fixed state.

A good analogy for Kyo and Jitsu is the act of tripping and falling. When the body goes out of balance when you trip, the side of the body furthest from the ground goes into highly active extension in the attempt to pull you upright. This is the Jitsu. The other side of the body becomes de-energised. This is the Kyo. However, you could say that this asymmetrical energy state is healthy. The body goes into an asymmetrical state in order to re-balance itself.

Now imagine that you trip and fall so far that you cannot pull yourself upright again but manage to grab hold of a rail to stop yourself falling to the ground. If you are not strong enough to pull yourself up on the rail then your body will remain in the highly asymmetrical state in a stuck attempt to rebalance.

In this pathological state it's a good idea to get help. And help is very simple. If someone can support your weak side then you may have enough strength in the Jitsu side to come back to balance or you can be helped gently onto the ground to recuperate and regain strength to stand up again.

This analogy illustrates the logic behind the traditional Zen Shiatsu idea of supporting the Kyo to allow the stuck energy in the Jitsu to 'pull' the system back into balance. It is a great concept, rooted in the belief that living systems want to find equilibrium and it works very well for acute conditions and for situations where the client is able to receive support in their Kyo.

However, when a condition is chronic in the sense I am using it, the Kyo – Jitsu polarity has become a part of the person's identity. The individual has become familiar and identified with the unbalanced state and 'getting back into balance' is a frightening move into unknown territory. He perceives the Jitsu as his strength and the Kyo becomes an actively hidden area which he resists any attempt to approach. The Jitsu acts as a deflector, pushing awareness away from the Kyo.

It is important to remember that this is a highly energetic dynamic. As we shall see, there is a great deal of energy in the chronic Kyo. It is a hidden pressure cooker and taking off the lid usually releases strong emotions which are frightening to the client, and often to the practitioner. It is not that the chronic Kyo is deficient in energy but that it is an area that is not inhabited, that awareness does not enter.

Remembering that the Kyo-Jitsu polarity is an energetic attempt to rebalance gives the key to treatment in both the acute and chronic cases but the method of treatment is very different.

Re-educating the Jitsu

For the first 12 years of my Shiatsu practice I noticed that a significant number of clients felt consistently better after treatment but continually relapsed back into their chronic state. I felt inadequate and thought that I wasn't really getting to the deep Kyo in my diagnosis. However, I now believe that the diagnosis was correct but the treatment was wrong. Doing Shiatsu in the traditional way is supportive of the Kyo, but in chronic situations the client can passively receive the support but actually becomes less aware of the Kyo.

Using the analogy of the person stuck in a half-fallen position holding onto a rail to stop themselves crashing onto the ground, if you support the person, they can relax during the support. But, in the chronic situation, their Jitsu has become habitual and stuck so that, even though the person can feel the support, they no longer perceive that they can use the Jitsu energy to pull themselves back into balance. The support simply allows them to let go of the excess effort for a while but they still remain in the same position. When the support is withdrawn the Jitsu effort has to re-generate.

The key point here is that, in the chronic situation, the nervous system has forgotten what the original 'healthy' function of the Jitsu was, and the tension and effort have become an habitual state without reason behind it. Traditional Zen treatment can cover over the issue by making the client feel better but, because it does not re-educate the Jitsu, the client is liable to stay in the same energetic 'position'.

The essential approach in working with chronic conditions is to re-educate the Jitsu to remind it of its healthy function. I will now describe my framework for working with these conditions as a four stage process.

1: Developing Trust and Contracts

Working with chronic conditions is challenging for both client and practitioner because the client has to actively transform their sense of self. This is frightening for the client and results in resistance to change which can manifest as defensiveness or anger projected onto the practitioner. Both client and therapist must be clear that they are willing to go through this process together, which may take a long time. It is most important therefore that the first stage of the therapy is devoted to building trust and developing open contracts. An open contract is one that is entered into without pressure and which is re-negotiable.

Many therapists tend to hurry this first step of the process, suggesting to the client what they need to do in order to change. It is often easy for the therapist to see where the client is stuck and it is tempting to try to 'rescue' the client with advice and active treatment. However, this hardly ever works in the long term. Initially the client may respond with relief and gratitude that someone has understood their problem and is 'taking over' but, essentially, they become passive because *the realisation has not come from them*.

This is the key point in this first stage. The realisation of what treatment is necessary has to come from the client so that they feel engaged and active in the process. The therapist can help them to come to this realisation but without pressure or suggestion. We now look at how you can practically do this.

a) Ask opening questions

Encourage the client to talk about themselves. You will notice that the client describes themselves with a narrative story. Often this story is told without much feeling. Ask open questions about the story such as “How do you feel about that right now?” instead of narrowing questions such as “Why did you do that?”. The first type of question widens the client’s awareness of themselves while the second tends to narrow their awareness of the present by focussing on the past. This allows him to get in touch with his feelings and to relate them to his body in the present.

b) Don’t do Diagnosis! Let understanding come from the client

Diagnosis is a process where an expert finds out what is wrong with a client and what to do about it. Therefore diagnosis immediately forms a relationship in which the client becomes less active. But, if we don’t understand what is wrong with the client, how do we know what to do? What I am saying is that the understanding should come from the client and that your expertise will come up with something to do based on their realisations. It doesn’t matter if you understand too but it is not necessary! What is important is that the client is getting in touch with themselves. Instead of trying to understand, keep asking opening questions and a time will come when you know what to do.

c) Focus on sensation rather than feeling

A client may be telling their story and getting in touch with their feelings but have no clue what they are energetically doing or how to make a change. When you notice their feelings causing a bodily action such as muscle tension or a change in breathing, you can guide their awareness away from feeling and into the sensation of what they are physically doing when they experience emotions. As we shall see, this can naturally lead into some focussed bodywork.

d) Say what you notice instead of what you feel.

In my experience this is very hard for Shiatsu therapists! We are so used to interpreting our perceptions in energetic or emotional language that we lose touch with what we actually see or touch-feel. However, there is an enormous difference between saying “I feel that your Spleen function is deficient” and “I notice that when you breath out your shoulders sag down” or “I notice that when you say that you feel sad your back tightens”. The first is of no help to the client. They may feel it is because they have an expert telling them why they are feeling bad but *they can’t do anything with it*. The second and third examples are useful. They focus his awareness on what he does when he breaths or feels emotion and often he has a realisation which comes with this awareness: “Yes, that action feels just like my sense of hopelessness about my marriage!”.

These techniques guide the client’s awareness into his body and he can develop an image of his stuck body dynamic. This allows for a natural transition to bodywork that makes sense to the client. He *knows* why we are working with that part of the body and he is engaged in experiments, using the support of the bodywork to try out different ways of breathing or dealing with his emotions.

The structure of this stage allows the client to feel that he is in charge. This develops the sort of trust necessary for working with chronic conditions. Basically, the client can start to feel his own resistance to change and can make a choice, choosing to give the therapist permission to challenge him.

If you hurry this stage then its easy for a client to feel subtly abused by the therapy. If he has not made a free choice to change, then who is he changing for!?

2. Waking up the Jitsu

This second stage is hard to describe in words and really needs practical demonstration. However, the principle is clear.

When a client starts to be aware of the physical, muscular and respiratory actions within his emotions then he starts to notice the physical manifestations of the Jitsu effort. It may be a particular tight muscle or a general area of holding.

The basic principle in this stage is to help him to become active in the Jitsu rather than releasing it. The technique uses touch to help him to become aware of exactly which muscles or structures he is holding and then guiding him to actively contract those muscles more! This makes the Jitsu conscious again and opens up the possibility of experimentation and change.

Often you find that the muscular pattern changes and the holding moves to another area. I have developed a series of bodywork techniques for helping the Jitsu to travel through the body. The techniques are based on using meridians to connect movement and sensation across joints where the body is stuck and then guiding the client into primitive movements initiated from this joint.

At this stage don't try to find the Kyo. It is often guarded strongly and the Jitsu can turn into barking guard dogs instead of learning to move. Instead, as the Jitsu starts to travel through the body, the client can become aware of areas from which he cannot initiate movement. He becomes indirectly aware of his Kyo as an area which he is avoiding.

3: Opening the Kyo

Once the client becomes indirectly aware of the Kyo it is possible to start to approach it with his co-operation. Because he has become familiar with the process of inhabiting parts of his body through working with the Jitsu, it becomes easier for him to experiment with entering areas with which he has lost contact.

It is very important to be guided by the client's developing awareness rather than jumping somewhere that he cannot follow. The picture I have is of the human being being a house with many rooms. Awareness is the light in these rooms. Some rooms have the light switched on. In the chronic case the Jitsu rooms may have the light off but the switch still works. The work in the second stage switches the light on in the Jitsu rooms and it then becomes possible to venture out into the darker corridors to repair the switches in the Kyo rooms. The local meridians are analogous to the lighting wires and their repair process is slow and developmental rather than sudden and miraculous.

If you rush the client to a Kyo room using your torch to light the way or by using your roll of temporary cable, he may be excited by seeing a room that has been dark for a long time but when he leaves you, he's in the dark again because the wires have not been repaired, and the fear of the dark simply makes him rush back to one of the old familiar rooms.

However, if you follow the client's developing awareness then he can, step by step, light and explore the house and become familiar with the contents of the forgotten rooms. These contents may be painful and overwhelming at first. They are emotions and experiences from the deep past which have not integrated into the person's sense of self so they are naturally threatening.

The important point at this stage is not to rescue the client from these feelings but to give him support to really feel them. There are three principles that can guide you here:

a) Work on yourself.

The energy in the Kyo is very strong and infantile. It's frightening for the client and often frightening for the practitioner too. However hard you try to remain calm and supportive, if you are uncomfortable with the client's feelings he will know it and back away. There is no technique that can help you here, you simply have to explore your own hidden emotions and become familiar with this type of energy. Then, when you meet it in a client, it may be painful but you are not rocked by it. This allows the client to use the sessions as a safe place to experience their Kyo and slowly his nervous system will become familiar enough with it to stay there by himself.

b) Wait for Kyo, don't dig for it.

Masunaga likened the state of waiting for the Kyo to waiting for a lover, without impatience but with warm expectation. Maybe in this culture people don't wait for their lovers like this! But think of David Attenborough waiting for a nervous animal to come out of its hole so he can film it. Waiting for the Kyo is like this: very still and stable for it is easily frightened and intervention can drive it underground.

The main problem I experience in this stage is my own insecurity. I feel afraid that the client will become impatient with the stillness and feel that they are not getting their money's worth. If you feel this, dialogue with the client. For instance you can ask him to tell you when he needs you to move on somewhere else. You will often find that a lot is going on internally and the client is experiencing a complex and satisfying internal process which would be interrupted by moving elsewhere or doing more active bodywork.

c) Focus on organs rather than muscles and meridians

The chronic Kyo may indirectly show itself in the passivity of certain muscles and the emptiness of certain meridians but the hidden energy in the Kyo has just retreated deeper into the body structure. I find that, if my attention is focused on the organs beneath the area I am touching, then the client's awareness can travel deeper, allowing the Kyo energy to well up.

4: Maintaining pitiless commitment

The nervous system takes time to repattern and become familiar enough with the Kyo energy to integrate it into the sense of self. The chronic condition has a lot of inertia and there will be frequent back-slidings and times of anger and disappointment.

Realise from the start that the client will have to experience a lot of painful and uncomfortable feelings to re-integrate the Kyo. It is only natural that he will blame you for this when he feels he is not getting anywhere! He can feel a victim of the therapy and you are the persecutor.

I find it helpful to remember that the nervous system takes time to integrate and needs to stay with an experience long enough to build the synapses. If you immediately feel apologetic and try to rescue the client every time he feels bad then he will not stay with his feelings long enough to embody them. It's great if you have empathy but pity kills therapy!. With empathy you feel with the client but can hold support him to stay with his pain if necessary. Pity, on the other hand, drives you to try and get the client out of pain, even if it's a necessary evil.

But sometimes the client does need a rest from intensity before entering those feelings again and only an experienced intuition can divine when to hold the client in intensity and when to give him a break. My only guideline is to watch yourself and to learn to recognise how you feel when you are being driven by pity or your own discomfort. Ask yourself "Who would be getting a break?" if you moved on somewhere less challenging.

One technique that helps both you and the client to stay in difficult places is to continually reflect the emotions back to physical sensation. Guide him to notice what is he doing muscularly when he feels the emotion. Keep on asking opening questions and stay in dialogue and it will be difficult for the victim-persecutor-rescuer dynamic to maintain itself.

What about the Three Souls?

This section is more of a philosophical conclusion than an exposition of fresh techniques but I find it satisfying to relate the principles of working with chronic conditions to the three souls of Chinese philosophy: the Po, the Shen and the Hun. Not much has been written in Chinese Medicine about the three souls, although the Shen is mentioned frequently in conditions which Western Medicine would define as psychological. I would like to explain them as dimensions of being and to show that the techniques above also cover all three of these dimensions.

The Po is the dimension of physical sensation:

The Po is traditionally the realm of sensation-experience. Very strongly attached to the physical body (it traditionally dies with you) it is fully in the present. Emotions and thinking are often about the past or the future, which we cannot directly influence, while sensation is happening now and therefore can give us a gateway through which we can experiment and transform our scripts.

The Po gives pure bodywork its power, because bodywork stimulates present sensation and focuses on what the client is doing right now, which can be changed, rather than the original reason they felt bad, which is beyond his reach in the past.

The Shen is the flavour of our being

Each of us are many people most of the time. Sometimes I am like a vulnerable child, at other times I am a strong and determined entrepreneur. Sometimes I am cold and heartless and other times I am warm and generous. What makes me feel like a consistent individual? I feel I am an individual because the multiple ways of being that I manifest have, somehow, the same flavour. In contrast, the essential flavour of someone with a seriously split personality changes dramatically from one time to another.

I'm avoiding using the traditional translation of Shen as 'spirit' because this is often interpreted as something independent of the body and I don't know about that. However, the Shen is independent of the form in which we manifest our energy and thus creates a gateway for transformation.

To illustrate: our example person, stuck in the process of falling over, may eventually come to think of himself as 'holding everything together', 'bearing the weight of the earth on his back', 'working so hard but not getting anywhere'. These views come from his experience of the muscular effort he is continually making, but they are not 'true', they are only what might be called the stories of the Jitsu. If he can feel the essential flavour of his existence he might describe it simply as 'effort' which can be used in a new and more constructive fashion. The Shen is very flexible while the stories are fixed.

If you focus on the Shen in your sessions rather than the stories it's easier for the Jitsu to remember its original rebalancing purpose.

The Hun is our continuing influence on the world.

Nothing exists if it doesn't last. We are like a wave moving through the sea. All the molecules of our body may change but the pattern remains recognisable. The pattern that we make with our lives may continue on after we die if we have influenced other people. Our wave can continue to exist in other people after we die and, more importantly for this article, simply the way we are can influence the people with which we work more than what we do.

Traditionally the Hun is seen as a pattern of influence, which is more long lasting if it is benevolent. But, however powerful and influential I am, the multiple effects of other waves will eventually make my individual influence unrecognisable. Traditionally, even the most benevolent individual's Hun does not last more than about three or four generations, after which it merges into the general background "ancestral influence".

The Hun is really the basis of good therapy. In the end, expert treatment only works for superficial problems. In chronic situations the client has to develop into a more integrated state rather than be manipulated into it. They are more influenced by the simple fact that a therapist has travelled the same road themselves than by their technical skill.

The key to working with chronic conditions is to help the client to become more aware and experimental and to help them to stay in contact with their underlying discomfort. I believe that they best learn this through example. If you can remain unruffled and in contact within intensity then your stability will influence the client and help him to remain aware and present. This allows him to re-integrate the Kyo and to use the energy in the Jitsu to move back into balance.

Healing happens in life, not in the therapeutic session but the Hun of a session can influence the way someone deals with things in their life. I often think of therapy sessions as pushes on a swing. Most of the movement happens outside the session but the therapeutic work gives regular impulses to help the movement to continue. Remembering that the session has a Hun which continues into life can be a great comfort to you since the session does not have to be complete, or end with resolution, it only has to give a little more impulse to the client's movement through life.

Bill Palmer is teaching a linked series of three postgraduate workshops on this theme on Jan. 12/13/14 , March 16/17/18 and May 12/13/14. Also he is teaching an open workshop on the Three Souls on March 3/4 Contact Suzi Counce on 01926 492880 for more info.