

The Sadist on Honeymoon

*An Exploration of the Wood Element in the Therapeutic Relationship
by Bill Palmer*

About ten years ago, I was running a workshop on counselling for Shiatsu Practitioners with a Gestalt Therapist, Flora Meadows. At the end of the workshop she said to me that she felt that Shiatsu therapists were sadists. I was shocked and assumed that she was making a criticism of Shiatsu but, in talking to her and thinking about it more, I realised she was not being critical, that she valued this skill, and thought it a natural and necessary part of being a therapist. The word 'sadist' is emotionally charged but it made me think. This article is an exploration of the decade of fertile thought which her shock tactics stimulated in me.

First of all, what do I think she really meant? The word 'sadist' is often used to describe a person who is excited by inflicting pain on a victim who does not want it. Someone who abuses and humiliates his or her victim. I do not think that most Shiatsu practitioners fall into this category! However, in any therapeutic relationship, the vulnerable client can fall into a passive role, being told what is wrong with them and what they should do, while the therapist enjoys the feelings of expertise, of knowing what to do and having the skill and knowledge to do it. In this dynamic the client and therapist may enact similar roles to the sadist and his victim since the power structures in the relationship are alike, though I hasten to add, they are less evil.

This is the darker side of the sadist in the therapeutic process which can act as a caution to us in our work, helping us to be aware of the power dynamics in the relationship. However, I believe that there is also another, more creative, parallel between the sadist and the therapist. To begin to explore this we need to look at why a client comes to therapy. More often than not, it is for more than a simple cure for a problem. At some level the client knows that his personality, posture or habitual ways of living are the root of his suffering rather than the immediate symptoms. He is implicitly asking to be helped to change his patterns. If he simply wanted to alleviate his symptoms then an orthodox doctor would be his first choice. The fact he has chosen a more holistic style of therapy means that he is probably asking for more.

However, changing patterns is an arduous process, often extremely painful, and all the defences of the personality are brought into play to resist deeper transformation, positive though it might be. Think how difficult it is for most people to give up a destructive habit such as tobacco smoking even though they know it might kill them. Think how much more difficult it is to change a pattern rooted in the posture and personality. In order to help a person to change at this level the therapist and client need persistence, compassion, vision and commitment. Above all, the process must feel 'worth it' to both parties. The rest of this article explores how the Wood Element provides these qualities in the relationship and how, by understanding the traditional Chinese view of the Liver, we can facilitate the aspects of the therapy which help the client to push through their resistance to change. In the process we will see how the metaphor of the sadist can be positively applied to therapy.

The Contract - Liver Choice

The contract between practitioner and client is arguably one of the most important features of therapy. Many of the problems in a therapeutic relationship can often be traced to a contract that is unclear. A contract is always made whether it is explicit or not. For instance, a client comes in through the door:

Shiatsu Practitioner: *Hello, what can I do for you?*

Client: *My back is hurting*

Shiatsu Practitioner: *Well, lie down on the futon and we'll see what we can do about that.*

This is a contract. The client has requested help with his back. The Shiatsu Practitioner has agreed to try to help through bodywork on the futon. The difficulties often arise in a therapeutic relationship when this initial contract is changed without renegotiation. For instance:

Practitioner: *I think that since your Spleen Energy is deficient you need to take more exercise and change your diet by eating more grains.*

This is a change of contract, although probably most clients would accept it without question, since the original implicit agreement was to work on the back through bodywork rather than through advice about lifestyle.

More serious changes of contract are also common such as:

Practitioner: *It feels to me that you are holding a lot of anger in your back. Do you know what that might be about?*

This change of contract (unskillfully) transforms the area of work from the issue the client brought, which was his back-pain, to his emotions. Such a change of direction, without consultation, almost inevitably has a confusing effect. To explain:

1) If the client accepts the changed contract, 'trusting' the therapist to know what they are doing, then he becomes more passive in the relationship. This can easily lead to the feelings of abuse discussed above, especially if such therapeutic interventions bring up feelings that the client does not want to expose.

2) If the client rejects the change of ground by saying something like "*I'm not angry, I just pulled a muscle*" then unclear conflict ensues. The two people will be arguing about what is the 'right diagnosis' rather than the real (and healthy) conflict involved in renegotiating a contract.

In effect the practitioner is saying "*I believe that I cannot carry out my contract to help you with your back problem unless we also agree to bring your emotions into the therapy*". This is would be a clear statement. The problem arises because it is *not* stated. The client is not given the choice of whether to continue working under these terms and not given the chance to express his view on the therapist's belief.

The therapeutic contract is a clear statement of the path which the process might take which both therapist and client can agree to and thus embodies two important aspects of Liver Function: the overall **vision** of where the therapy will go and the **conscious choice** to go in that direction.

Commitment - The Yang and the Yin of the Liver.

If the contract is clear then the client can make an active choice to take part in the therapy and this makes it easier for him to stick with the process when it gets difficult. Since neither therapist nor client can know the path of the therapy at the beginning, the contract needs to be renegotiable. But if it is too flexible and changes whenever there is difficulty then the therapy can never push through the client's natural resistance to change. To paraphrase Derek Gale: "*If whenever the going gets tough the tough get going, then we never get anywhere*".

Carola Beresford Cooke uses the metaphor of the seedling pushing up through the resistance of the hard earth to reach the light to explain the Wood Element. In therapy this image describes the process of the client and therapist pushing through the resistance to change; being flexible as to the exact path, but not being turned back by opposition. This flexible persistence through conscious choice is what I mean by **commitment**. In Chinese terms it is the **Liver Yang** of the therapy.

However, it is easy for commitment to be confused with control. For instance:

Therapist: "*You made a contract to stay in therapy even if it got difficult so I'm keeping you to that*" or

Client: "*I should stay with this process even though I think this therapist is useless because I've made a commitment and should stick with it*".

Both of these statements smell of the shadow side of the sadist/victim relationship. No client can know the intensity of pain they may feel when they make their initial choice to be in therapy. Therefore I feel more comfortable with questions such as:

Therapist: "*Now you know how difficult this process can be, do you still want to hold to the choice you made to stay with it even if it got tough?*"

Then commitment can be a courageous reaffirmation of choice in hard times rather than a rigid set of rules that the therapy is controlled by.

The Therapeutic Sadist

Commitment in this sense is a mutual choice by therapist and client to stay with a painful process in order to get to the real life energy. This is the positive analogy with a sadomasochistic relationship. The metaphor of the sadist is useful for a therapist because it points out that, to really get anywhere, you may have to be willing to persist in an activity which causes someone else pain.

However, it is very difficult for a therapist to distinguish between this loving commitment and the darker enjoyment of power of the real sadist. Psychotherapists recognise this and require that therapists are themselves under supervision by someone experienced enough to help them see whether they are being therapeutic sadists or real ones.

Why is it worth it?

Human beings are complex and can persuade themselves they are victims to a situation. In some cases this may be true, but in therapy the client is actually free to choose. He is an adult paying a therapist to help him and, if the pain is not worth it, he is free to leave. In reality the contract, the commitment and the vision mean nothing if at some level the therapy does not feel worth it.

What factors help this feeling of worthwhile-ness to develop? The most obvious is that there must be phases of satisfaction and nourishment within the therapy. If it's all hard from beginning to end, in the end both therapist and client run out of stamina. The initial period of therapy, where trust and contracts are developed is very important in building up a reserve of good feeling that can nourish the therapy through its hard times.

Honeymoons and Liver Yin

This initial time is like a honeymoon. Everything seems to be resolving very fast. The client feels the therapist is great and feels themselves to be getting better. In many ways it's just like falling in love - everything is warm, smooth and satisfying. Like falling in love, this period is very transient but this nourishing period builds up a supply of satisfaction which supports the future commitment.

I feel that this store of contentment is the **Liver Yin** of the relationship. Without the Liver Yin the persistent Liver Yang has no feeling of being worth it and can only be maintained through rigid control. Phases of resistance and difficulty literally use up the Liver Yin and, unless the store of satisfaction is sometimes replenished, the relationship will dry up, become hard and brittle and finally break apart. The Liver Yin is the **Life Blood** of the relationship and needs to be nurtured by leavening the Yang process of challenge with contact that feels empathetic and nourishing. Breakthroughs can also provide these times of fulfilment and even pain can be satisfying if the client feels that it is getting him somewhere.

It is ultimately the existence of satisfying honeymoons in the therapeutic relationship that make the necessary 'sadomasochism' worthwhile and give substance to the commitment to be in therapy.

In acknowledgement - Liver Hun.

I started this article by acknowledging Flora Meadows in initiating this fertile growth of thought. On the other hand, her words would not have made sense to me if I had not experienced the satisfaction coming from challenging relationships. Since my family avoided conflict, it was not until I worked with Derek Gale, in the latter half of the 1980's, that I really understood the value of the Liver in therapy.

I must say I didn't understand it at the time! I left after five or six years of regular therapy before the issues raised had reached resolution. But that leaving was one of the first times I made a choice and was valuable for that. What is interesting to me and relevant to this article is that Derek's strong challenges continued working within my life for many years after the end of that therapy, in a period that I never saw him personally. Only in the last year have I reached real resolution to those issues and feel that the therapy with him has properly finished.

This endurance of influence strongly echoes the Chinese concept of the **Liver Hun** (*the Liver Soul*), which describes the persistence of a personality's 'benevolence' after death. It is an extension of the Liver function into a more collective and universal dimension, giving a significance to our life within history and the wider community. Ted Kaptchuk describes the Hun as that aspect of ourselves that is part of ancestral lineage embracing the effects our predecessors have on us and which we pass on to future generations. I like to think of the Hun as also being the continuation of a person's influence when they are not present, not only when they are dead. Thus the soul, or the Hun, of my teachers lives on in my life even when I am not with them.

Most oriental traditions emphasise the importance of lineage, that no practice or idea is born out of nothing. Acknowledging past influences and paying homage to a lineage of learning supports my ability to innovate and be spontaneous, knowing that the motivation is not based only on the shallow soil of my individual life but also on the deep roots of a lineage. Thus the Liver Hun also gives substance to the action of Liver Yang. The strength of a therapist's lineage is important in their ability to compassionately challenge the resistance of a client. Supervision can help here too, giving a therapist support from the collective wisdom of the therapeutic heritage.

Lastly, my experience of Derek's Hun (even though he is very much alive), is a great lesson to me, teaching me not to assume that all therapeutic relationships need to reach resolution, that no session needs to be complete and rounded. I believe that the force of the relationship will keep on threading through a person's life until they reach satisfaction and liberation from those issues. "Optimistic" you say? Well, optimism is part of Liver Vision, so why not?

Reference:

Carola Beresford Cooke: *Shiatsu Theory & Practice*, Churchill Livingstone 1996