

## The uniqueness of Shiatsu - and about Shiatsu as a therapeutic method

reflections by Wilfried Rappenecker

At the European Shiatsu Conference Kiental in October of 2011 an open plenary discussion took place on the question 'What is the heart of Shiatsu?' Personally, it became clear to me during this discussion that what we call the heart of Shiatsu and what is close to our hearts is not what is unique to Shiatsu. Openness and presence, communicating with the client by means of resonance, getting into contact through physical touch with the person as a whole, energetic perception, the much discussed "no intention", establishing a connection with the client while maintaining therapeutic distance etc., - all these are also key ingredients of many other bodywork modalities and as well of body-oriented psychotherapy.

Consequently, these are not the key ingredients that make a distinction between Shiatsu and other methods; Shiatsu is merely one method out of many that work in a therapeutic way with people by means of openness and resonance.

In my view, what distinguishes Shiatsu from other methods is a specific technique; this technique is characterized by a relaxed and vertical "sinking in" and staying in deep contact for a shorter or longer period of time in the state of "simply being there".

Below I will describe this particular technique of Shiatsu in detail and *from my perspective*. I will then discuss my understanding of Shiatsu as a therapeutic method.

The specific technique that distinguishes Shiatsu from other methods has a deep and special effect. In one way or another it is applied in most of the popular forms of Shiatsu. It characterizes meridian Shiatsu as well as a meridian-free Shiatsu.

Each of these four aspects is needed in order to fully develop the specific effect of this technique:

- being open and relaxed
- vertically sinking into the body surface
- reaching the depth and
- really being there.

Being open and relaxed means that the energetic space of the practitioner opens up. Typically, this shows in relaxed shoulders and wrists. Ideally, however, it also includes all other areas of the body (e.g. diaphragm, solar plexus, groin, ankles, lower back, etc.) as well as a relaxed and

open mental approach ("no intention") of the Shiatsu practitioner.

This openness allows the energetic system of the recipient to open up to that of the giver, thus allowing a state of resonance to emerge. If this occurs, it usually shows through a freer and deeper breathing pattern of the recipient who mostly experiences this as pleasant. It boosts the client's confidence in the treatment situation, which is an important prerequisite for many of the effects of Shiatsu. (This open state can also cause anxiety, if the openness gained through resonance brings previously buried painful and dreaded feelings or experiences to the surface).

Being open and relaxed is just as important when "sinking in" as it is when holding the contact at the chosen depth, as described below ("really being there"). It is a key aspect of good Shiatsu.

Vertically sinking in means to touch *directly* what is reached at the chosen depth. What counts is the direct contact, all surrounding areas of the body become secondary in this direct contact. The receiver gets the feeling that the focus is truly on him or her and on this one particular place that is being touched. Together with the open state of the practitioner this moment creates the feeling of being touched deeply.

The effect of a vertical "sinking in" *clearly* differs from a contact that is not vertical. Try it out on somebody! It is a fascinating energetic phenomenon that I still do not fully understand even after decades of Shiatsu practice and research.

It is one of the biggest challenges for a Shiatsu practitioner to "sink in" deep physically while remaining open and relaxed. An untrained person will automatically tighten up their shoulders and arms (and other body parts) as soon as he or she sinks physically deep into the body of the recipient - it is like a reflex!

In Shiatsu we use a technical trick in order to be able to stay open and relaxed while "sinking in" - the use of one's own body weight. Since gravity pulls the practitioner's body downwards, with this technique it is possible to accomplish a deep sinking-in without muscular effort. In general, the use of one's own body weight is therefore seen as a key element of Shiatsu. For experienced Shiatsu practitioners an additional technique, the *Inner Technique of Expansion*, offers the possibility of establishing a relaxed contact with the recipient, if necessary without the use of one's own body weight.

Reaching the depth means that the practitioner "sinks in" that deep that he or she is reaching "the bottom of the tsubo". The achieved depth is a physical phenomenon, just because a specific anatomical level is reached below the skin surface. However, it is also an energetic phenomenon, inasmuch as the relaxed and focused attention of the practitioner perceives this level, resonates with it, and through this gives it a meaning in the treatment.

I like to call this deep level the *Communicating Level* because the communication of the energetic body spaces and aspects of human life seem to occur more directly and immediate here. I have the impression that superficial and deep aspects in a person's life reflect in superficial and deeper layers in the body. In everyday life, the superficial phenomena of life are

characterized by agitation and unrest, mainly on an intellectual and emotional level. This is especially true for those who suffer from great stress. The deeper aspects on the other hand are characterized by more peace, stability and continuity; at this level it is about "the essence". In this sense, it is below the surface of the body at the *Communicating Level* that I find access to the "real person", far beyond his superficial wishes, fears and desires. In a way, the *Communicating Level* is a second, deeper surface of a person. In Shiatsu it is far more interesting and effective to work with the "real person" rather than staying on the surface.

Really being there means holding the depth for a shorter or longer period of time in a relaxed and focused manner. Ideally, in this moment the practitioner wants nothing more than to just be there and to experience the other person through touch. This is the moment to use *Inner Techniques* or in some other way apply a focused and expanded attention as a treatment tool.

In order to be able to completely "be there" it is necessary to feel what is being touched and held - be it body tissue such as a muscle, tendon, bone or the like or the emptiness of a Kyo, the density of a Jitsu. It is necessary that the practitioner makes a decision to touch and hold a particular spot and not another. Often it is possible to find the best contact by subtle change e.g. of depth, the contact angle or the amount of pressure. To decide for *one best contact* allows the attention of the giver to really be there.

In my opinion, this technique of vertically sinking in deeply in a relaxed and open manner and holding the contact truly distinguishes Shiatsu from other bodywork modalities. To apply this technique correctly is a lifelong learning process of patient practice similar to the training of Qi Gong.

And it is much more than a technique. If the practitioner can find positions that allow her to sink in while remaining calm and relaxed she then creates a wide space which allows the client to become wide as well. This process of becoming wider allows the client to see his blockages and problems more clearly, however, with less fear and defense than outside of the treatment room. Oftentimes superficial blockages dissolve spontaneously when the client senses his own freedom and spaciousness. Deeper issues can be experienced, contemplated, accepted and possibly resolved in a state of relaxation and spaciousness rather than in defense. In this process every client has his or her own way. Finding this way together with the client is an art of Shiatsu.

At this point again we have left the uniqueness of Shiatsu. Perceiving the client in such a subtle way and finding that path together with him is a method that Shiatsu shares with many other bodywork modalities and with psychotherapy.

From early on, I have experienced and understood Shiatsu as something similar to psychotherapy. In Shiatsu we affect the energy field of the recipient in terms of more openness, flow and freedom. The key instrument in Shiatsu is a physical contact, as it has been described above. In addition to this, the use of words is oftentimes also important to help the client understand what is happening and to offer new ways and new solutions.

Many types of psychotherapy allow clients more space and freedom as well; the key instrument here usually is verbal interaction. Blockages can also be touched with words. If a significant blockage is being touched, if it dissolves or is being experienced in a different way, this will be perceived in the *therapeutic space* for both a psychotherapist as well as for a Shiatsu practitioner.

In my point of view, Shiatsu is not a curative therapeutic method even if it happens again and again that even long lasting problems get resolved after a few treatments. Rather, Shiatsu is a method that helps the client experience him or herself and to recognize patterns and processes in an accepting way. Shiatsu therapists accompany clients in these processes for part of the way. They explain, provide assistance and other support by means of their hands, but often also through words.

To my view it therefore corresponds to the essence of Shiatsu if we describe this work as a form of guidance of a psychophysical process and present it as such to the public. *Process Guidance* is a more adequate way of describing what we do in Shiatsu and distinguishes our work from a treatment with the only goal of relieving symptoms. *Process Support* leaves the responsibility with the client because it is ultimately up to her to choose her own path - for some this will be the alleviation of discomfort, for others a deeper psychological process as in a crisis situation or in psychotherapy, for others it may be a spiritual experience.

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