



What is Shiatsu?

by Antje Roitzsch

What is Shiatsu? This is not a very commonly known modality and I hear this question a lot.

Wataru Ohashi explains in his book "do-it-yourself Shiatsu" the Japanese word Shi means finger and atsu means pressure. Shiatsu is also called acupressure. It is oriental bodywork where particular points of the body are pressed to ease aches, pains, tension and symptoms of disease. These points are called tsubo and are located along the meridian lines or energy pathways through the body. The tsubo can be tender when the

flow of energy is blocked. By manipulating those points the energy circulation gets enhanced. Tender tsubo however are not usually where the complaint is. For example to relieve a headache points might be stimulated on the arms or legs. To paint a picture of how this information gets applied during a session I will describe a typical session to you and then go into more background afterwards.

The Session

The sessions are performed on a floor mat wearing comfortable loose clothing. Upon arrival one usually fills out an intake form or talks at length with the practitioner. The questions include physical complaints and major illnesses, emotional responses to certain situations, food preferences, high or low energy levels among other things. The information will give the practitioner a clearer picture of who and how one is in the world beyond simply knowing the complaints.

Often a session starts out with 6 stretches. These are to engage the energy in the different pathways of one's body. Some of them might feel easy, while others the body seems to resist. This also is a diagnostic tool for the practitioner. The practitioner usually begins by placing her hand on the belly, moving her hands around, pressing lightly into different areas, which is another diagnostic tool. This usually feels comforting and gentle. Moving one hand down the leg the practitioner keeps one hand as a comforting, reassuring presence on the belly. She is actually crawling on her hands and knees, moving one hand slowly down a specific path on the thigh, leaning into specific points. The pressure might feel firm but comfortable. If it is not, feedback is always welcome. Once in a while there might be a spot that feels unexpectedly sensitive (here the energy is stagnant or blocked). A good practitioner seems to sense it, ease up a little bit and have you breath into the area. After a while the sensation will subside. Once arriving at the foot she lifts up the knee to rotated it in a big circle, giving a delicious stretch to the hips. Then she places the leg down, bending it slightly, exposing the inside and moves up points on the inside of the leg. The leg might be put in a few different positions, exposing and stretching the meridian to be worked on.

As a transition from one leg to the other both legs get rotated and stretched, sometimes putting the body into gentle twisting positions. The release and letting go of tensions is a beautiful effect of this.

Working her way up the body the practitioner might stop in the hara again (the belly) and read the effects of the session that will mirror in this area. The shoulders and upper chest get opened and stretched which heads into meridian work of the arms. Here also the arms get stretched, rotated and the meridians worked on by leaning into the specific points.

The stretches always engage the whole body, when the arms are stretched the toes move and when the legs are stretched the head moves. It feels like a wave going through the body initiated by the movement of the practitioner.

The practitioner might move the person seemingly effortlessly into a side laying position without any help of the receiver. Giving up control and just being moved around is a great release (although that might take practice for some of us).

Lying in a side position the shoulders are free to be rotated and stretched. For most of us this is an area of tension and habitual holding patterns. Gentle work will release some of these tensions and even relax and ease the breath. The whole side or even the back might be worked on in this position. Being moved on to the stomach the practitioner will lean into all the points along the spine. Most people will feel a sense of release and letting go, although some spots might be unexpectedly sensitive. Here it is also good to just breathe into those areas. At some point on the backs of the legs one might notice three or even four points of contact. The practitioner uses her knees for extra effect, but it never feels like too much pressure. Being turned over the session comes to an end with the practitioner resting her hands in the hara (belly) again touching the same areas as in the beginning, proceeding with a light kneading, almost like a cat kneading the belly.

The receiver now has time to lie quietly for a while, feeling the effect of the session. One might notice a sense of deep relaxation but also stimulation, being ready to face one's projects and life. Specific issues that were addressed will have changed or shifted.

Background

I like to describe shiatsu as being a modality between massage and acupuncture. It addresses soft tissue concerns without needing to get undressed. This is a great advantage for those who feel shy about receiving massages. Similarly people that have fear of needles can still go deeper and addresses a whole different dimension than massage. The session described is based on the accumulated knowledge of 5000-year-old Chinese medicine. Similar to 5-element acupuncture the person is evaluated based on the knowledge of the 5 elements: metal, earth, fire, water and wood.

During the intake, the meridian stretches and the touching of the hara the practitioner evaluates the person's elemental balance and how they relate to the physical, emotional and spiritual well being. If one element is too dominant or too weak over a long period of time one could see tendencies and imbalances in a person that could develop into diagnosable diseases. These diseases are what western medicine treats with medication. But eastern medicine looks to strengthen or sedate the elements to bring them back into harmony, giving us a sense of well being and prevent disease.

Shiatsu is best used to maintain health and vitality, strengthen internal organs and prevent energy from getting blocked in the first place.

Additionally Shiatsu can be a support on different levels: It can address physical discomforts. On an emotional level, it can bring excess emotions like anger, fear, grief, worry and sadness back into a normal range. It can help bring life into focus, seeing the bigger picture. In general it can be a great support during life changes, such as a job change, a move, a divorce, an illness, finding one's life purpose and goals. Caregivers can also greatly benefit.

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A Shiatsu information and demonstration evening will be held on Monday, February 27th at 7:00 pm at 28 Washington St., in Camden.

This article originally published at *Inner Tapestry Journal*, February-March 2006