

# How does Shiatsu work?

Four principles that make Shiatsu work

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## Shiatsu as process facilitation

During the first few years after I first learnt about Shiatsu, I assumed that Shiatsu worked according to the principles of TCM. Based on the results of Hara diagnosis, the ensuing treatment of the meridians would reduce the imbalance between Yin and Yang, or Kyo and Jitsu, thereby promoting health; complaints would subsequently become less or disappear entirely. However, what actually happened during and after a treatment I did not understand. I trusted that it would somehow work.

Only as the years went by did I understand that Shiatsu is not a method that, in and of itself, eliminates discomfort and complaints directly. Shiatsu does not correct defects, Shiatsu doesn't repair. In my view, the effectiveness of our work is based on a completely different principle, which, nonetheless, is of great significance in every therapeutic work: Shiatsu has the potential to increase the freedom in the body and life of a human being to walk new and different paths so that existing states of suffering, problems and pain may become redundant and therefore decrease or even disappear.

We cannot heal another human being. No one can, not even orthodox medicine. Any form of medicine works by improving the inner and outer conditions conducive to healing. Healing always depends on the degree to which a person has the capacity to regulate themselves and their body in order to promote healing. This is what Shiatsu can accomplish: Shiatsu promotes the ability for self-regulation; a prerequisite for healing.

In this sense, Shiatsu can facilitate someone's process for a section of their life path and support them in finding new solutions. Shiatsu is process facilitation, and as such it resembles a wide range of psychotherapeutic methods. Just like psychotherapy, body therapy can't heal or promise healing. We don't know exactly what the results of a treatment or a course of treatments will look like. Sometimes these come about quite surprisingly, and at other times it may appear that other aspects are more important than the hoped-for alleviation of a particular complaint. And: the client's active participation is of crucial importance; without their initiative not very much may change at times.

But how does Shiatsu work, or rather, what are its most important mechanisms? In 2007, when I asked the lecturers at the Second European Shiatsu Conference if there were any further *non-specific* effects of Shiatsu besides the *specific* work based on a Kyo-Jitsu diagnosis, I believe that most of them did not understand my question. At that time the dominant way of thinking, which I followed myself in my early Shiatsu days, was that balancing Kyo and Jitsu will bring healing. Since then, however, Shiatsu in Europe has come a long way. The healing effect of Shiatsu is understood less and less in the sense of actively removing imbalances. The mechanisms of Shiatsu are far more complex.

Today, as mentioned above, I see the foundation of the effects of Shiatsu as an increase of freedom which clients – facilitated by our treatment – will find in their bodies and in their lives. Several powerful factors prepare the path for this increase in freedom.

It is these factors that I would like to write about in this article:

1. The resonance space
2. Deep contact and deep rhythms
3. The specific work with energetic and physical patterns and structures
4. The therapeutic dialogue

### 1. The effect of the resonance space

*This is perhaps the most important factor in our work.*

All living beings have the capacity for resonance, all bodies are resonance spaces. When two beings with the capacity to resonate come together they automatically form a mutual resonance space in which they experience and influence each other, and more or less understand each other, often subconsciously. This dynamic also takes effect in the therapeutic practice: client and therapist create a communal *Therapeutic Space*, where most of the treatment effects develop.

We all experience the influence of other resonance spaces in our daily lives. When we encounter a relaxed person, we find it easier to let go of our own tension and relax too – provided that's something we're interested in. The reverse can happen as well: when a stressed and tense person enters the room, stress and tension tend to increase in the other persons present. In Shiatsu we can experience this phenomenon when the treated person glides into deep relaxation. If that happens, our work becomes easier, it becomes more enjoyable, it flows as of its own accord. Conversely, when touching a distinct Jitsu, the tension will reflexively increase in the therapist's body. Shiatsu practitioners often have to downright learn to reverse this reflex and relax when they contact tension or Jitsu and become soft and expansive, which is much more conducive to good results.

What happens in the shared resonance space makes it easier for the treated person to relax into this space and to be able to build trust. It is the therapist's task to quasi suggest or initiate a relaxed atmosphere in the space via their own relaxed touch. The client's relaxation will also be induced by other factors, as we will see on the following pages. When these other factors come into play, the increasing relaxation of the treated person may conversely promote relaxation in the treating person. The resonance spaces of both persons involved will mutually influence each other.

However, in the therapeutic space it's possible that not only relaxation but also tension increases. This can make our work considerably harder. It is important that the practitioner becomes aware of such a change, for example by noticing an increase in stress and tension in

themselves, and contemplates why it may be happening at that particular moment. Perhaps the treatment may have brought the practitioner in touch with a difficult or painful emotional topic in the client's life, resulting in increased tension in their body and psyche. When the practitioner understands that their own tension may have been triggered by tension in the client, they can counteract it and relax themselves, and in this way support the client in a difficult situation. Further support can be provided by speaking to the client or by modifying the touch.

The importance of the practitioner's mindful and relaxed presence in the therapeutic space becomes thus more comprehensible. Perceiving one's own situation as well as the client's is only partially facilitated by the five classical senses, which doesn't question their importance at all. However, the resonance space offers a further sense: perception and experiencing through resonance.

### **Perception and experiencing in the resonance space**

Resonance is the major way in which we perceive other human beings, including in our everyday life. When a stressed person enters the room we perceive their state not just through their posture, gestures, and facial expression but we can directly feel it, provided we are open to it.

Experienced Shiatsu practitioners aren't surprised by the plethora of impressions, sensations and information that reaches them during the treatment of a human being. What in Shiatsu is often referred to as 'energetic perception' or 'intuition' is, in my view, information which becomes particularly evident when we are connected with the other person in the resonance space.

These impressions and sensations are simply there; suddenly we know or have a notion of something. When we look closely, we recognise that in the context of the resonance space we experience this information in the first instance as a feeling, as a sensation. Only in the second step do we interpret these sensations and perhaps give them a name.

This kind of perception is essentially subjective. We don't receive any objective knowledge about the other person. We experience them, and what we experience is distinguished not only by the strengths, but also the potential defectiveness, of the subjective. We therefore have to treat this information with appropriate mindfulness and align it with what else we know about the person. What in the beginning of our Shiatsu career happens rather randomly and surprisingly, can, with increased experience, become an essential source of information which we can utilise systematically.

An important non-physical encounter takes place in the communal resonance space; it is here that the client experiences the presence of the therapist as well as safety, trust or also consolation and comfort. In this way the relaxed connectedness in the therapeutic space facilitates the client's deep relaxation and allows the appropriate opening of their resonance space. Metaphorically speaking, doors are opening, dividing walls become more permeable, and the client encounters themselves. While all this has a liberating effect it can also be difficult and

painful. The increase in freedom for self-regulation mentioned at the beginning of this article, can arise and take effect.

More information on resonance in Shiatsu can be found in my short article 'Resonance'.

### **Significance of the therapist's ability for resonance**

Due to the possibilities evolving in the resonance space it's extremely important for the therapist to become increasingly familiar with their own body and ability for resonance. This can be promoted through the practice of Shiatsu itself, but crucially also through exercise systems such as Yoga or Qigong. By practicing meditation, we can also learn to experience within our physical bodies and to accept ourselves.

In the practice of Shiatsu, the practitioner's position and alignment takes on a pre-eminent role. A good position for treatment is one which supports a relaxed upright posture and alignment of the body space, and therefore the presence in one's resonance space. Positions which do not support this are fundamentally unfavourable. In my article 'The Inner Technique of Expansion' I describe this in more detail.

The more comfortable we are with our own inner opening-up and internal alignment, the more we will encounter our own topics – pleasant, unpleasant, and difficult ones alike. The latter can include unresolved and subconscious physical-emotional complexes that want to be recognised and embraced. If remaining unrecognised they can turn into serious obstacles and considerably limit our capacity for resonance. This also applies to the pressure to give a successful treatment. Having a professional Shiatsu practice means to open up and deal with one's own issues.

When working tenaciously with our own capacity for resonance, at some point a pleasant feeling of being present in a relaxed way will arise within us. Our attitudes towards the demands of life will also become more relaxed and change. Experienced Shiatsu practitioners are aware of and appreciate these changes. They allow them to offer the client their own open resonance space, so that it is easier for the client to enter into a state of increased resonance. Even in critical situations during the treatment, therapists are then able to keep their own resonance space open for the client. This represents a valuable tool for supporting and safeguarding the effectiveness of the treatment.

### 2. The importance of deep contact and deep rhythms

*Working with deep contact and deep rhythms is equally important for our work. A physically deep sinking-in and a relaxed remaining in the depth for a shorter or longer period of time represents a technique specific to Shiatsu.*

Our body has two surfaces: the physical surface represented by the skin, and a deeper surface which we reach when we have sunk through the connective tissue and the fascia and have arrived on firm ground, quasi at the 'bottom of the Tsubo'.

The upper surface provides the physical boundary to our environment while the deeper surface represents the gate to our deeper space. I like to refer to the deeper surface as the 'communicating level' since being in touch with this level seems to make it easier to connect with other deep areas of the body.

During everyday stress, our attention tends to rest on the outer surface while our thoughts, fears and desires can even be in the space beyond our bodies. Often, we are trapped there; entangled. Our emotional and mental constructs have become knotted in such a way that we may be unable to unravel them and to see what we truly need. In such a state it is difficult to find solutions to existing problems. It is the kind of state in which many of our clients come to our practice.

During the relaxation of the treatment our clients find their way back to themselves and their bodies. Besides the effects of the resonance space described above this is particularly promoted by the relaxed deep contact typical of Shiatsu. When the therapist touches the client's body in its depth, sooner or later the receiving person's attention will follow the touch into this depth. Each touch by the therapist will then guide the client's perception and awareness out of the stress-dominated space beyond the body's surface and into the predominantly pleasant and calm experience of their own body space.

Deep rhythm means that one deep contact is strung onto the next, without the therapist's attention leaving the depth, even if the physical contact has to be temporarily released in order to physically reach the next point. The continuous presence of the treating person's attention on a deep level leads the client even more reliably towards experiencing the depth of their own body.

At this point an interesting phenomenon can be observed: the entire stress 'out there', all the pressure, all the fears, desires, efforts and avoidances remain unchanged. But in this moment, they appear not so important anymore, they have lost a part of their power over the thinking and feeling of the person. Instead, the client experiences her body space with more awareness and is more relaxed; an experience, even if associated with pain, that is mostly pleasant (there are exceptions). The body relaxes – often very deeply, in a way it hasn't experienced for years or sometimes even decades. Confidence in the situation and the body can grow; life becomes better when we feel comfortable in our body. We find it easier to accept ourselves and our situation, which is often a prerequisite for positive changes. The world becomes clearer, solutions are easier to find or arise as if on their own accord.

Such deep relaxation may not really be possible during the first treatment. But during a course of treatments body and soul learn more and more to trust, to open up step by step, and to go into an increasingly deep relaxation. When the overall conditions are right, this also applies to people with post-traumatic stress disorder who may experience any deeper relaxation as a threat to their instable balance. However, over time they will be able to experience the safety of their own space as a reliable parameter.

**Deep contact has a very physical and a very energetic dimension.**

In order to support this development, the deep contact in Shiatsu needs to occur mindfully. It is important that the treating person feels what they are touching in the depth, and that they then decide to rest for a moment precisely here, at this depth. The decision is made easier by consciously perceiving the quality of the touched tissue as well as the energetic nature (Kyo and Jitsu) of the space at this location.

In this way the purely physical contact should be extended to include the mindful presence of the treating person in the depth. The energetic dimension will be crucially strengthened by the permeability of the therapist's shoulders and arms as well as potentially their entire body. (Please see my remarks/comments about presence and ability for resonance above.) This happens independently of whether the pressure is applied more lightly or more strongly.

By touching the body's surface only lightly, such permeability can be relatively easily achieved with a little practice. It is applied in many varieties of body therapy, for example craniosacral osteopathy. Besides the valuable light contact on the surface, Shiatsu also offers the possibility of physical deep touch, and, if required, with greater physical pressure. Indeed, the deep contact in connection with physical pressure and the therapist's open and permeable body is a specific Shiatsu technique. It represents a valuable potential in the touch of Shiatsu, and it is what distinguishes Shiatsu from other forms of body therapy.

At the same time, learning to simultaneously hold depth, pressure and permeability is one of the big challenges of practising Shiatsu; an ability which should be continuously developed further with much tenacity. If this is achieved, it will become clear that depth and pressure represent two different parameters during touch:

Shiatsu practitioners often reach the desired depth mainly through pressure, which they may produce by using their own body weight. As a reflex, shoulders and arms frequently get more dense and solid while the solar plexus and other areas of the body tense up.

It is, however, perfectly possible to touch physically deeply and in a relaxed manner without applying much pressure. This becomes possible through the therapist's clear alignment and slight expansiveness. If required, this slight pressure can be increased, mainly OR in the first instance through expansion, possibly also by using bodyweight.

(Pressure may become important when much pressure inside the receiving person's body is to be encountered. By responding to much inner pressure with equally much pressure from the outside, quasi meeting it on an equal footing, the inner pressure is neutralised. This may be experienced as a tremendous relief and liberation.)

If the practitioner succeeds in going into deep contact and hold it as described above, this will effectively support the fundamentally positive effects of Shiatsu.

**The Touch in Shiatsu is Direct**

Directly touching the tissue at depth is an important aspect of deep contact and deep rhythms. It means to approach the tissue directly as one is sinking in, as if one wanted to penetrate it, but then touch it only lightly or with finely attuned pressure. Generally, but not always, this direct touch is applied perpendicularly to the body surface.

However, the touch should never be applied indirectly in the form of looped effleurage as in classic massage. Neither should one slip sideways or slide past the spot tangentially. This would dilute the information for the receiving body. No playing about, no pussyfooting around, but direct, open and honest contact; physical and with focussed attention.

Such direct contact requires the receiving person to deal with the experience of the touch. At times, this can be a challenge, but generally it's a positive experience when the touch occurs according to the rules of Shiatsu, i.e. with relaxed expansion and openness of the giving person. The touched person feels seen and directly addressed.

Of course, there are exceptions to this rule of direct contact, particularly when the touch is experienced as threatening or becomes too painful, as may be the case in traumatised persons. In such cases the touch could be adapted to the relevant situation in consultation with that person.

Direct contact is an art. It contributes considerably to the effect of Shiatsu.

### 3. The specific and focussed work with a person's physical and energetic patterns

*This is the aspect of our work often considered as the most important for the positive effects of Shiatsu. Even though I believe that its significance is overrated, I still view working directly with the physical and energetic patterns and structures very meaningful and essential.*

A persons' body and soul mirror each other in a variety of ways. Emotional states and experiences also always find their expression in the physical body; physical states and experiences have visible effects on the emotional realm. Both aspects of life are balanced with each other and kept in harmony by the energetic body.

We are already born with distinct physical and emotional personal traits. These patterns evolve and change during the course of our lives, influenced by childhood experiences (parental home, schooling, etc.), further education, job, relationship, societal environment as well as all other life experiences. Since human beings seek positive and pleasant experiences whilst avoiding unpleasant and painful ones, they will develop – mostly in harmony with the prevailing societal norms – a wide range of strategies to avoid or block out negative experiences and try to reach pleasant ones.

These techniques shape a person's personality and also manifest in the structure and organisation of their body as well as their emotional being. In times of particular strain, they

represent, first and foremost, an important resource for coping with critical situations and are therefore the first to be activated.

However, since such emotional and physical patterns, by their very nature tend to be sluggish and will change only slowly (and even then only for a compelling reason), they have the tendency to bind a person and limit their freedom for creatively finding new paths and solutions. They then often turn out to be an obstacle rather than a support in coping with the current situation.

Human beings continue to develop so that views and behavioural patterns which in the past contributed to resolving a crisis may not be helpful ten years on. They may even prevent achieving a solution.

Shiatsu can help to allow old structures to become permeable, on both a physical and energetic level; to release blockages; and to open doors to new paths. Shiatsu changes the way in which the body organises itself physically and energetically. Different approaches in Shiatsu offer different possibilities to achieve this.

### **Different approaches in Shiatsu**

Zen-Shiatsu focuses mainly on working with those energetic organs and their meridians which, based for example on Hara diagnosis, represent an energetic imbalance. Meridian work addresses the extreme poles of this imbalance so that they may come closer together and balance each other and are thus less of an obstacle in coping with the current crisis.

Meridian work is energy work and, since energy is also always space, it also means working in the energetic space. The spaces of individual meridians mirror the relevant aspects of the client's personality and body. Meridian work is characterised by subtly addressing what is notable in the meridian space (as well as in the 'home' of the relevant energetic organ). It is not just about balancing Kyo and Jitsu. For me, the encounter with the other person appears to be much more important; to experience them in the context of their meridians.

In meridian-free Shiatsu the therapist will be guided primarily by the client's physical and energetic patterns. Blockages and stuck Kyo-Jitsu patterns are perceived as an expression of being invested in old coping strategies. Working directly and indirectly with such blockages opens doors to new solutions which will render the client's complaints and problems redundant. The therapist will be aware that each part of the body is connected to all other parts. Each painful area sustains resonating connections with several other areas of the body space. Working with such 'resonance areas' can significantly change the situation in the original area. In my article 'Tracking Ki – Meridian-free Shiatsu' I have described this way of working in great detail.

The basis of *Local Shiatsu*, too, is formed by perceiving Kyo-Jitsu patterns and the physical structures in problematic areas. With relaxed presence in her body, the therapist will be in resonance mode as described above, allowing her to perceive such patterns. She can touch them directly, either manually or with the tool of her focussed attention and observe any changes that may occur. These changes in the energetic as well as physical structure in the



relevant area provide the body with new opportunities for re-organising local as well as related resonance areas. However, the decision whether to accept this offer is beyond the power of the treating person but lies within the client's capacity for self-regulation. Further information can be found in my article on 'Local Shiatsu'.

In any local area, such as a joint, there are also the *concrete physical structures*, which can be directly touched and addressed. Shiatsu offers the possibility of working very precisely and minutely with individual bones, ligaments, tendons, and fascia, for example on the pelvis, the shoulder joints, the spine, the wrists, or any other area that is of interest. Beyond any local changes, the focus of Local Shiatsu will equally have effects in more distant areas. By the same token, local areas can be influenced by working in more distant resonance areas.

With their potential for reducing energetic imbalances, blockages and other obstacles to self-regulation, the approaches described here represent an important part of the efficacy profile of Shiatsu. As Shiatsu always means working in the energetic space, the practitioner's relaxed presence and focused attention, in conjunction with manual touch, becomes an essential tool.

#### 4. The effect of the accompanying dialogue

*Shiatsu also works without any accompanying dialogue. However, an open and trusting dialogue in a safe space will reinforce and safeguard the positive effects of Shiatsu; it will strengthen the understanding about what happens during and after the treatments; and it will support the client in finding their own path for creating changes in their everyday life. The client will-become aware of her physical patterns and reactions which will strengthen their competence for self-regulation.*

In conjunction with the other three mechanisms already described above, the client will often go into a state of deep relaxation during which important obstacles may resolve and the body, sometimes visibly, begins to re-align itself. Positive experiences within one's own body will strengthen the person's trust in their current situation and their ability to deal well with it. Accordingly, one of the effects of Shiatsu is that our clients develop new or different thoughts and ideas.

However, our clients won't always understand what's happening in the treatments. Furthermore, and especially when they are not used to perceiving their bodies, it can happen that they won't become aware of many of the experiences during treatment. They enjoy the deep relaxation and the pleasant physical experience and want to relive that again and again. There's nothing wrong with that; some of my clients have been coming to my practice for years simply for this reason.

Shiatsu further offers the opportunity to go beyond simple relaxation, and to experience one's body with more awareness and understand it more deeply. This can be an important learning process leading to deep insights.

Through active verbal support in the form of questions and suggestions and by offering explanations we can support our clients in understanding what is happening during the treatment, allowing them to make sense of what has been experienced.

Simply the client's experience of being able to openly express their sensations and memories in the treatment room and to feel the therapist's interest will potentially open the doors to experience and insight.

It can therefore be important to reflect together what has been experienced during the treatment so that it can enter into conscious awareness. At times we have to quasi translate what has been experienced into everyday language so that it makes sense. During the course of the process a client may gain many and varied insights, for example with regards to being more confident in their body; the relationship between their lifestyle with respect to their attitude towards life and their complaints; and that they can positively influence their situation – and how to do this.

### **Support through Touch and Dialogue**

This is of particular importance when a client comes with specific complaints. These may refer to physical pain in a particular area, but also to emotional complaints and crises. In such cases it may be important that clients understand that a connection exists between their concerns and their experiences during the treatment, for example how they feel before a treatment in contrast to during and after the treatment. If they have an idea how this could relate to their problem or their complaints, new doors will open.

If clients perceive their situation more deeply in this sense, they will also recognise what hinders them, or what they can do themselves to create conditions that facilitate healing. We can support this process of insight through the accompanying dialogue.

However, we should always be mindful to meet the client where they currently are. We respect their perspectives and viewpoints, and together we look at the possibilities that may emerge. It can be extremely helpful to describe our own view. However, we must avoid imposing it on ~~the~~ the client and presenting it as the only one to be correct.

In this sense it can be useful to give homework to the client, for example to find their own answers to a question relating to their situation; to journal; or to express their current needs in writing. Engaging clients between appointments with questions and topics meaningful to them will promote cognitive processing. Results can be addressed at the beginning of the following session. The ensuing discussion will then – like most discussions before a treatment – find its way into the treatment experience.

And finally, it can be helpful to support clients in converting what they have experienced during the treatment course into their everyday life, in a way that engenders further development and improvement of their situation. Through our questions, perhaps also through specific pointers and suggestions, we stimulate their imagination and initiative. It requires much instinct and tact to inspire our clients with our ideas whilst at the same time observing how they find their own way and support them as they do so.

In order to utilise the dialogue in this way as an element of our Shiatsu practice, we don't have to be psychotherapists. I, too, am not a psychotherapist. But I am interested in having an idea what makes someone tick; ~~in~~ what way they themselves feed their problem; and what options they have to implement changes.

In a relaxed and safe space, the correct questions and pointers often simply appear as if by their own volition; I only have to grasp them. I do not have to know the solution; often, this will arise during the course of the process.

The four mechanisms of Shiatsu described above are most likely incomplete. They can be complemented, expanded, or looked at differently in a wide range of ways. But one thing is essential for any effect: the therapist's relaxed presence and alignment, rendering them more powerful. Tenaciously practicing and developing them like Qi Gong, will augment the joy and the effects of our Shiatsu.