

Safety and Awareness

An exploration of the autonomic state of the shiatsu therapist

Kate Kuut
Zen Shiatsu Opleiding Amsterdam 2020



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Kate Kuut

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Introduction

Neurobiology research on the neurophysiological state elicited by a feeling of safety in mammals offers valuable insight into the preliminary state we need to be in as shiatsu therapists in order to approach the giving of shiatsu. Masunaga cites a relaxed state for both giver and receiver of shiatsu as a precondition for shiatsu to be given and received. This relaxed state has its origin in the neurophysiological state of the therapist.

A neurophysiological feeling of safety is recognized as an internal state of quiet alertness, with relaxed breathing and a feeling of receptiveness and openness to the external environment that conveys to others that we are safe to approach, allows us to socially engage with others, to explore and be curious about our environment, and to observe. It is a prerequisite to play and learn.

As shiatsu students, there are at least two important reasons why we might reflect on our internal state and attempt to understand it. Firstly, from the point of view of giving shiatsu therapy, a safe therapeutic presence is essential in order to engender a feeling of safety in the client without which the shiatsu treatment is immediately and irrevocably compromised since without feeling safe and connected the client cannot receive the treatment and any potential benefit to the client is forfeited. To the client, our safe state might be experienced as warm, loving and caring and allows them to reciprocate and feel receptive to our approach. Therapeutic presence is the ability to be fully present, attuned and receptive in the presence of the client as they engage in therapy. It is essentially how the therapist makes the client feel and is regarded as essential for reciprocity and healing in relationship. In shiatsu, as a body therapy, therapeutic presence has an added dimension, that of touch. The shiatsu therapist must offer not only safety in his or her demeanour but also safety in his or her touch or 'safe hands' (Kishi). A safe therapeutic presence is essential for students of shiatsu as part of their general therapeutic skills.

Secondly, and perhaps more relevant, since the first point described above as our ability to engender a feeling of safety in our client is largely intuitive and happens by itself in our social engagement with them mostly without our thinking about it, a safe internal state is a necessary departure point in order to attend to the business of diagnosis and treatment of the client. Syo, the art of diagnosis and treatment, requires that we are highly focussed so as to see the symptoms of the client in all their complexity. At the same time, it requires that our attention is wide, relaxed and open so as to see the condition of the client in its entirety as they sit or lie before us. These two ways of giving attention don't always come together in our everyday experience. We may be in an adrenalin state induced by our sympathetic nervous system where we narrow our focus and zoom in on detail. Or we may zoom out, widening our focus so that we can see the bigger picture, but letting go of the detail. An internal state of safety is a springboard for creativity and observation, essential for learning syo.

In the following pages, I have set out to explore our state of mind as we practise shiatsu and how we may influence it for purposes of entering into the state of receptivity and

relaxed wide view that we must cultivate if we are to improve the quality of our diagnosis and touch and learn to express the 'life sympathy' of Masunaga.



THE NEIJING TU FROM THE WHITE CLOUD TEMPLE IN BEIJING

PART ONE: YIN

Hand

Soft and warm when touching

Spreading and reaching to every level and space

Knowing where it has to touch

No doubt, no hesitation

Heart-centred fullness

Brings a feeling of cradling

It lets ki from heaven pass through you

Drawing out disharmony

Reborn through touch

Akinobu Kishi

On a dark afternoon in January, I lay on a Japanese futon in a state of mild anaesthesia brought on by the exquisite hands of a well-trained shiatsu therapist. In what seemed like an age and an instant I had been transported from a state of turmoil to one of tranquillity and had now entered a peaceful no man's land between sleeping and waking. The storm that had been raging had blown over and my mind was quiet. In a place I couldn't locate, I realised that my body had calmed down. My mind stopped in its tracks, gripped with curiosity about the sensations in its body, I felt 'held' but couldn't say where exactly, 'cradled' in the words of Kishi's poem. I took a deep breath in and out and relaxed. Unmistakably palpable to my nervous system, the support that buoyed me could not be grasped by my conscious mind, only experienced. Each and every muscle in my body relaxed and I breathed, deeply, through my lungs and through my skin. My senses, awoken and freshly attentive to the world around me, sharpened. On the street, a bird warbled a song that sounded like a question. The stillness that punctuated his singing was intense, and my heart, no longer agitated, but calm and soft, opened in its embrace. Miraculously, it seemed the puzzle of my condition had been solved on a futon. My body responded by breathing slowly, and relaxing as it regrouped. The deep relaxation and deep calm in my body and mind were long overdue. Tears welled up and trickled down towards my ears, and I waited. My breathing deepened, and with it my awareness until, finally, something, a last frontier perhaps, dissolved and, as though a door had opened, my mind followed its body into the safe waters that surrounded me. When I opened my eyes, I was alone. The therapist had left the room.

Exhausted by complications and illness after surgery, my nervous system had capitulated. Fractious and volatile, and threatening continually to implode or collapse,

it had settled into a disorganised state of flux and was now unreliable and out of control. Nothing was wrong, as such, but nor did anything feel right. In this state, I arrived at the shiatsu clinic. In roughly thirty minutes, in the safety of its surroundings, and understanding the signal to relax, my nervous system somehow reconfigured and my mind, too, took the cue to relax and settle. Signalled by the therapist, a haven in the midst of a storm, it seems unlikely that this safe autonomic state could have been transmitted to me without first being present as an internal state in the therapist. And, far from being incidental or coincidental, beyond the natural talent of the therapist, this safe autonomic state, which became a cocoon inside which I could unravel, was without a shadow of a doubt the product of a quality of mind arrived at after many hours of training. What I had experienced, in fact, was the deep presence and 'safe hands' of a gifted and, which is more important for the purposes of this thesis, trained shiatsu therapist.

Descartes' ideas concerning the relationship between mind and matter have served as a bedrock for the notion of the mind body split for the last few hundred years. This splitting of mind and body is something that while it has profoundly influenced western thought, is entirely absent from the philosophical thought of the Eastern world, where body and mind are regarded as one.

Nevertheless, the mind body split and therefore, too, the mind body connection, has been the source of much debate and, for students of shiatsu in the western world, is an important point to be considered. Neurobiological research has sought to explore the relationship between mind and body by looking at the messaging system that runs between the two, known as the autonomic nervous system. A group of researchers led by Dr Stephen Porges, American psychiatrist and author of the polyvagal theory, investigated the shifting autonomic state of our bodies in response to cues of safety and threat in the environment. Porges' work, while it has yet to be scientifically validated, has had wide clinical application since its publication in 1994 and has direct implications for how we view therapeutic presence and the therapeutic process.

The central tenet of Porges' research is that human beings have an innate primary need for safety and hence are impelled to embark on a quest for it in their biological, social and neurological behaviour. It is only when safety is experienced as an autonomic state that we can properly engage in the essential activities of secure social connection, reproduction, feeding and digesting, sleeping, and nurturing our young. Human beings, in the same way that other mammals do, have the ability to experience and at the same time to signal to others a deep sense of safety through their nervous systems. Fascinatingly, it is in this very process of signalling safety to others that we are able to regulate our own autonomic state into safety – a loop, if you like, in which we coregulate with others. Evolutionally, it was the skills of language and social communication that enabled mammals to develop the ability to signal safety to one another. The reciprocal signalling of these cues of safety acts as a feedback loop from which all parties can derive an internal feeling of safety, known as interoception of safety, and communicate it to other nervous systems. When another nervous system is able to read the safety signalled, this is known as neuroception of safety. This feedback loop enables us to live together in safe groups and is a mechanism that acts to protect us from predators.

Porges' polyvagal theory holds that the feeling of safety is a physiological state in which our sympathetic and parasympathetic branches have regulated our organs optimally, our breathing is calm and deep, and in which we feel relaxed and alert. This safe autonomic state allows us to feel receptive and open to our external environment and to feel curious about our surroundings so that we can play and learn. We are social animals, and as such are acutely attuned to friendly faces and soothing voices which act to calm our nervous system. Physical settings, too, can offer cues of safety and therefore have the potential to calm us; the smallest chapel, or the grandest cathedral, offer an intimate and protected space in which we are surrounded by solid protective walls inside of which the beautiful resonance of chanting and singing like incantations of the soul, the jewel-like colours of stained glass windows, and the heady balm of incense gently disarm us and move us into autonomic safety.

In an article 'Portals to Compassion' (2017), Porges summarizes his polyvagal theory thus: 'Polyvagal theory holds that cues of risk and safety, which are continuously monitored by the nervous system, promote either states of safety and calmness or states of vigilance towards sources of potential threat and defence. The theory assumes that mammals are on the search for safety, which, when obtained, facilitates health and social connectedness. The theory explains how the rituals associated with contemplative practices trigger physiological states that calm neural defence systems and promote feelings of safety that may lead to expressing and feeling compassion.'

Porges' theory uses the physiology of the autonomic nervous system to explain how the body is able to transport us to a feeling of safety. Feeling safe internally, he asserts, is dependent upon a neuroception of safety in the environment and identifies three states that we can be in depending on whether our nervous system perceives cues of safety or threat in the environment. The first of these is the social engagement state, in which our nervous system perceives safety and regulates us into calmness and connection via our parasympathetic nerves. In this state, our heart rate comes down, our breathing slows and we smile and connect. Next, he describes a fight or flight state, in which we enter a state of arousal, our heart rate and blood pressure may rise, we may begin to produce adrenalin and our body generally prepares us to mobilize and run from a threat. Finally, he talks about the freeze state, in which our heart rate and blood pressure come down as our body prepares to 'play dead', a remnant of reptilian behaviour when caught and unable to run. Generally, we shift between the first two states of parasympathetic rest and social engagement on the one hand, and sympathetic mobilization on the other, while the freeze state is reserved for situations where our nervous system assesses that we cannot flee.

The nervus vagus, or vagus nerve, is the longest nerve in the body and accounts for about eighty per cent of parasympathetic traffic. It transmits both sensory and motor information and emerges along with two other parasympathetic nerves that go to the face and ears from the medulla oblongata, a small structure at the top of the spine nestling under the occiput.

The medulla contains the breathing centre of the body and is where sensory and motor pathways converge. The proximity of these pathways allows a number of parasympathetic activities, for example, breathing, to be fast and efficiently regulated.

Importantly, the medulla is located close to the emotional centre of the brain, the group of structures called the limbic system. Neuron activity in the medulla allows sympathetic and parasympathetic activity, which includes the sensation of touch, to be communicated to the emotional brain where Masunaga states in his manual for students that the client experiences the pleasant sensations of touch in shiatsu and which explains the bonding that occurs between client and shiatsu therapist during shiatsu.

Porges' innovation lies in his interpretation of the physiology of the vagus nerve. He theorizes that the vagus nerve has two mechanisms, hence the term 'polyvagal'. In the first place, an 'old' vagus, as he puts it, that is unmyelinated, meaning it transmits information slowly, and regulates us into the freeze mode during intense fear (Porges' 'dorsal vagus mode'). This pathway follows the digestive system down to the stomach and digestive organs and is slow to react. He regards the dorsal vagus mode as a survival response from our reptilian past allowing us to 'freeze' as an alternative to fight and flight. The newer 'smart' vagus (Porges' 'ventral vagus mode') that evolved as we developed language and the ability to distinguish human speech and higher frequency sounds that regulate us out of the threatened defensive state of the autonomic sympathetic state into safe social connection follows the pathway from the medulla around the larynx, face and ears and down to the heart. In other words, the smart vagus is closely linked to the senses of vision, hearing, taste and smell.

Porges' myelinated fast-acting smart social vagus plays a crucial role in safe social connection. By virtue of its trajectory along the larynx, ear canal, facial muscles and down to the heart and lungs and the fact that it is well-myelinated it is well-designed to make use of social engagement and interaction for purposes of regulating our feeling of safety within our immediate environment. Porges makes the connection between our evolved ability as social mammals to activate our smart vaguses and our ability to communicate a feeling of safety. Safety, he suggests, is a physiological state that is induced by the activity of our smart vagus during social interaction.

The pathway of the parasympathetic nerves through the face, ear, tongue and larynx, enables us to self-regulate our own nervous system by means of our facial expressions and prosody¹. At the same time, it allows our nervous system to be coregulated by that of another using the same mechanisms of social interaction – that is, those of facial expression and prosody. Social interaction using our parasympathetic nerve pathway along the senses enables us to reach a safe state. Our ability to communicate is not just motivated by our physiological need to feel safe, it is the mechanism by which we and others in our group are able to experience an internal state of safety. Social interaction, Porges concludes, is the key to feeling safe and represents a primary mammalian need the pursuit of which represents our life's mission.

While Porges' parasympathetic state is stimulated by interacting with others positively, or by engaging in activities that involve stimulation of the vagus nerve such as singing or deep breathing, the parasympathetic state also undergoes an inhibiting action by

¹ Prosody is the way that we modulate the tone of our voice as we speak

the sympathetic response. The inhibiting action of the sympathetic response upon the parasympathetic state takes us out of the safe autonomic state. It can, for example, be induced by signals from the medulla to produce adrenalin in the adrenals upon detection by the nervous system of danger or a need to mobilise for action. In this sympathetic state, in which the parasympathetic response has been 'inhibited' by the sympathetic response, the senses that are innervated by the parasympathetic nerves are dampened or 'inhibited'. This has a marked effect on one's ability to interact. One's facial expressiveness and prosody are 'flattened'. The sympathetic inhibition of the muscles in the eyes, ears and larynx affects the coregulation process and interferes with connection. For example, the muscles of the inner ear may tense and reduce the frequency range that one can hear.

This sympathetic inhibition of the muscles that control facial expression, hearing and speech, our senses that collect data for syo, plays a decisive role in our interaction with the client during the Kanpo². When sympathetic inhibition takes over, we literally lose valuable information because the muscles of our inner ear tense making it difficult to hear the client resulting in our ignoring or not registering what they are telling us, our throat tenses so we cannot express safety when we speak, we lose contact with the client through the expressiveness of our face and finally, we forget to breathe deeply and so lose contact with our Hara. In the end, sympathetic inhibition of the parasympathetic state results in a missed opportunity to enter and work from Masunaga's parasympathetic state.

For anyone engaged in therapeutic work, awareness of this part of the therapeutic dyad is important so as to maintain the regulating effect of calming social interaction and contact with the client. Bessel van der Kolk has this to say about polyvagal theory: "The Polyvagal Theory provided us with a more sophisticated understanding of the biology of safety and danger, one based on the subtle interplay between the visceral experiences of our own bodies and the voices and faces of the people around us. It explains why a kind face or a soothing tone of voice can dramatically alter the way we feel. It clarifies why knowing that we are seen and heard by the important people in our lives can make us feel calm and safe, and why being ignored or dismissed can precipitate rage reactions or mental collapse. It helped us understand why attuning with another person can shift us out of disorganized and fearful states. In short, Porges's theory makes us look beyond the effects of fight or flight and put social relationships front and centre in our understanding of trauma. It also suggested new approaches to healing that focus on strengthening the body's system for regulating arousal."

Carl Rogers, psychologist and contemporary of Masunaga, is known for his concept of Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) – an approach in which the therapist maintains an attitude of grace towards the client and seeks to accept the client fully and without judgment and a broadly accepted standard in therapeutic settings. Like Masunaga, who was acquainted with Rogers' work, Rogers was greatly concerned with how to cue safety when approaching the client, since he could see the potential for self-healing in the client at a psychological level if a client were to experience the

² The Kanpo are the Bo shin, Mon shin, Bun shin and Setsu shin

right conditions. “The individual has within him or her self vast resources for self-understanding, for altering her or his self-concept, attitudes, and self-directed behaviour—... these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided.”

Polyvagal theory offers an understanding of why UPR is so important in the therapeutic dyad. In shiatsu, we project subliminal cues of either risk or safety to the client’s nervous system physiologically through the quality of our sensory touch. Though we maintain an attitude of grace towards the client in our social interaction, we meet the client at the point of contact, too. Our hands can convey safety, or a lack of it, and of this we should be acutely aware. The powerful sense of safety that the shiatsu therapist’s hands are potentially able to convey are in terms of therapeutic presence inevitably a part of UPR and must be regarded as such in order to ensure that the client is able to feel sufficiently safe to relax and receive the treatment from the therapist.

The quality of our sensory touch in the shiatsu therapeutic setting may be seen as part of Carl Rogers’ definitive concept of Unconditional Positive Regard. It is, one could say, the tactile extension of Rogers’ valuable concept that reaches out to embrace the autonomic nervous system of the client.

Nurtured by its masters in Japan, at once authentic, reciprocal and compassionate, and unparalleled in its ability to heal and restore the mind body connection, shiatsu’s uniqueness lies in its potential to act upon the nervous system. A vital blend of the medical and philosophical ancestry of East and West, it incorporates elements of TCM, Zen Buddhism, Taoism and western medical theory.

It is the ‘safe’ touch of shiatsu that holds the key to the parasympathetic response. Masunaga called it ‘touch with love’. Namikoshi called it ‘the mother’s mind’. Stimulation of the parasympathetic nervous system by calming the sympathetic using shiatsu produces a powerful response in the body – when shiatsu pressure is correctly applied, a wave of calm hits the body and we can breathe. It is like the anaesthetic but, magically, we maintain consciousness. It is as though pure oxygen has been released into our lungs. Thus, in the embrace of the parasympathetic response, in which we feel calm and anaesthetised, shiatsu begins to have its effect. Safe touch communicates a powerful sense of safety and is interpreted by the client’s nervous system as a safe presence allowing the client to relax. Talking about safe hands, Kishi says that healing arises in the client when the therapist, in a state of awareness and compassion, the ego surrendered, is able to just feel and perform setsu shin. Setsu shin performed correctly, the treatment ‘arrives’, and the kyo and jitsu are brought into balance and the client’s energy flows freely. Masunaga calls this ‘life sympathy’.

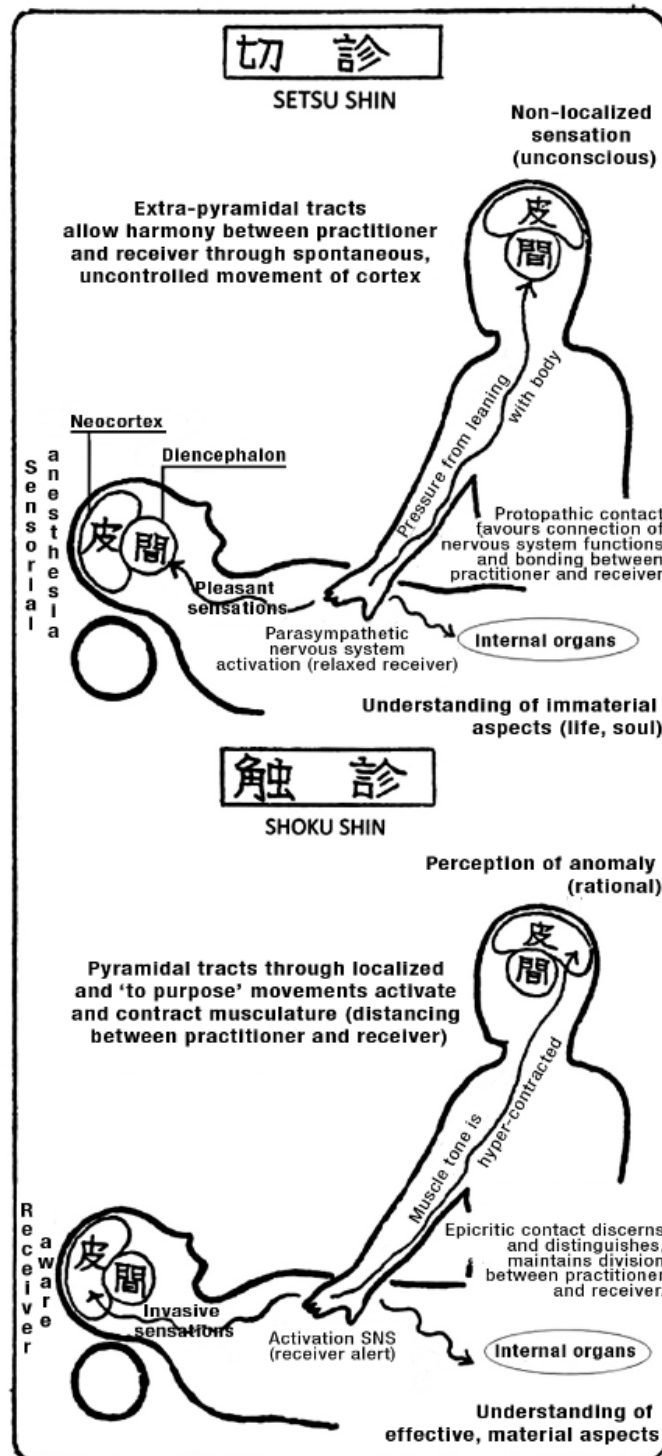
Realizing that access to the client’s parasympathetic was essential for healing to take place, whilst at the same time acknowledging that gaining access to the client’s

parasympathetic was fraught with problems, Masunaga set out to explain a way in which students of shiatsu could navigate setsu shin and employed a characteristic mix of Chinese and Western medicine to explain his ideas.

In the first part of a series of four manuals written for his students, the first of which was published in English translation last year, Masunaga discusses the skin-organ relationship theory, called the somatovisceral reflex theory that originates from Chinese medicine which together with the recognition of the parasympathetic response as the route to activating the client's self-healing is an important concept in shiatsu theory. Shiatsu communicates through the skin which is a part of the somatosensory nervous system. Using perpendicular, sustained and supportive pressure called 'sasaeatsu' and meaning 'supporting with pressure', shiatsu calms the sympathetic nervous system and activates the parasympathetic nervous system. An indispensable element of this supportive pressure is the soft attention and open awareness that is required to sense the client's ki meeting one's pressure as one feels. According to the skin-organ relationship theory, disharmony in the internal organs is transmitted to the epidermis of the skin via the autonomic nervous system. Touch that stimulates the parasympathetic pathway to the organ treats the organ disharmony. However, it is known that touching the skin stimulates the sympathetic nervous system via the somatosensory nerves. To stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, via the skin, it is thought that perpendicular, sustained and supportive pressure at a certain depth depending on the individual is needed. This helps us to understand why Masunaga's stated principles of perpendicular, sustained and supportive pressure when giving shiatsu are so important.

Clearly, knowing that unintentionally stimulating a sympathetic response in the client's nervous system could potentially be a barrier to treating clients with shiatsu, Masunaga was concerned about the quality of touch of his students. Working with the somatosensory nervous system, which detects temperature and pain in receptors found in the skin, the shiatsu therapist must do everything in his power to ensure that he communicates safety in his touch and ki. To do this, Masunaga held that the relaxed state of the therapist was paramount. The reason he gives for this was that any tension held in the muscles in the line of pressure, say, from shoulder to hand but also, for example, in the hara, indicated activation of the therapist's own sympathetic nervous system. If a therapist gives the 'wrong' pressure, that is, pressure that is not coming from a relaxed therapist, the client will detect the tension coming from the therapist's touch through the somatosensory receptors of his own skin and his nervous system will interpret it as a threat. If the touch is 'wrong', the client's nervous system will mount a defence in the form of a sympathetic nervous response which inhibits the parasympathetic response and makes it impossible for the client to relax thereby rendering the treatment futile. In this situation, the organ is not treated and remains kyo. Likewise, if the touch is 'right' – that is, touch that incorporates Masunaga's pressure principles and comes from a relaxed therapist – the client's nervous system will perceive the touch as safe and rather than mounting a defence, will relax and trust the therapist's hands. In this relaxed state, where the parasympathetic has not been inhibited by the sympathetic, the kyo of the organ can now be treated.

Masunaga captured the concept of setsu shin performed in a relaxed state in a diagram included as teaching material in his 1st Manual shown here below.



MASUNAGA'S DIAGRAM OF SETSU SHIN (1ST MANUAL, 2019)

Masunaga's diagram clearly depicts the states of both therapist and client (here described as practitioner and receiver). In the upper part of the diagram, we can see the importance of soft, wide focus, with what he refers to as protopathic contact which he deems to support the bonding between therapist and client as the pleasant

sensations of protopathic touch reach the diencephalon (emotional brain). The lower part of the diagram illustrates what happens when our focus and touch become narrow leading to muscle tension in the therapist and at the same time in the client. The treatment here is now being 'done' to the client rather than space being created for the client to respond in accordance with the principle of self-healing. The sharp focus of the therapist, who is in a sympathetic state, muscles contracted, perceives an anomaly and treats the client with tensed muscles (hypercontracted muscle tone) and in so doing unintentionally induces a sympathetic response in the client whose nervous system experiences the touch as invasive and cannot relax since he is now alert and in a sympathetic state himself. The therapist's attention is no longer soft and wide, but has been caught by the perception of an anomaly, and thus the 'ki capsule' as Kishi describes it which is inhabited by therapist and client is disturbed by the intense focus of the therapist dissecting its path to the symptom. The invasive sensations are communicated not to the emotional brain but to the neocortex, or thinking brain, a higher structure.

Masunaga's diagram describes very well my own state of mind in particular during supervision treatments where the pressure is on to find the symptom that will reveal the client's condition and therefore the diagnosis. We get stuck in the chase and end up treating symptoms losing sight of the whole which, if we hadn't, could potentially reveal the client's condition to us. When asked if we can see the treatment 'arriving' we are unable to say since our awareness has been hijacked by the symptom. This is frustrating for shiatsu students and though in all likelihood it is due to many reasons, one of which is that the pathology of TCM patterns is as yet not fully automated so that we are preoccupied with recall instead of perception, it has also to do with the sharp focus of the sympathetic nervous system or 'hyperfocus' that we are in and our desire to 'find' the symptom that will lead to diagnosis.

Example:

I had been told during supervision that my hara diagnosis and palpation needed work, it was haphazard and unpolished. Client lays while I palpate the hara. I am anxious to approach the palpation more confidently and want to be clear in my palpation so I decide to palpate 'firmly' on the kidney trying hard not to hesitate. It feels as though a barrier has been put up. I move on to the bladder feeling more gently. As I work around the rest of the hara, I realize that I cannot feel because there is something in the way. I confer with the client, who tells me that she has no idea about the hara since her mind had wandered off while I was palpating the kidney. We return to the scene and examine what happened at the moment that I had palpated the kidney area. It emerged that she had distinctly felt that my touch was forcing its way in, was invasive, and that this had caused her to wander off in her mind and start making a shopping list in her head for dinner that night. So, even in this small instance with palpation it became clear that my intentional focus was really not a good mindset going into hara palpation. The sympathetic focus of my mind and contracted muscle tone in my hands had prompted a sympathetic response in the client that resulted in her withdrawing from connection, closing off into her own thoughts and in effect separating her mind from her body, or in psychological terms, 'dissociating'.

The client must be in a parasympathetic state in order for healing to take place. Just as important, and potentially less explicitly clear, is that the therapist must equally be in a parasympathetic state, in other words, relaxed and aware in order for the client's parasympathetic to be accessible to him in the first place. The sympathetic response of the client in this example was discernible during the hara palpation. It essentially blocked further exploration of the hara. Despite the fact that she was mentally open to continuing the palpation, her body had decided otherwise and communicated this by putting up a barrier. This was interesting to observe and showed me how important my approach was when beginning to palpate the hara. It demonstrated for me the importance of the therapist being in a relaxed, parasympathetic state with open wide attention in order for the client's parasympathetic to be accessible in the first place. It also demonstrated for me the intelligence of the nervous system. My client's nervous system communicated to my nervous system that it was aware of my invasive touch and disengaged from the process putting up barriers that I could sense but not penetrate. It also illustrates for me how Masunaga's stipulation of a relaxed state for both client and therapist works in practice: if the client is approached by a therapist who is in a sympathetic state then they will not lower their defences. The approach is all important. A relaxed and parasympathetic approach that conveys safety in touch is necessary in order for the client not to mount a sympathetic defence.

Example:

Treating the lung meridian in a client, I was directed by Joyce to pay attention to the pressure that I was giving, which was much too strong. She directed me to pay attention to the client's face which when I looked was indeed fearful and alarmed. The eyes were wide and the shoulders drawn up. I tried to focus my attention lower in my hara and began again. This time I tried to forget about 'giving' shiatsu and to 'feel' the ki in the client's arms. The client was able to relax. She told me afterwards how surprised she was that she just lay there and didn't say anything. It struck me that her lung kyo may have compromised her sense of embodiment which may have prevented her from feeling the invasiveness of the touch at a conscious level and being able to speak out about it. Joyce explained that the lung meridian is very sensitive and working too firmly on it can overwhelm the client.

It is of fundamental importance to understand that a feeling of safety in therapist and client is not simply a lack of threat but a body state in which the nervous system perceives safety and is able to relax as a result. The autonomic nervous system is involuntary and so the process of perceiving safety and relaxing is not a choice but the consequence of a confluence of internal and external conditions and an exchange between two unique and therefore different nervous systems. What is a choice, however, is to recruit interventions to regulate yourself and your client into a safer state to improve trust and connection and nourish the therapeutic relationship. Resilience and trust develop in therapist and client in a loop that rests on the yin state of safety from where attention and awareness can unfold during setsu shin.

PART TWO: YANG

“When you activate the right hand, know that the heart is in the left” (Sen Rikyu)

We begin the third year of our Zen Shiatsu training seated in the half lotus, eyes closed, as our sensei guides us on a journey within. Gently, she invites us to soften our eyes as though beholding something beloved, turning our gaze inward as we relax into an inner smile, a line – outwardly invisible – stretching from the corner of our mouths to our ears.

A few minutes later, we listen as each describes lush forests, towering mountains, and exquisite blooms, an Elysian interior world which we learn to call the Inner Landscape³. I savour my new state and delight in its sensorial opulence as my eyes, now open, take in the vibrant blue mats and red cushions against the quiet sage floor and crisp white walls. It is as if I am now seeing everything for the first time, with fresh eyes. I no longer see a red cushion, or a blue mat but an entire room, a brand new landscape, which is complete and whole. Inside, I am quietly alert, ready. And at the same time, I am peaceful, fulfilled, complete, open now, and aware. I am in the room, fully present.

This open, connected and meditative state is joyful and light and has an ethereal expansiveness that is very wonderful to inhabit. Whereas before the meditation I needed to search for objects with my eyes in order to find them – no sooner had I one object in view than another caught my attention and I could never keep both in view at the same time – now I am able to rest in this new state of attention and just observe. It is as though I have been given a new pair of glasses and everything falls into place. Directing my mind to the sensory experience, I notice an odd sensation – a feeling of space in my body. My sensory perception relaxes and as this happens I realise that what I had thought was space in my body is movement, though I am seated on the ground; it is as though my body has come alive. The movement that I can feel is, I realise later, unmistakably, ki.

The sensation of ki within blew my mind. Not just that ki was flowing, but that I could feel it ‘live’ as it was happening – the experience was sublime and my sensibility of it marked the beginning of a state of embodiment that, if it had previously been nebulous and somewhat out of reach, was now impressing itself upon me with great certainty and in a manner that was larger than life. Ki feels natural, light and joyous, like pure oxygen bubbling softly, and as I contemplate it, I realise that it is yang. Nourished, energised, and centred, my mind is clear and able to attend to the scene before me. We work as a group in this state. The morning passes quickly and is light-hearted as the ki begins to flow. A few weeks later we will learn about the Three Treasures of Jing, Ki and Shen but for now I am intrigued by the journey from my usual state to this

³ See illustration on page 6 at the end of the Introduction

new altered one with its clarity and wide view. It is as though we have gained a new perspective, and can look down from Kunlun mountain at the view below.

Our introduction to the Inner Smile, a beautiful meditation from the Taoist tradition of self-cultivation, was a turning point for me in the Zen Shiatsu training. It brought the notion of ki alive. This experience of feeling ki within was entirely different from searching for it in another person as we had been doing in our training up until this point. Remarkably, my brief encounter with ki had emerged from stillness. I hadn't performed any special movement or otherwise used my body to bring me into it. Rather, I had simply sat still and moved my mind. And the act of turning my mind inward to observe my Inner Landscape, giving attention to and nourishing it, had connected me to my own ki.

Though the luminosity of that moment in the group did not return for some time, the practice of this meditation sparked my curiosity. Around about the same time, and in the midst of my generally feeling stuck, Nick Pole arrived from London and brought with him novel and unexpected insight. It was a fascinating weekend at which we were invited to experience the workings of our own nervous system in all its abundance and fragility. Engaging in his presentation, quite apart from the intriguing workshops he gave, Nick himself was more than anything else an inspiration: his quiet approach brought us to a new point of departure from which to explore what for most of us was uncharted territory – our own autonomic state.

A short seiki treatment brought me to a state of heightened awareness. The ensuing hours offered surprising revelations about my own engagement and reciprocity with others. Returning home, I noticed a difference in how I was received by my partner and children, and in my own subsequent feelings of openness and connection towards them. I took note of how relaxed and enthusiastic my own children and partner seemed to become in my presence and put this deeper connection down to my altered state. I became intensely curious about this new lighter way of being that seemed to have transformed my family's reception of me. At the same time, I became aware of the disparity of internal states in the dojo – in polyvagal terms, safe and connected, unsafe, disconnected - a spectrum of potent internal experience that projected into the space with great urgency. I wondered what it would be like if we could acquire a state of equanimity, composure, openness, one in which we perceive the client and in doing so can master the delicate art of syo, whose wisdom though it defies western logic permits an approach by the intuitive mind. As Nick treated me, I began to feel vividly a rush of downward ki from my middle down to my toes, pulling me with huge force for a whole minute it felt like. Afterwards, I felt a little unsteady. Then I felt the jitteriness fall away and was left in a state of peace, and then I began to feel very happy and alive, connected.

My experiences during that weekend were exhilarating. Propelled into a new state in which I could sense ki within myself, I had been unwittingly fast-tracked to an embodied state. In this quantum leap, but somehow feeling like something very small on the back of something very big, the world of my experience began to unwind - slowing down and as it did so I began to appreciate the relationship between my safe

autonomic state and a new sensibility, out of which a sudden and unanticipated connection with ki had resulted. As I walked, my feet sank slowly deep into the ground beneath, which no longer felt hard but sprang back like young grass, fine as fresh corn silk, and full of life. Ki entered through my skin in a captivating exchange with the world which I now experienced from a state that was at once grounded and at the same time intensely joyous, a particular lightness of being the sensation of which endured for some weeks after Nick left us.

Against the backdrop of Nick Pole's programme of clean language and the intuitive way in which we were encouraged to work, the question of our autonomic state and the part it plays in the shiatsu dyad tapped away at my thoughts. As we worked in what seemed to be slow motion, I sensed that underlying all that happened at my level of perception was another layer, like the water upon which the waterlily floats, subtle, but discernibly felt. The more I relaxed, the more I felt my own body to be carried by it, a counterweight to gravity. I know now to call it ki but at the time was puzzled by it. I mulled over the experiences of the December shiatsu weekend and spent the Christmas period reading books recommended by Nick and some Masunaga. As the luminosity of my all too briefly elevated state wore off like a deflating balloon, I continued to wonder about my autonomic state even conjecturing that the shiatsu weekend had been a subtle trip, brought on by strange energies in the dojo and doomed never to be repeated. I was comforted by Masunaga, who wrote not about elevated states and hair-raising trips into the world of ki but rather about the importance of breathing, a gentle exchange of the ki of the universe through the skin through the simple act of respiration and about masters that breathe through the soles of their feet. I began to hold the image in my mind of breathing down to my toes and very soon began to feel ki in the pores of my skin and as I did so the simple pleasure of breathing in ki became mine. A weight was lifted from my shoulders and I began to feel a strange but welcome support and rather than the familiar but saddening predictability of the road ahead began to sense there might be options unexplored.

The Master and His Emissary, a magnificent tome recommended to us by Nick and which he draws on in his own book Words that Touch, is the work of Iain McGilchrist, a British psychiatrist and academic whose research has centred on the purpose of the division of the brain into a right and left hemisphere. The book describes his quest to understand the logic behind nature's splitting of the brain and asks how it might have benefitted us evolutionally. In a fascinating polemic, he joins a longstanding debate on the lateralisation of the brain and puts forward a passionately argued case for the existence of an ingenious cooperation of the left and right hemispheres arguing that, instead of an inherent left or right dominance for separate tasks, the two hemispheres work together to perform complex tasks that require two kinds of attention simultaneously – narrow and focussed attention which he assigns to the left hemisphere, and a broad, vigilant attention that he assigns to the right hemisphere. Using examples of research carried out on stroke patients, he deconstructs in

mesmerizing detail the two hemispheric roles and the part they play in creating the interior world of our experience.

The lateralisation of the brain, and the idea that left and right work together to complete tasks cooperatively but with distinctly different propensities, has wide implications for how we might approach syo in shiatsu. The brain, spinal cord and nerves, in other words, the nervous system, lies between what we perceive in the form of sensory information and how we interpret it. The neural networks fostered by our brain make sense of the world of experience by means of language, thought, attention, consciousness, memory and imagination, filtering our lived experience and creating life experience in the process. This mass of neurons has been compared to the stars of the milky way due to being so numerous although our brain, which has a surface area of about a square metre, comes compactly folded and weighs little more than a kilo and a half on average. The epicentre of the nervous system, it acts in concert with the spinal cord and nerves coordinating a complex internal messaging network that connects every cell in our body to it thereby maintaining homeostasis in the face of ever changing circumstances in the external environment.

To illustrate his theory, McGilchrist uses the example of a bird feeding. The bird needs to work with pinpointed and highly focussed attention in order to see and catch tiny morsels of food. At the same time, he must keep a wide view, a lookout, in order to detect nearby predators. This ability to utilise two different forms of attention concurrently is a skill that has helped our evolutionary survival. McGilchrist holds that the bird is able to perform these two tasks simultaneously because of a cooperation between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Elsewhere, he gives the example of learning and performing from sheet music. The music student must first break down the whole into small digestible pieces and learn them mechanically before he can memorize them. Until this process is complete, in other words, until he has mastered and automated the mechanical playing, and memorized the notes, his performance of the music remains an activity using predominantly left hemispheric function. It is only when the left hemispheric oriented part of the process has been automated that he can move to the next step, that of attempting to perform the piece with feeling and emotion, a right hemispheric oriented activity. The activities of listening to the timbre of the notes, hearing the harmonies as they build up, expressing the music through his instrument and hearing the result of his expression as he plays, all help to induce a state in which the right hemisphere dominates and flow is achieved. Crucially, it is the process of attunement between what is heard and what is expressed that enables the state of flow to develop and be maintained, so that the activity and goal, that of attunement, are one and the same. McGilchrist theorizes that flow is achieved in a right hemispheric state.

In the first year of Zen shiatsu training, much emphasis is given to learning fixed routines of shiatsu treatment, the kata's. Japanese tradition requires the student first to master the mechanics before understanding the context and theory and mastering the feeling. McGilchrist's insights into the left and right hemispheres offer an understanding of the creative process in which the left-brain skills of 'processing and unpacking' the parts are interwoven with right skills of understanding and seeing the whole. The Eastern reverence for direct experience, the terrain of the right

hemisphere, could be seen as an intuitive understanding of our need to learn with both halves of our brain and as such constitutes a fundamental part of shiatsu training.

To demonstrate the importance of the attention that we give as we engage in shiatsu, Nick kicked off our second day with a short exercise asking us to walk around the dojo as a group, between the mats and cushions that lay strewn on the ground whilst naming each item we came across out loud for ourselves. Next, he invited us to repeat the exercise, only this time he asked us to not name the objects in our path but instead to look at them as though seeing them for the first time without naming them, to feel them, to look at their colour, to feel their texture, and to experience them in a different way. After the second exercise, the colours and forms of the objects took precedence over the names of the same objects. People felt they had a better view of the room as a whole. For some, the room and everything in it came alive, was more vivid and there was a sense of an energy shift after the second exercise. For myself, the picture had been transformed following the second exercise into a more integrated and complete one as though both my eyes were looking through a wide angle lens, as though I had an overview, and the colours of the room were bright and vivid. Each object seemed to have acquired a curious luminance and space around itself so that it rested suspended in its own orbit, projecting its own ki.

Such was the contrast between these two entirely different views of the dojo during the exercise that we were forced to concede that our brain appeared to work differently depending on how we approached what we saw. Approaching the exercise with a left brain view, that is, naming the objects as we viewed them, resulted in a disjointed view devoid of vitality whilst approaching the same objects with a right brain view, and thus specifically approaching with a not naming mindset, the revered beginner's mind of Zen Buddhism, imbued the scene with life and offered a more relaxed overview of the whole that was absent in the left brain view.

The exercise described above represents an attempt to engage separately the left and right hemispheres of the brain in order to illustrate the way that the left and right hemispheres attend to the world through the senses. McGilchrist's right brain, the origin of our connection with broad, vigilant attention that detects risk and safety as we feed and bond, and the origin of our connection with flow, allows us to become deeply absorbed in an activity whilst observing great detail subliminally. The right brain has physiological differences when compared with its other half, the left brain, containing more white matter, or myelination, and possessing a longer working memory – hence it can make faster and more numerous connections, and hold more information to hand at any given moment. It observes the larger world and sees the whole. This right brain tendency towards a bigger picture of the surrounding world, composed from a stream of information obtained through our senses represents not a cognitive function, in McGilchrist's view, but a preliminary step: it creates what we see. In an effort to distinguish the defining difference between the right and left hemisphere, he uses the symbol of the rose flower and contrasts it with the red traffic light. If one thinks of the rose, he says, one may be aware of many connotations – romantic love, for example, or friendship, innocence, or death – which ramify through our experience of life, literature and art with infinite possibilities for association, whether of the mind or the emotions. The red traffic light, however, relies on the 1:1 mapping of the

command 'stop' onto the colour red, which is both explicit and unambiguous, qualities he assigns to the left brain. The red traffic light leaves no room for either doubt or reflection – one simply stops when one sees it.

So it is with the right and left hemispheres: right makes infinite and wide-ranging connections, enabling one to think more flexibly and from these connections is able to obtain a clear wide view of the whole situation. It prefers direct and novel experience over the familiar, integrates experience and, crucially, it perceives the implicit. It sees things in context and plays an important role in, for example, understanding the language of metaphor, and, too, in the appreciation of humour. The perception of the implicit and an ability to see the whole is highly relevant for syo.

The left hemisphere, meanwhile, is preoccupied with the breaking down of the whole into parts. It prefers the familiar, and is self-referring, dealing with what it already knows. It perceives the explicit, preferring literal to non-literal meaning. The left is associated with focussed attention, labels things and is reductive and solution-oriented. Interestingly, McGilchrist examines the possibility that left brain activity may correlate with the sympathetic nervous function and similarly right brain with the parasympathetic but finds no conclusive evidence for this assumption.

Clearly, the right hemisphere view, illustrated for us so poignantly during the class with Nick Pole, is, for the shiatsu student, something that warrants a closer look. Syo, the art of diagnosis through the Kanpo, seems to lend itself to the talents and affinity of the right hemisphere, requiring the shiatsu therapist to see the client in their entirety, or the whole person, whilst at the same time absorbing the detail of symptoms. Masunaga apparently said that syo comes itself to be seen – one cannot look for it. This reading of body posture and language, facial expression, tone of voice, uses McGilchrist's right hemisphere skills. The right hemisphere recognizes faces and distinguishes facial and vocal expression of emotion faster than the left, and more accurately. Whereas the left hemisphere uses the lower part of the face to gather information, in other words, the mouth, the right hemisphere uses the more subtle information from the eyes. The human face conveys important information about the uniqueness of the individual. The right brain hemisphere is involved in expressing emotions. This affinity of the right hemisphere in both expressing and, importantly, perceiving expression of the uniqueness of individuals is clearly of great importance. In syo, the two right hemispheres of shiatsu therapist and shiatsu client attune as one expresses and the other perceives in a state of flow.

McGilchrist's assertion that the right brain is involved in reading and interpreting the facial expressions of others has implications for mastering syo. It suggests that one may read the state of another using right brain perception. In Mon, Bo, Bun and Setsu shin we are collecting information through our senses that will become important diagnostic information. Syo requires us to have well-developed right functions like ability to read faces and postures, implicit meaning, an overview, and a degree of detachment.

Talking about syo, Kishi describes a difference in sensibility between East and West which he calls 'heart feeling'. When we work with our hands, and the pressure is correct, there is a heart connection. One's focus needs to be not on the meridian, but

on the whole person, a life. Seeing a person's reality without judgment, he goes on, is key. One needs to see the whole situation of the person with 'intuitive, integrated observation'. In doing this, one is not searching for pathology, but sympathising with the incongruity. Because the practitioner sees the client's reality with non-judgmental sympathy, the patient becomes relaxed and open. It needs concentration. Instead of trying to grasp what we perceive, one attempts to watch the movement and understand its pattern. Syo is a dynamic feeling in the moment and is like trying to catch the wind. It responds to touch and so is changing every moment. This requires great attention.

Kishi's remarks could easily be read as an account of what happens when the left hemisphere's inhibition of the right brain function is relaxed and the right hemispherical qualities take over. The ability of the right hemisphere to perceive the whole, to integrate wide-ranging sensory information, its talent for discerning the novel, its role in subliminally interpreting the detail of the face thereby catching the uniqueness of the individual as they present, and its resulting propensity for social engagement – all these qualities guide us quietly and effortlessly towards a state of attunement in which the client expresses and the therapist perceives what is expressed, which is the realm of the right hemisphere.

The practice of training the mind through the body reaches back thousands of years through Taoist and Buddhist tradition. The state of awareness and compassion which the shiatsu therapist must enter in order to practise syo could be described as a heightened and simultaneously relaxed awareness of body and mind. From the yin of embodiment born of a neurophysiological state of safety and the yang of intelligence operating from a centred being where the heart is nourished, clear and untroubled by conflict or emotion, and with the ego surrendered, something new can emerge: attunement with others.

In the modern environment, where ego is all-important, the algorithm rules, and serenity, peace and centredness have all but disappeared from our lived experience, the ancient practices of meditation, qi gong, tai chi, and other practices offer much-needed respite. In his book, *Zen Shiatsu*, Masunaga invites us to surrender the ego, saying that it is only when the ego is surrendered that mere pressure on the body becomes a supporting vital force towards health. On the question of surrendering the ego, Eckhart Tolle offers the following: the ego cannot dismiss itself. Ego is essentially overridden, not by an act of will, but by an increase in awareness. It is the development of awareness that allows the ego to dissolve. The first step to a higher state of awareness, is sensory awareness. Then, coming into the present moment.

In Zen Shiatsu training, we train our energetic centre, the Hara. We practise the meridian stretches, and are encouraged to take up a complementary art such as qi gong to cultivate our own vital energy. Diligent practice leads us to growth that is satisfying and brings with it benefits like stronger immunity, and improved physical and psychological health. In synchrony with this outward progression that we and others can see and appreciate, an internal process starts to unfold. We feel a desire for personal growth which promises to help us mature. It is this journey towards

maturation, and the joy and connection we begin to experience, that is the undisputed prize for our efforts. I entered the fourth year feeling doubtful about whether I would ever learn shiatsu. On being asked about my personal transformation process at the first meeting, I was struck by its absence. Resistance promptly set in, followed soon by stagnation and its concurrent feelings of disconnection, lack of joy and, exasperatingly, no flow.

Meditation is defined as the act of giving one's attention to only one thing either as a religious activity, or as a way of becoming calm and relaxed (Cambridge Dictionary of English). It is the absorption of the mind for spiritual purposes. Regarded universally as a powerful tool to tame the mind it is said to lead to a state of altered consciousness from which we can experience a higher state of being and thereby be released from the tedium of our everyday existence.

The options for meditating appear endless making it a difficult and loose concept to grasp. Typically, something is chosen to focus the mind on, such as the breath, sound or other object. Zazen often begins with a focus on abdominal breathing or breathing from the Hara. Transcendental Meditation, which involves repeating a mantra silently, usually a monosyllabic sound, for about twenty minutes and focussing the mind on this activity, is notoriously difficult to practice. Attempting to train the mind in this way is a laborious process that can encourage dissociation, and thereby defeat its own purpose. TM seems to ignore the natural desire for novelty and reward, and as I am an unseasoned meditator, descends all too often into frustration at my inability to stay on task. A novice and now a failure in the meditation world, I became curious about diaphragmatic breathing attracted by its uncomplicated and primal allure.

'In ancient times, the Chinese said people near death breathed through their nose only, while sick persons breathed with their shoulders, and ordinary people breathed with their chest. Wise men were said to breathe with their belly, and masters from the soles of their feet'. (Zen Imagery Exercises, Masunaga)

Diaphragmatic breathing, or 'eupnea' to give it its scientific name is a natural and relaxed form of breathing present in all mammals, who are born breathing this way. It is the most important thing we can do to regulate our autonomic state and is, in fact, the only part of the autonomic nervous system that we can control. It is recommended for developing the Hara and involves contracting the diaphragm muscle that runs horizontally below our lungs between the thorax and abdomen. As the lungs expand with air, the chest does not rise, but instead the belly expands. Eupnea occurs in mammals when they are in a state of relaxation, in other words, when there is no threat detectable in their surrounding environment. Exhaling long and deep, the vagus motor neurons are activated which slows the heart rate and relaxes our breathing. Its opposite is shallow breathing, which is a form of breathing in which the chest rises, not the abdomen and is called shallow due to inhalation not going down to the abdomen. The lower the focal point of one's breathing, the more an individual has 'ochitsuki'

which means settled or stable ki in Japanese, or composure – in English, we might call it ‘gravitas’⁴ – and the more one can breathe with one’s whole body.

Abdominal breathing may be what wise individuals strive for but this is not the ultimate way to breathe according to Masunaga who talks about the ideal way of breathing as a mental image of drawing in and sending out ki from the tips of our fingers and toes, breathing in right down to the tips of our toes. Obviously, air doesn’t travel beyond our diaphragm, but the point is to focus at a lower point.

Masunaga explains that in order to do the meridian stretches we need to quietly experience the sensation that lingers along the meridians and should start first with becoming aware of our body and experiencing our breathing as the ‘breath of life focussing on breathing in the Hara. I decide to follow Masunaga’s advice and breathe down to my toes. Five minutes of deep breathing morning and evening. These five minutes on waking and before sleeping soon began to permeate other parts of the day and I found myself wanting to breathe like this all the time. The awareness of my feet on the ground was so pleasurable that my brain became deeply attached to the feeling causing me to repeat it at every opportunity. I began to wake up rather early and the effect on my general energy and awareness was profound. Diaphragmatic breathing is known to be a route into the parasympathetic autonomic state and as such has obvious significance for shiatsu.

Example:

Having begun to feel ki and being aware of a new sensibility that had been growing since reading Masunaga’s remarks on breathing through one’s toes, my nervous system bubbled quietly as I pondered the question of awareness. After the morning 5 minute meditation, I decided to perform Masunaga’s spleen stomach meridian stretch with sensory awareness, Eckhart Tolle’s first step towards entering the present moment. One could argue that it is entirely self-evident that one would practice the meridian stretches with the utmost awareness as a matter of course but in practice the exercises are done rather routinely.

Seated in position, I breathe deeply and allow myself to relax and enjoy the sensory experience of ki entering the body. I place my attention on the route of the spleen meridian from the ground to my big toe up along the calves and inner thighs. I continue to breathe. As I do so, I feel ki along the spleen meridian in my legs. Holding my attention at the sensory experience, and at the same time holding my senses as wide as possible, I feel my thighs relax and my sacrum anchors in the space where in my imagination previously my pelvis had been. My hara is suddenly very heavy and has, it seems, finally relaxed. My pelvic bones touch the floor and I can lie back with ease to enjoy the stretch. In the Liver stretch, I feel the release of tension and stress and during the Heart Protector and Triple Heater stretch feel a sense of rest and coming home as well as expansion and of being at ease.

⁴ From the Latin word ‘gravitas’ meaning ‘weight’ or ‘heaviness’ and used in the English language to mean ‘seriousness’ or ‘dignity’

Wide relaxed focus, McGilchrist's right hemispheric attention, augmented the sensory experience during the meridian stretching exercises. The entire process became much more enjoyable and the feeling of exploration compared to that of routine proved to be a game changer.

CONCLUSION

Among the vineyards and bastides of the Lot in South West France, where the land is drier and wilder than its lush neighbour the Dordogne, I gaze at the river shimmering in the valley at the end of a hot summer's day, moved by the beauty of it. The Notre Dame de Perygaude, its tiny silver dome blinking out across the landscape, offers quiet sanctuary. Close to the beautiful stone church is a small war memorial, hidden from view by the trees. I think of French soldiers returning to this exquisite place, home to their loved ones. Imperishable peace – if it is anywhere – is here. The pale sand-coloured Quercy stone, with its subtle patina and delicate hue, warm from the sun, nuzzles my skin as I stretch out on it. The surrounding countryside breathes and, as bees halt the day's business finding rest in nests and flowers, I, too, feel the waxing of yin as evening approaches.

Later, I watch the first stars come out, illuminating the blackness. Each arrives with an inaudible but triumphant ping, and as the sudden darkness of the night softens into a quiet indigo, cradling me in its starry blanket, the deep contentment of Nature's flow envelops me lulling me into a state between waking and sleeping in which I am, magically, still conscious. I breathe deeply, and I breathe through the soles of my feet and as I inhale the ki of the universe, I observe the stars, like drops of joy, and full of life. I begin to glimpse the space between them of distance and perspective, and where first I had felt to be an observer a boundary dissolves and I am no longer separated but am part of the universe now, no longer passive in an embrace but moving, active, and eager to explore, triumphant now, like the stars.

Somewhere at the end of the first year, we move away from memorizing lengthy kata sequences toward an appreciation of what is happening under our fingers as we give shiatsu and learn to feel ki. Hara and heart feeling are introduced and as I stomp round the dojo with my hands on my thighs, emitting strange haric sounds and mentally trying to shift my centre of gravity lower down my torso, I hold in my mind's eye the image of a little man with a huge hara. No matter how hard I try, though, hara remains an abstract and elusive concept for me. And the same applies to ki, which is sometimes 'there' and sometimes 'not there', depending.

Masunaga is clear in his writings about the importance for both the client and the therapist of entering the parasympathetic state in order for shiatsu to have its effect. But, like the hara, and like ki, the concept of the parasympathetic is abstract for me, I have no experience of what he means by it although I can try to describe it using terms like feeling 'relaxed' or being 'in the zone'. Ironically, in using western terms to describe the state in which we need to be in order for shiatsu to be practised, Masunaga comes no closer to explaining it to me than if he had used any other term, Japanese or English, Eastern or Western. And slowly it dawns on me that I will never understand either concept cognitively, since something is lacking. And what is lacking, I finally understand, is direct experience.

Direct experience, of not only ki and Hara, but, too, of Masunaga's parasympathetic state is an essential step in learning shiatsu as I discovered during this year. It was not enough to aim for feeling relaxed or being in the 'zone'. I wanted to know the sensation of being in the parasympathetic. In other words, to have 'direct experience' of it so that I could recognize the feeling and find out how to bring myself into it. My nervous system needed a blueprint of the feeling of the parasympathetic as I sat before the client. I discovered my blueprint by chance during our weekend with Nick Pole and it was this that set me in search of how to return to this state that I entered in three short days.

An understanding of the physiology of the parasympathetic state as well as direct experience of it in order to be able to observe and assess one's own internal state is of fundamental importance if we want to access the parasympathetic state as Masunaga requires us to. Porges' polyvagal theory and his emphasis on the primary mammalian need for a safe autonomic state, homeostasis, goes some way to providing a model for observation that we as students of shiatsu can use to reach our own conclusions about the quality of our autonomic state. With careful attention to our autonomic state, we can employ the ancient technique of diaphragmatic breathing to bring ourselves directly into a parasympathetic state which allows embodiment to be experienced, a state in which our senses effortlessly take in the richness of our surroundings, and in which our awareness may open and relax. Armed with the blueprint of a safe and embodied experience, our nervous system will have a reference point from which it can begin to access our feeling.

In the shiatsu therapeutic setting, a mutually dependent safe autonomic state makes it possible for therapist and client to enter a deeply relaxed state that we refer to as the parasympathetic state in which ki can be felt and contacted using Masunaga's principles of supportive pressure. Embodied, our sensory awareness takes us into the present moment at which point perception can relax and expand. Masunaga said that syo cannot be looked for – it comes itself to be seen. If syo comes itself to be seen, as Masunaga proposes, then perhaps the relaxed awareness and expanded perception of the shiatsu therapist can be seen as an invitation for syo to reveal itself.

Therapeutic presence in shiatsu, in which the tool of Unconditional Positive Regard plays a part, extends beyond an attitude towards the client. For shiatsu therapists, therapeutic presence must be apparent in the quality of touch with which we approach the client. It is the quality of touch of the therapist, more than the facial expression and general demeanour of the therapist, that determines the extent to which the client can relax and allow shiatsu to calm the sympathetic so that he can enter the parasympathetic state in which shiatsu can deliver its healing effect.

Embodiment is clearly contingent upon an autonomic state of safety. For the student of shiatsu, an autonomic state of safety is, like the departure lounge of an airport, the point at which one must arrive before one can depart. Safety is a yin experience, the basis of our autonomic state, which allows us to feel embodied and from which upon being reached our inner landscape can unfold as we perform setsu shin. Embodiment is an awakening of the senses that allows us to come into the present moment. It is from embodiment that we can enter Masunaga's state of relaxed awareness, the

parasympathetic, in which we can learn to listen with our hands and connect with Masunaga's heart feeling, something so simple but yet without it the shiatsu conversation cannot begin and we, the student, cannot learn to express Masunaga's 'life sympathy'.

Appendix

Physiological signs that you or your client may be in a sympathetic state

Here are some things you, or your client, may experience if you are not in a safe autonomic state.

- You may feel uncomfortable or unsettled and can't put your finger on why
- Your breathing may be shallow
- You may spontaneously perspire even though the room temperature is ambient
- You may have narrow vision so have difficulty seeing the whole room, you move your head a lot to see better
- You may find it difficult to sit still and want to move about
- You may feel that the muscles of your shoulders or jaw are tensed
- Saliva production⁵ may increase so you find yourself swallowing more than usual
- You need to hold the other person in your line of sight (hypervigilance)
- You may need to visit the toilet though your bladder is not full
- Your pupils may dilate
- Your stomach or gut may tense so you feel cramp or gas in your stomach and intestines
- You might feel nauseous
- You may feel distracted or dissociated – your mind is not present
- You may feel wired
- You may miss information from your senses because you are focused on a goal instead of relaxing into wide focus
- You may feel uncomfortable interacting with the other person – there are many reasons why this could happen and it is good to reflect to try and understand what may be going on

Sympathetic inhibition of parasympathetic action in the face, ears and larynx may lead to the following signs

- Your facial expressions are flatter than they normally are which transmits to the client as being unengaged
- Your voice tone is flatter
- You misinterpret, don't register or you ignore what the client is saying. This is partly due to tensed muscles along the vagal pathway along the ear
- You see symptoms, but not a picture. Vision can be restricted due to tension in the eye muscles

⁵ Saliva production increases both in the sympathetic and parasympathetic states but in the parasympathetic the saliva is noticeably thinner (serous saliva) than saliva produced in the sympathetic state (mucous saliva) (Source: Wikipedia)

Reasons a client might feel unsafe during a shiatsu session

- Therapist's touch is hurting the client; for example, too heavy, or sharp
- Therapist is distracted and not giving the client their full attention which takes the client out of their relaxed state causing them to wonder what is going on
- Therapist is hyper focused on kyo and jitsu or another aspect of treatment and is no longer in a state of relaxed wide focus. Therapist is now in 'tunnel vision' and therefore in a sympathetic state which transmits to the client as 'unsafe' touch
- Fear, doubt, or hesitation in the therapist can transmit to the client as a lack of safety and cause client to shut off
- The space is not safe; for example, too much noise, temperature too low or high
- Unprocessed emotions in the client; for example, grief
- Trauma in the client

Reasons a therapist might feel unsafe during a shiatsu session

- Self-criticism
- Criticism or challenge from the client or a third party
- Unprocessed emotions due to life events or past grief being held in the therapist
- Fear of anticipated judgment, failure but also fear of success
- Wanting to do the treatment right or well
- Your goal of helping the patient has been thwarted
- Tiredness – mental and physical
- Lack of automation of the technique, lack of mastery
- The space is not safe; for example, too much noise, temperature too low or high
- Stress – acute or prolonged
- A lack of trust on the part of the client

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