



*As Seen in the Spring 2014
Issues of Be Well World*

Shiatsu

West meets West and heads East

By Paula Derry, PhD, LMT

Among the world of holistic massage and bodywork modalities is Shiatsu, a touch therapy that promotes wellness by supporting the body's ability to heal itself. Shiatsu originated in Japan in the early 20th century when practitioners wanted to distinguish therapeutic touch from relaxation massage. It took root in the United States in the 1970s.

What differentiates Shiatsu from most bodywork is how it is based in Chinese Medicine. The central idea in Chinese medicine is that a vital energy called chi (pronounced *chee* and also written as *qi* or *ki*) is the force that animates life. When a person is healthy, this energy flows freely along pathways on the body called meridians. If chi is out of balance, this is experienced as dis-ease and ultimately can result in disease.

With its roots in Chinese medicine, the goal of Shiatsu is to encourage the balanced flow of chi. Practitioners address particular symptoms or problems that a client, or receiver, has, but understands them in terms of the energy flow in the whole body. When chi is balanced, the body is better able to follow its natural inclination to heal itself.

Shiatsu, then, endeavors to balance energy through touch. The word "Shiatsu" has been translated as "finger pressure" but a practitioner is not simply applying pressure. The practitioner is connecting in a way that encourages the movement of energy. Tsubos - also called acupuncture or acupressure points - are places along the meridians that are especially capable of influencing the flow of chi. Individual points correspond to specific organs or systems of the body, and Chinese medicine mapped out hundreds of these locations thousands of years ago. Shiatsu practitioners use this knowledge and apply massage-like techniques and intention to assist in correcting the energy flow.

Different styles of Shiatsu exist, having developed similarly to the variations in acupuncture schools of thought, reflecting the underpinnings of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Five Element Theory, and Zen Shiatsu theory. Shiatsu practice schools include Zen Shiatsu, Ohashiatsu, Shiatsu Shin Tai, Quantum Shiatsu, and others.

Adding to the individuality of any practitioner's work - and this is true in all bodywork - is the inherent variation that any given therapist may imbue within his or her touch. Experienced practitioners tend to develop their own style based on their experience, preferences, and infusing other bits from additional modalities they have learned.

In practice, some therapists emphasize working on certain combinations of points that they have determined need to be touched. Others emphasize working along an entire meridian. In addition to using their fingers, practitioners may also use their hands, arms, knees, or feet. Some gently rotate the limbs or other body parts in their technique. Others emphasize mindfulness in both giver and receiver and the healing power of the relationship.

In a traditional Zen Shiatsu or Ohashiatsu session, the receiver lays on a mat on the floor fully clothed. The practitioner is on the floor as well. Questions, observations, and discussion before beginning the session will help focus where and how to work. To begin the session, the practitioner establishes a meditative attitude of connection with the receiver and uses specific touch techniques to assess the state of the meridians. He or she then touches specific meridians to disperse stuck energy or encourage weak meridians to collect energy, and will gently rotate the limbs and other parts of the body. A shared attitude of attentiveness may ensue. Other therapists might use additional assessment techniques, such as pulse diagnosis. They may have a goal of working on muscle tension or rigid posture that affect the flow of energy, combining Shiatsu with other practices such as myofascial massage. Some practitioners work on a table or with a sitting client instead of the traditional mat on the floor.

People seek out Shiatsu for a variety of reasons. Frequent goals include a desire for deeper relaxation and reducing stress-related symptoms such as fatigue and anxiety. Physical symptoms often dominate one's attention, with headaches, muscle tension, or chronic pain seeking a solution. People also seek out Shiatsu to support their recovery from illness. But often what is sought is a greater sense of well-being, clarity, and a more complete connection of body, mind, and spirit.

And through the combination of human touch and free-flowing chi, Shiatsu can offer benefits on all these levels.

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