

What is Movement Shiatsu?

by Bill Palmer M.Sc. MRSS.

In ancient China people paid their doctor while they were well. When they became ill, the payments stopped! This encouraged the doctors to focus on preventing illness rather than treating disease after it struck. How did they do this? The average Chinese peasant had no detailed knowledge of energy pulses, meridians, organs and acupuncture points. But everyone knew how to eat and how to move. So the doctors concentrated on advising people about diet and on teaching them how to move in a way that automatically balanced their energy systems. This was probably an origin of Chi Gong.

In the modern world of alternative therapies, diet and exercise still play a big role. Many therapies work on a model of prevention rather than cure. But, in the main, clients come to alternative practitioners when they have a problem because they are archetypally identified with doctors and “you only go to the doctor when you are ill” in this culture. This ‘medical’ role often means that the client is quite passive within the healing process, lying down and being pressed or manipulated. Knowledge of the theory behind the treatment is not necessary to the client and is often only vaguely discussed, so that even if advice on diet and exercise is given, he is still dependent on the therapist for the knowledge.

Contrast this to the style of work within psychotherapy. Here the therapist is mainly a facilitator, helping the client to find out about themselves and find new ways to make choices. The client is very powerful in this process. Only he can be self-aware about himself. The knowledge gained in these sessions is all in the client’s own language. However brilliant the psychotherapist, however well she can understand the client, the therapy does not work until the client understands for himself.

This style of work is also found in some forms of body-work such as Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique and Body-Mind Centering. It is not a coincidence that all of these systems use movement as a focus as well as touch. It is through guided and spontaneous movement that a person can become aware of habitual conflicts and consciously explore how to repattern them. The client becomes empowered by being active within the movement and the therapist becomes a guide rather than a doctor. *Because these therapies focus on stimulating the client to a deeper experience of himself, they are called experiential therapies.*

Movement Shiatsu is a system that I have been developing for the last 13 years to find a way in which Oriental Medicine can become experiential too. Many Western & Oriental movement systems have helped and influenced the evolution of this work including Feldenkrais Method and Body-Mind Centering. Like these forms of work, we also use movement as a focus, thus helping people to become aware of connections within the body-mind. Meridians, points and energy are no longer mysteries manipulated by the magic hands of the therapist but things that can be directly experienced by the client. In particular, we show people how to feel meridians as archetypal ways of connecting one part of themselves with another. By learning how to make these connections in one’s body one can gain new inner options; liberated from the fixed habits of past conditioning.

Postural and psychological habits are often learnt very early in life and our chronic energy patterns are often developed in infancy. This means that unwinding a pattern of energy disharmony involves re-entering the stage of early development in which that state became established. Each stage of foetal and infant development depends on the support of earlier stages and often a pattern of disharmony is created in one stage because earlier steps have not been completed. Many of the processes of Movement Shiatsu are designed to help a person strengthen the support that earlier development gives to more sophisticated actions.

As an example, consider the act of standing upright. For a vast majority of our evolutionary history, in fact, since we were primitive chordates more than 500 million years ago, we have had a front, a back and a spine. During the eons from then until we became fish, the spine was used purely as a means of locomotion. Since we crawled out of the sea onto the land we have had to deal with the gravitational field of the earth and to balance that against our desire to move. During most of that time as snakes, reptiles, amphibians and mammals we have used the front of our bodies to relate to the ground, supporting our weight, and the back muscles have been mainly involved with forward motion.

Human babies learn to move forward because they see something they want to investigate. A connection is slowly made between what the eyes see and the legs which push them forward to get it. This connection between eyes and feet develops down the back of the body, muscles coming under 'conscious' control from head to feet. The impulse of pushing from the feet then travels up beside the spine and follows the focus of the eyes. This connection is what is called the Bladder Meridian. Although it forms from head to feet, the direction of energy flow is from feet to head. This provides our impulse to go-for-it. The front of the body is used to direct the flow of weight downwards and to receive the support of the ground. This activity also develops from head to feet but then the flow of energy is downwards too. It defines what is called the Stomach Meridian and provides our ability to rest, relax and digest, i.e. to *not* use our muscles.

It's only in the last hundred thousand years that we have really stood upright and walked on two legs. In this position it is easy for the back muscles to become too involved with weight bearing. In this role they become chronically tense which restricts our ability to move.

To experience this, try standing up and very slowly leaning backwards from the ankles (not by bending the back). At a certain point you will feel the back muscles tense to keep balance as your weight shifts to the outside of your feet and to your heels. Also the knees straighten and lock. If you try to walk like this you will find your movement very stiff and ungainly.

Now lean forwards very slowly. At a certain point, as your weight starts to shift onto the balls of your feet, the back muscles can relax and your knees can bend. You can feel your weight flowing down the front of your body and how we seem to be constructed to stand this way with minimum muscular effort. The solidity of our flesh is supporting us and our muscles are free to help us move rather than just to hold us up.

In the first position the weight is flowing down the Bladder Meridian, leaving us tense and restricted. In the second the weight is flowing down the Stomach Meridian and the impulse to move through space is free to flow up the Bladder meridian. The confusion of standing upright has been resolved.

In our early development we re-trace our evolutionary history. Many people have learnt to stand before they have structurally learnt to support themselves in gravity. This is like growing up too fast - maybe because proud parents encouraged development in the fast lane, maybe because insensitive parents did not provide what the infant needed, so he had to grow up fast to get it for himself. However it comes about, if you watch a baby walking before he is ready, he uses his back muscles a lot, his arms are pulled back and he staggers forward leaning backwards. The Bladder meridian is overactive whilst the Stomach meridian is empty, weight is not flowing down the front of his body and his legs. His body is insecurely placed on the ground.

I feel this is often the root of an energetic imbalance that, in the adult, expresses itself as a nature that is always doing, can't relax without collapsing, fundamentally insecure but never admitting vulnerability. Physically it results in pulled back postures and rigidity.

By teaching such a person to re-enter the pre-standing secure relationship with the ground, releasing weight through the Stomach meridian and particularly building up the tone of the inner organs by helping them to move too, he starts to experience how much he can rest on the solidity of the soft tissues instead of holding himself up with muscles.

This allows the back muscles to take time off from the job of keeping the body upright because it will no longer collapse. It is no longer empty inside so the weight can rest on the internal solidity. Psychologically this opens up a new sense of self as well, learning how to just *be* instead of having to *do* things all the time. I feel that this is the root of a sense of self-confidence, our emotional inner solidity. When we can rest on the earth we are free to move.

There is usually an emotional history to our habits and learning to move in new ways often brings up painful feelings. This process is healthy and we can usually deal with pain as adults which we couldn't cope with as children. This allows us to make a new choice and to move through the pain rather than lock it up in our bodies. Movement Shiatsu does not explicitly focus on these emotions, but contains within its theoretical model an explanation of how the experience of oneself is related to the patterns of the body. This gives us a physical handle on how to work with emotional disturbance.

Practically, Movement Shiatsu is an interactive therapy. Using touch on points and meridians to bring awareness to movement and postural patterns, moving the client's body to introduce new ways of moving which balance the meridians and, finally, guiding the client to move themselves, reflecting to them the choices that they make and the other options that they have.

Healing then becomes more like education than treatment; the client becomes a self-healer and the therapeutic relationship shifts from being a parent-doctor treating a child-client to one adult giving a helping hand to another.