

Zen Shiatsu

The Japanese have a very particular style of manipulative bodywork involving the direct stimulation of points on the body with concentrated pressure. It is known as Shiatsu, which literally means finger pressure. Shiatsu is actually a combination of Chinese acupressure with traditional Japanese massage (Anma). Like Chinese Massage Therapy, Shiatsu focuses on the pressure points on the meridians, thus correcting metabolic imbalances as well as emphasising correction and maintenance of joints, tendons and muscles.

The way Shiatsu is practised has earned it a reputation for being excessively painful. This is perhaps justifiable and is probably explained by noting the cultural basis: the Japanese, being a very militaristic and stoical nation, are conditioned to tolerate high levels of pain. Another part of the explanation is the lack of sensitivity on the part of the practitioner. Like any mode of therapy, Shiatsu is not just a technique but an art form, relying heavily on the awareness of the practitioner for effective results.

As such, one of the modern exponents of Shiatsu, Shizuto Masunaga, coined the term Zen Shiatsu. The story is told that he was treating a Meditation Master and after the treatment the monk said, "This is Zen between two people". So Masunaga's style of Shiatsu emphasises a close and empathetic rapport between practitioner and patient.

It is also softer. Rather than using forceful thumb pressure, leaning in strongly and then backing off, so that the patient experiences an intense series of on and off changes, Zen Shiatsu relies on steadiness and a broader spreading of pressure. So Zen Shiatsu makes extensive use of the fully spread hands. When deeper work is required the elbows and knees are used, easing the excessive pressure on the practitioner's thumbs which is often the case with the usual practice of Shiatsu.

Zen Shiatsu is a complex and self-contained mode of therapy requiring a detailed knowledge of meridians and diagnostic procedures. But in the context of extending your skills as a massage therapist, a familiarity with Zen Shiatsu pressure technique will greatly enhance your ability to palpate and diagnose the condition of the soft tissues.

The main principle to keep in mind when applying Zen Shiatsu is to lean, using the power of gravity rather than your own body force. The pressure should be perpendicular and steady. It is most important to develop a very quick change from one point of pressure to the next, only backing off the pressure just enough to slide to the next position. This gives the sense of continuous pressure which transmits a more sedating and more nurturing feeling.

Basic Concepts

Consistent with the basic concepts of traditional Chinese medicine, Zen Shiatsu is grounded in the theory that health problems are attributed to, or at least involve:

- imbalances in yin and yang;
- disharmonies between the internal organs; and
- blockages to the circulation of Qi through the meridians.

The unique features of Zen Shiatsu, compared to traditional Chinese medicine techniques such as acupuncture or other shiatsu techniques, are these:

- For diagnosis, abdominal palpation is the primary technique used. Abdominal diagnosis (in Japan: hara diagnosis) is an ancient Chinese technique that had been largely abandoned in China, but became important in the practice of Kampo (the Japanese practice of Chinese medicine) around the beginning of the 18th century. Abdominal diagnosis is used in Japan for herbal medicine prescribing, acupuncture, and Zen Shiatsu. The diagnosis is primarily aimed at determining whether each meridian is relatively empty (Japanese: *kyo*, Chinese: *xu*) or relatively full (Japanese: *jitsu*; Chinese: *shi*). At the end of the treatment, the abdominal diagnosis is performed again to ascertain changes (improvements) that have occurred.

- Pressure is applied at intervals along the meridians that were described by Masunaga. He presented 12 meridians, corresponding to the 12 basic organ-affiliated meridians of the Chinese system. The meridian pathways are similar to, but not the same as, the Chinese ones; the main difference being an extension of each meridian to range from legs to arms, passing through the associated diagnostic region of the abdomen.
- The treatment involves brief contact with each point, in a somewhat rhythmic pattern as a portion of a meridian is traced. The contact is with fairly strong pressure that is applied using the movement of the practitioners body, fingers, elbows, and other parts of the body.
- To attain the proper combination of pressure and movement along the meridian, the practitioner may move frequently around the recipient's body and may even move the recipient (who is instructed to remain passive), such as lifting the head or arms. The actions may include turning or bending the recipient's body parts with the purposes of gaining access to essential points, stretching the meridians, and using gravity or leverage to attain the needed pressure at certain points. The therapy does not focus on one part of the body, even if the health problem is localized; the whole body becomes involved.

The practitioner works within a meditative state, focusing on the responses of the recipient so as to properly direct the therapy, as opposed to focusing on selection of pressure points by a theoretical system. To develop this condition of heightened awareness and clear intention, the practitioner practices meditation regularly

Because of its connection to traditional Chinese medicine, Zen Shiatsu serves as an excellent adjunct to acupuncture therapy as well as Chinese or Japanese herb prescribing, fitting well with the theoretical framework. Further, it serves as a complementary therapy for Western methods of manipulation, including chiropractic or standard massage (e.g., Swedish style), providing an entirely different stimulus to the body.

* * *

Although Masunaga's Zen Shiatsu is considered essential reading for practitioners, the main textbook of Zen Shiatsu used today is *Shiatsu Theory and Practice* by Carola Beresford-Cooke (first published 1996; revised edition 2002). She has outlined five basic principles of Zen Shiatsu as follows:

- **Relax.** The practitioner must be in a comfortable physical and mental condition to convey comfort to the recipient; the arms, hands, neck, and shoulders must be relaxed, not tensed, to give the proper treatment and to perceive the recipient responses.
- **Use penetration rather than pressure.** It is understood that the body has spots (called "tsubo") that can receive the pressing by the practitioner; the muscle gives way to the penetrating force to let it enter, rather than being pushed away by pressure. The result is an entirely different experience than mere finger-pressing, and requires that the practitioner have the correct body position in relation to the recipient and be mindful of the technique being used.
- **Perpendicular penetration** without side-to-side motion. Unlike many massage techniques where movement across the surface is emphasized, Zen Shiatsu involves penetration at each point, perpendicular to the body surface. Although there are a few exceptions, the treatment does not involve rotation, back-and-forth, or wiggling movements of the hands, but simple direct inward-directed movement.
- **Two handed connectedness.** The Zen Shiatsu practitioner maintains two hands on the recipient's body; one hand may be still and holding a part of the body in position, while the other is active, penetrating points on the meridians. The practitioner is advised to give attention to the role of both hands, not just the more active one.
- **Meridian continuity.** The focus of the therapy is to treat an entire meridian, not just individual points or regions. This is based on the theory that the imbalances to be addressed are based in the meridians, which require a free flow of ki throughout.