

Muscles have Feelings Too

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The paradox of change

People come to therapy to change something. Maybe they want to get rid of pain or deal with emotional issues or cure an illness. They often feel powerless to deal with their condition themselves. Maybe they want the therapist to rescue them and make it go away but, even if they don't expect so much, the therapy is usually seen as a way of solving their problem.

This article explains why *trying to* change often doesn't work, particularly in long term, chronic situations. Paradoxically, letting go of the desire to be different can create a better environment for real improvement to happen spontaneously. I will also discuss how this change of focus could be good for the health of society.

For thirty years I have worked with 'severely disabled' children. I find that many children with 'disabilities' are traumatised by the orthodox therapy they receive because both the parents and the therapists feel a pressure to try to make the child develop as normally as possible. The fact that they are focusing on how to change the condition means that the child feels there is something wrong with her core self. The result is that she sees her disability as unacceptable and does not include in her view of herself the parts of her body that do not work 'normally'. In my experience this often leads to the child growing up into a frustrated adult, feeling a helpless victim to their condition.

In contrast, when parents and therapists start to see a child as 'whole' rather than disabled she relaxes into herself and from this ground she starts to explore how to develop her unique potential without comparing herself to the norm. The father of one of the children I work with recently wrote this poem to her:

*when i am with you,
i am,
your hands and your voice,
i try to see how your every movement is a
word,
how the sounds you make express the truth
of your soul's feeling
your eyes show your sadness
and your joy
your smile radiates your blessing
on all of us
who do not understand*

...

*my prayer is not for your healing
for you are whole
my prayer is that i may grow to be strong
enough
to hold the beauty of all you express
and help give it form*

(White)



This viewpoint applies to everyone. People with a chronic condition frequently view it as a disability and, if it doesn't change, feel ashamed, disempowered and stressed. Much of the suffering associated with chronic issues comes from the frustrated desire to change rather than the condition itself. So how do we help a client to embrace themselves as they are without collapsing into a fatalistic acceptance of a situation that they feel powerless to change?

The individual as a team

The key idea is to see each part of the person as a valuable part of a team, *including the 'disabilities'*. The emphasis of the therapy then becomes to help the team to operate well together, rather than to change the individuals in the group.

The idea that the self is a group has a long respected history in psychology (Carter) and transpersonal psychotherapy introduced the term 'sub-personalities' to capture this idea. As Roberto Assagioli, originator of psychosynthesis, said: *"We are not unified; we often feel that we are, because we do not have many bodies and many limbs, and because one hand doesn't usually hit the other. But, metaphorically, that is exactly what does happen within us. Several sub-personalities are continually scuffling: impulses, desires, principles, aspirations are engaged in an unceasing struggle."* (Kentaur Traening)

Therapies such as Voice Dialogue modify this idea of "unceasing struggle" by viewing the multiple selves as a community who can learn to communicate maturely and live together as equals. *The advantage of seeing the personality as a community is that it gets to grips with the inevitable conflicts and differences within the self rather than aiming for a false harmony.*

On the other hand, the philosophy underlying most body-therapies and physical medicine is that the body is a single organism whose constituent parts are mindless. From this viewpoint, there is no understanding of why a part of the body should resist harmonising with the whole. Physical therapists recognise that to re-pattern a habit may take some hard work but the basic viewpoint is that the parts of the body *are naturally in harmony* and need to be reminded, persuaded, manipulated and taught how to find this ideal state. There is often an implicit assumption that the body should be the servant of the mind and if it doesn't do what the mind wants then this is a problem.

Multiple minds, multiple bodies

But if the mind is multiple, there is no one ruler for the body to obey. Furthermore, the different sub-personalities sense themselves through the posture they assume and the way in which they move the body. So the many personalities are embodied in muscles, organs and fascia and the struggle between the personalities is reflected in conflicts within our anatomy. Because of this, I find it helpful to view the body as a community of autonomous agents rather than a unified machine and, since meridians are the connectors and communicators between different parts of the body, one can view Shiatsu as a pre-eminent *'group therapy for the body'*.

I imagine each part of the body as having personality and feelings of its own, not just being part of the embodiment of a sub-personality. A chronically tense muscle may be 'sulky' and resist relaxation until its feelings have been understood. Instead of trying to relax the muscle, it may be important to acknowledge its tension and respect its grievance. In touching such a muscle I imagine I am listening to a friend with a valid complaint. This viewpoint changes the quality of touch and helps that part of the body to feel heard and seen as a valuable member of the group.

This is the basic philosophy of Movement Shiatsu: to see the body as a community and to help this community to live together with respect and awareness. In practice, there are two complementary approaches to helping this body-community to live together that I call "*Including the Kyo*" and "*Assisting the Jitsu*".

Including the Kyo

The concepts of Kyo and Jitsu, which we normally use to describe the state of surface meridians, can be extended to apply to these body-group members. As I have explored in a previous article (Palmer, 2013), the Japanese character for Jitsu means "That which is shown" while the character for Kyo means "That which is hidden". So although a Kyo meridian may be 'empty' the Ki of the meridian is only *hidden* and its hiding place is usually a part of the body that is immobilised or not joining in with the activity of the rest of the community.

This uncooperative part can seem like an obstacle to the rest of the group and there is a tendency to reject it or drag it along. But this breaks the team spirit. It's like a group of people who are climbing a mountain. If one person is injured then that person puts a strain on the rest of the group. Maybe they have to carry them, and the injured person feels ashamed and stressed themselves for holding up the group. *But this dynamic of stressed Kyo/Jitsu is only maintained if the group still has the aim of climbing the mountain.* If, instead, they decide to change the game and change their aim to 'having a picnic' then everyone can take part, the group is not stressed and the injured party has time to heal without feeling bad about sabotaging the group aim.



True healing takes place if the rest of the group pays attention to the Kyo part and **changes the game in such a way that it *can* join in.**

This is consistent with the Zen Shiatsu paradigm of helping the Ki of the Jitsu meridian to support the Kyo meridian. But in chronic situations, I find it is not enough to work only with meridians; the Kyo has become embodied in a 'hidden'

part of the body and is resistant to change because it doesn't feel included. To melt this resistance, the person needs to become aware of that part themselves and to *change the way in which they use their body* to include and care for it.

The desire to fix a disabled part that is not ready to get better can actually inhibit healing because that part feels bad about itself and becomes more deeply hidden. Because it hides itself, the rest of the group does not take care of it, so it remains under strain. Letting go of the desire to change creates an environment where the Kyo part can feel better about itself and come out of hiding to join in with the others.

Assisting the Jitsu

In real life, people often can't change the game to care for the Kyo. They have jobs to do, children to care for and relationships to maintain. They can't just stop all this to 'have a picnic' to include it. But if we see the Kyo as a valuable part of the team who can't join the game at the moment and view the Jitsu as the substitute who has the energy to compensate for its inactivity, then the process of treatment is transformed.

In a football team, if the striker is taken off because of injury and someone, whose speciality is defence, is the only one available as a substitute then the replacement will be hard pressed to fill the role of the one taken off, and will feel under pressure and tense. However, if the whole team shares the job of filling the striker's role then everything works smoothly and with good heart.

This metaphor exactly describes what can happen in the body. If a part of the body is vulnerable and needs to be taken off the pitch, then another part will try to take its place and may become stressed in the process. But if the rest of the Person-Team can help in the process of compensation then the stress disappears.

Movement Shiatsu has specific techniques for facilitating this by bringing awareness to the way in which the neighbouring parts of the body are communicating with the Jitsu area and helping the neighbours to move with it. This, in turn, highlights how more distant areas can assist the movement until the whole body is included in supporting the Jitsu. I view the traditional meridians as innate maps tracing chains of supportive connection between members of the body community; but we also create new pathways as we develop. I like to think that I am helping a client to create new meridians, not just working with the ones in the books.



Is this approach effective?

Psychological therapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT Tapping) explicitly concentrate on changing behaviours and have a good track record for treating people with debilitating phobias. Many body therapies also focus on change, adjustment and intervention with good success. So what is the point of the approach I have been advocating? Is it effective and when is it appropriate?

I think this is a fundamental question, which resonates with many of the issues facing modern society. Essentially, I feel that this approach is especially appropriate in situations in which the client has to live with and be creative with their condition rather than change it. For instance, old age, disability, degenerative conditions and other long term chronic issues.



Modern society is focused on consumption. Advertising makes us feel inadequate so that we will buy products that will change us. The whole media industry builds a picture of an ideal which most of us can't live up to. The result is that we are conditioned to see ourselves as needing change, and the quicker the better. So therapies that focus on change gain high status and conditions that are resistant to change are pushed under the carpet. The 'broken' in society, including the insane, the elderly and the disabled are not seen as useful members and their potential value is ignored.

Blessed are the cracked for they let in the light!

But all of us are broken in some way. The personal growth movement focuses on positively mending these weaknesses and thus gaining 'empowerment', 'healing' and 'transformation'. So parts that remain disempowered and do not improve feel particularly bad about themselves because they don't take the opportunity that personal growth systems offer!

In my lifetime, I have seen society radically change. In the 1970's, most of my contemporaries were interested in the deep problems facing humanity. We were starting to see the thoughtlessness of the human race and its danger to the planet and feeling the humbled by this view. Nowadays most of western societies seem to be driven by philosophies of dynamic individualism and the arrogance encouraged by the successes of technology. People are valued by their wealth and success rather than their contribution to others.

Therapy has also changed response to this sea change in society, becoming driven by the aim of fixing problems rather than developing awareness and care. This is reflected in a more superficial approach to ourselves: we are more concerned to look good than to be good and this undermines our compassion for

each other. If our society focuses on fixing the blemishes and looking good while hiding the real issues, then we will treat our environment and each other in the same way. I can only see disaster and destruction if we continue to go that way.

Shiatsu and its philosophy of caring for the Kyo could be an environmentally friendly and spiritually effective therapy. As long as we don't try to fix the Kyo, but help it to feel a valuable part of the whole then we are healing a deep malaise in this society. Jesus of Nazareth said: "*Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth*". An interpretation of this beatitude is that people who include and befriend their own weaknesses will have compassion for others and for the planet. In particular, insane, elderly and disabled people could be cherished by society because they show us how to live with things instead of trying to change them. It's only when we lose the arrogance that says we can fix everything that we will learn to be part of the planet rather than just to exploit it.

Bill Palmer will offer a Postgraduate programme next year showing how to apply this approach to Shiatsu and other body-therapies. He will give taste of this programme at a workshop of Qigong, Voice and Bodywork in Bath in January. Contact bill@seed.org or look at www.seed.org for details.

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