

# BURN ON with SHIATSU

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**In March 2012 the International Academy for Hara Shiatsu started a practical training setup where Hara Shiatsu practitioners work with burnout clients, producing remarkable results ...**

## The setting

In the burnout practical training in Tomas Nelissen's International Academy for Hara Shiatsu an average of 18 clients receive a weekly Hara Shiatsu treatment for 10 consecutive weeks. After these 10 weeks the next cycle starts. From March 2012 to the end of 2013 Hara Shiatsu practitioners gave 900 treatments to 90 clients. Some of the clients came from physicians or psychotherapists who suggested Shiatsu as a supportive therapy while others came on their own behalf. The treatments mentioned were focused on burnout issues, which is a modern term for a broad variety of imbalances that manifest in stress related symptoms, ranging from sleeping disorders, headaches or massive muscular tension to many years of being unfit to work, due to severe exhaustion related depression. The variety of clients is just as multisided as the challenges the practitioners had to deal with. There is no such thing as the typical burnout client. Burnout is a versatile topic!

But: What then is burnout? It is often referred to as the end result of a pattern of complete exhaustion that shows on physical as well as emotional level and develops over a longer period of time. However, at the end of the day the result is: a dead end – no more choices left! This leads to a thorough loss of well being and control over everyday life and in many cases also to a number of related disorders. Due to the variety of possible manifestations and patterns associated with burnout, it can be considered a collective term or description of a combination of issues and patterns rather than a clear diagnosis. In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10) burnout is defined as "a factor influencing health that demands action from side of the health system (Z73.0)." Burnout is not a clearly defined disorder as opposed to a diagnosis that clearly suggests a set of treatment options, like for depression for example. Therefore there is no common definition of the burnout syndrome yet, but only different approaches to define and tell it apart from similar disorders.

The Swiss Expert Network on burnout suggests a good approach to the issue: "Burnout is a job related stress reaction that leads to a constant negative emotional condition in otherwise healthy individuals. Burnout is characterized primarily by a state of thorough exhaustion, accompanied by chronic stress, reduced working efficiency and motivation, as well as developing a disturbed attitude towards and behaviour in the working environment. On somatic level burnout manifests as a disorder in the neuro-endocrine regulative system that can show as symptoms within the vegetative (nervous) system. This condition develops slowly and often without the individual even noticing it. It is the result of an employee not fitting in at the job as far as the following 6 criteria are concerned: the amount of work to be done, social environment, support, values, fairness and control. If there was an imbalance in one or more of these fields, the individual's personal resources are insufficient to cope with working conditions. Burnout often triggers a vicious circle by making possible strategies of adapting and coping with the situation increasingly ineffective which adds up to the syndrome."

Since using the term burnout has become en vogue, there are many critics warning, talking about what they call "burnout inflation". What used to be just stress is now quickly labelled "burnout". One fact however seems to be agreed upon: the mentioned condition of being "tired" of working, causes tremendous costs.

*The European Agency for Workplace Safety and Health estimates the economic follow on costs caused by burnout within the EU to be about 20 billion Euros. Per year.*

## The energetic dynamics of the burnout syndrome

To find access to dealing with this very variable issue with Shiatsu, we chose to use the twelve step model of psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger, who played a major role in establishing the term burnout, using it in his book "Staff Burnout", released in 1974. In the course of the 900 treatments we tried to evaluate the characteristics of these twelve steps to burnout from an energetic point of view adapting it, translating it into terms of yin and yang, as well as the five phases. This paper is the outcome of our observations and experiences that we like to share and also see as a subject of discussion.

We would also gladly exchange experiences and ideas and see them be taken a step further. Like many psychosomatic patterns burnout is also nourished by respective behaviour and values. The perfect soil for burnout is made out of a strong longing for perfection. And a lack of self confidence that tries to buy affection with performance. Both factors coming together are like fertilizers being used in a glass house. The desire to grow and be successful is something positive. However, as soon as this desire turns into a compulsion we have entered the first phase of burnout.

### **1. The compulsion to proof ones capabilities**

The kidneys are the home of will power. The liver forms an according vision. The Gallbladder manifests this vision with determination. The American educational scientist Howard Earl Gardner has found a starting point that has proven to be effective in overcoming burnout.

*To put it simple: we are the captain of our ship, but do we always have hold of the steering wheel? Do we set the course? Do we cruise at the speed we like to?*

It is all about conscious self-control, when Gardner asks the following three questions: Who am I? What do I want? How can I efficiently accomplish my goals? The first two questions are about aspects of the water element, while the third question mirrors the wood element. The first two questions form the foundation of our identity. The more insecure we are about the first two aspects, the more vulnerable we are to acting in a way that does not express our strengths, abilities and longings, but increasingly focuses on getting someone else's attention. An insecure identity needs one thing above everything else: approval. In this ongoing quest, the water element cannot express its essence freely, since it is focused more to the environment than the core of things. Out of the seed for what we could be, grows a tree that is not rooted in itself. In challenging situations the water element is no more a source of self-confidence, self-worthiness and clear unbroken will power. In turn we try to build these aspects by showing increased activity. We want to proof ourselves, because just being is not enough. We need to do. Our natural desire to unfold, turns into a need to be acknowledged. Want turns into must. The consequence is:

### **2. Increased efforts**

The roots of our vulnerability for burnout can often be found in our personal development, our history. Within the cycle of the five phases, in cases of a weak water element, the metal element takes over – mainly in the large intestine, with its quality of holding on to things – and tries to make up for the missing role of the guiding mother, that tries to provide structure, rituals, order and control to support the insecure child. We often witness this dynamic development when parents split up, which in turn unsettles children in most cases. These kids benefit from structures, rituals and mental as well as emotional clarity, because they all give direction and generate security.

This direction and support (metal element) helps build a feeling of security (water element). As long as the initial pattern is not dealt with and let go of, this kind of "protection" will be taken into adulthood, where any kind of weakening of the water element can lead to according patterns. This goes also for attacks on the water element that happen in our adult life, like the fear of losing our job for example, or being anxious when facing new challenges. The effects however are the same: our mental aspects increasingly control our actions, our activities, no matter if the actions being taken are congruent with our self, our own desires and goals, as long as they serve the purpose of getting attention and a certain amount of security in life. The metal-wood-dynamic within the five phases "overrules" the water element and the individuals involved cling to their pattern of "increased efforts" while relaxation and regeneration are neglected. Which leads to:

### **3. Subtle negligence of ones own needs**

Overruling the water element's quality of focusing on what they really want in life, individuals face the result of an increasing negligence of their own needs. The need to pursue a certain assignment has completely got hold of the individual. Minor everyday tasks and pleasures feel increasingly annoying, taking a break is deemed useless, the body neglected. The yang energy of the wood and fire elements gets dense, contact to the yin is lost and the water element is a mere energy reservoir to be exhausted. Pursuing this path leads to:

#### **4. Suppression of conflicts and personal needs**

The deranged dynamic between metal and wood element has become so strong that personal needs are not only neglected but completely suppressed. The continuous exhaustion of the water element causes an inner emptiness that leads to withdrawal and secret behaviour. No one shall know what is really going on, how the person truly feels. However, sometimes in this phase of the disorder compensating mechanisms develop leading to excessive or addictive behaviour, to make up for the feeling of emptiness.

#### **5. Re-evaluation of priorities and values**

Studying the small intestine meridian, we see that it shows a strong affinity to the yin aspects of the water element. Be it the diagnostic areas on the back and the hara or the Mu and Shu points: all these areas are located in a region strongly associated with the water element. Small intestine needs water. The main energetic aspects of the small intestine are based on a functioning connection to the fire-water-axis.

*To be able to tell apart what is important and what is not we need clarity.  
Clarity comes from consciousness (fire element) connected to calmness (water).*

Stamina comes from combining passion (fire) and a strong will (water). Because of the rising yang of the prior phases and the resulting exhaustion of the yin, the water-fire-axis starts to dissolve in phase 5. The persons concerned lose clarity and consciousness regarding the factors in their lives that define who they truly are. Individuals lose contact to their values and beliefs. And they also lose stamina and the ability to push through. They may start to stay away from the job. More and more often.

#### **6. Increasing denial of arising problems**

Losing touch with our personal values we also lose contact to our personal needs. The yang on the outside becomes hard and spry while the yin becomes increasingly exhausted, also in the wood and fire elements. The liver's flexibility is lost and the happiness of the heart vanishes. Physical symptoms related to this energetic condition increase.

#### **7. Withdrawal**

Feelings of hopelessness and loss of direction become overwhelming. Affected individuals start to withdraw from themselves and the whole world. The metal element collapses. The elemental spirit of the lungs becomes weak. The controlling energy of the large intestine is exhausted. Energetic cohesion within the system dissolves and all suppressed disharmonic tendencies surface all the stronger. In the water element anxieties arise, the wood element causes mood swings, tension and headaches, the fire element shows throbbing of the heart or a tight feeling or pressure in the chest and the earth elements shows chaotic and disharmonic digestion.

#### **8. Observable behavioural changes**

Withdrawal increases. The energetic imbalance manifests as obvious changes in behaviour.

#### **9. Depersonalisation & 10. Inner emptiness**

The water-fire-axis breaking apart causes a loss of sense for the own personality and therefore the last bit of recognizing the own needs is completely lost as well. That leads to overall self denial regarding the body as well as the own personality. In this phase the exhausted kidneys often lead to severe phobias and panic attacks, the individual feels useless, worn out and devastated. Using up the yin like this on every level increases the feeling of inner emptiness. This may once again lead to compensatory addictive behaviour. Thorough separation between fire and water. And as a result of this, loss of sense for the own personality. This may lead to self negation. The exhaustion of the yin causes inner emptiness which is often compensated with the use of drugs of any kind.

## 11. Depression & 12. Thorough burnout

The whole system is completely polarised. Initiative and motivation are down to zero. A prevailing symptom at this point is the longing to sleep all the time, which mirrors the total exhaustion of any yin-sources. The loose yang can cause destructive tendencies.

*There is no "I" or "me" anymore, earlier mentioned compulsions have dissolved, and along with them any purpose in life. Suicidal thoughts arise. At this point the immune system often breaks down.*

These 12 phases suggested by Freudenberger do not necessarily come in the same chronological order. They reflect certain steps on the way to burnout that can be more or less severe, depending on the affected individual. Most of the clients in our practical training however, clearly showed to be in one of these phases, with a strong tendency to phases 3 to 7. But there were also clients with many years of exhaustion related depression and according inability to work, meaning phases 10, 11 or 12. The graphics displaying the energetic aspects of the 12 burnout phases in correlation to the five elements was derived from the energetic diagnosis of our clients, just like the treatment plan, that takes into account the characteristics of the burnout phases and sets a clear focus for the treatment accordingly.

### The liver meridian: The key to change

The liver is responsible for the free flow of chi. Every chronic pattern means some kind of stagnation, because chi does not flow freely, but is limited to certain channels or paths within the system. Liver 14, the Mu point of the liver shows this energetic aspect clearly. The liver is in alarm mode, if the gate is closed for a new cycle (Qi Men, liver 14) or cannot be passed. But this alarm does not only affect the liver, but the whole system. With the liver being unable to maintain free flow of energy, every change is difficult or unlikely. And according to our observations, any kind of stagnation leads to a stagnation of the liver chi. So in the beginning of a treatment series we focused on getting the liver chi into motion, to provide the conditions for a change to take place, to make it possible for chi to start a new energetic cycle. This idea was put into action treating the sides of the body, working on the whole third meridian family (liver, gall bladder, heart governor and triple heater).

For reference we checked the liver in the hara diagnosis as well as liver 14. This approach was pursued until we could see a change as far as free flow of energy was concerned. Depending on individual energy and burnout phase, this change could sometimes be observed shortly after the treatment started (sometimes as early as 15 minutes). Sometimes mobilizing the liver chi became the main focus of the whole treatment cycle. One way or the other, treating the liver chi was the first and most important step in our work, to change chronic patterns and prepare for the next step.

### The lungs and bladder 42: The gate to the Po

As shown in the schematic explanation of the 12 burnout phases, the triangle between metal, water and wood energy plays a central role in the process. In the metal element the focus was on Po, the body spirit, that we usually call living will. In a state of severe exhaustion we are like a flat tire, we have lost our will to live and our instinct that makes us take care of our needs, be it physical, spiritual or emotional. In chronic patterns Po plays a crucial role, since any kind of long term disharmony leads to that feeling of being flat and exhausted. In the case of burnout Po loses energy, due to the exhaustion of the yin, which also weakens the lungs. In the early phases this manifests as suppressing ones needs and personality. During the later phases it shows as a total loss of living will.

In the meridian cycle lungs come after liver. Chi passes the gate of liver 14 and a new cycle can begin, if Po is active. So therefore working with the lungs energy and the Po clearly stood out as the next step in our approach towards burnout treatment. This approach was put into action just the same. Depending on the burnout phase and individual condition, working with the lungs could take more or less time, while our diagnosis showed clearly that metal energy was influenced by burnout more directly than wood energy in comparison. Therefore treating lung energy took more time and drew more attention within a treatment cycle. Even though practical work was mainly focused on working on the respective meridians, in this particular step in our work, bladder 42 was used as a direct gate to the Po and also used as a reference to indicate how far changes had taken place already.

## **Gall bladder 25: Alarm for the kidneys**

After maintaining free flow of chi and activating the will to live, the focus changed to treating the water element. Mainly on supporting and bringing together our will power and inner resources. Gall bladder 25, the alarm (Mu) point of the kidneys, expresses the strong bond between water and wood element, especially in the early phases of burnout. Gall bladder 25, Jing Men, is often called the gate to the capital. Is this "our capital"? Our innermost fount? Is it alarming when this gate closes and we have no access to our inner self? Or is it alarming when this gate is so open that we get lost? The process of "exhaustion" of the water element, which begins in bladder 23 (Shen Shu, Shu point of the kidneys) is particularly interesting. The compulsion to do something weakens the kidney energy.

As a result of this fatigue we lose our will, which clearly reflects in the condition of bladder 52 (Zhi Shi, home of will power). After a longer period of weakening water energy and losing will power, the situation for the kidneys becomes alarming. Gall bladder 25 shows an energetic reaction accordingly. Fatigue (kidneys) and loss of will power (kidneys), take away our ability to make decisions (gall bladder) in compliance with our inner resources, which is a main characteristic of burnout. This is where we set the third focus in our approach to burnout. Once chi flows freely, our will to live is active and strong and our decisions are made in compliance with our "capital", we can start to move out of and away from our burnt out condition. Bladder 52 and gall bladder 25 serve as reference, even though the main work in the water element was done on the meridians.

### **Learning by doing**

So during the burnout practical training we have treated 90 patients in 900 treatments focusing on and using this approach:

- ***Establish free flow of chi***
- ***Activate the will to live***
- ***Bringing together will power and available resources***

This approach was not made up but was derived solely from practical experience and continuous re-checking of already acquired data and results. When I increasingly started working with burnout clients in 2008, just the term "burnout" created an image of complete emptiness and the according approach that formed in my mind was all about tonifying and nurturing the body energetically. However in the following practical work I was often surprised and learned that burnout is but a condition of polarised energy. In extreme conditions yin and yang are separated from each other. A huge lack of energy on one side and massive tension on the other. That really got my attention and was the kick off for the burnout practical training.

Every pattern has its own characteristic, a specific look. In our intensive work and so many treatments we tried to see these characteristics and gain an effective approach to the energetic aspect of burnout. In our practical work we wanted to get a quick and effective overview, focusing on the three main topics mentioned above. However, during the diagnostic process we found out sometimes that none of the above mentioned factors was relevant. Maybe these cases were just about fine tuning, which could easily be accomplished in one or two treatments. Then again there were some cases, where all three aspects were in the main focus of a treatment series. That is when we had the best results using the treatment sequence described above. When facing a chronic pattern, we found it hard to work with the other aspects, as long as the liver did not provide free flowing chi. And without living will it is pretty hard do establish the will to conquer everyday life. Of course we also wanted to know how our clients perceived the changes and outcome of our treatment.

So in our practical training at the International Academy for Hara Shiatsu we used written questionnaire to get feedback from our clients. We handed them out to our clients at the beginning of a treatment cycle and they consisted of two parts. The questions dealt with the common condition and well being of the clients at the beginning of the treatment series as well as at the end of it. Our clients were free to decide to take part and to throw the questionnaire in a box, if they wished. Part one after the first treatment and part two after the last of the ten treatments. The questionnaire was completely anonymous to avoid any influence from the practitioner or by the relationship between practitioner and client. The rate of returned questionnaire averaged at 73%.

- out of these 73% the energy level improved remarkably in 58% of the cases, meaning that symptoms like fatigue, sleeping disorders, overload, etc. decreased
- 51% noted a remarkable improvement with emotional issues, including anxiety, insecurity, being unsatisfied or angry
- plus: a major part – 92% of the clients – were happy about the treatments, 62% were very pleased with the appearance and competence of the practitioners

## The true nature

It became clear during the practical training that working with the energetic aspects of the burnout cluster made the individual energetic patterns surface all the clearer, while the imbalance of the burnout condition decreased. It is for a reason that in times of extreme stress, we use terms like “I feel completely besides myself”, “I am drowning in work” etc. This is meant to say that behind the burnout waits the real issue, the energetic pattern, the individual as such. Behind the noise lies peace and quiet. Behind the stress and the compulsion to do waits the chance to be. Dealing with the symptoms at hand is a mere stepping stone on the way to dealing with the true nature of the individual.

The above mentioned questions that Howard Earl Gardner asked in the first phase of burnout were: Who am I? What am I? How do I efficiently accomplish my goals? Finding an honest answer to these deep questions is probably the best burnout preventive measure. And the first question directly guides us to our true nature itself, our innermost core. And it this core we want to touch, that is the heart of Shiatsu.

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The author would be glad to receive ideas, feedback and comments on the topic.

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