

Bodywork as a portal to transformation

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“It's also helpful to realize that this very body that we have, that's sitting here right now...with its aches and its pleasures...is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, and fully alive” Pema Chodron

My Shiatsu practice is based in The Netherlands where I retrained after careers in the airline industry and commercial business. My understanding of stressful occupations and the commercial world transfers well to working with clients who are managing their life stresses and searching for balance.

There are many well known schools of Body Centered Psychotherapies for example: Hakomi, Gestalt, and Rolfing. I write about bodywork from my own practice of Shiatsu and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and my client's experiences of healing and transformation during bodywork sessions

Bodywork is a relatively physical modality and sometimes I wonder why I didn't choose for Psychotherapy or acupuncture. However I have always enjoyed *being in my body*; sport and horse riding were part of my youth and hatha yoga now supports my life and work. As I embarked on my first Shiatsu course, I had an "aha, this is it" feeling which became reinforced as I studied Shiatsu and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which appealed to my logical mind.

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Why do people choose bodywork?

They are feeling physical pain, tension or symptoms that are more explicitly emotionally linked such as depression, insomnia, and burnout. Shiatsu is also very successful in treating symptoms where Western Medicine hasn't found a cure. I love the Dutch word for this *uitgedokterd*. (Doctored out)

My teacher Bill Palmer says “people coming for help are often stuck” there is a motivation conscious or unconscious to look for support in working with life struggles or as Eugene Gendlin says “*living forward*” (Weiser Cornell, 2013, p218)

Are the body and mind designed to keep up the pace of our modern lifestyle?

We live increasingly in our heads, the mind loves to rule and make all the rational decisions but the body has its own intelligence. Bodywork is one method that people reach for to redress the body mind balance. My teacher Bill Palmer says “No-one walks through the door looking for bodywork unless they are ready for help” A realistic approach is that bodywork is a method of continuing self maintenance as seen in Asia, not necessarily a quick fix cure.

I invite you to consider with me 2 of my clients:

Saskia: Mid thirties, two young children, works four days a week, keeps house, plus other roles of wife and mother and maybe does some sport. Symptoms exhaustion, sleeplessness, restlessness, migraine.

Her husband Ron: similar age, keeping up the pace, head full of ideas, plans, obligations, as well as the financial pressure – no time for sport. Symptoms lower back hernia and shooting pains down one leg.

I might clear the initial tension with shiatsu and stretching, after which body and mind generally feel lighter, calmer a bit like releasing pressure from a valve. Then we look for the areas that may need to be tonified/strengthened to achieve the balance. This high paced life is taking its toll, it is no coincidence that the exponential popularity of yoga has grown in synch with our fast paced world.

Fortunately the health insurance in The Netherlands covers alternative therapies which encourages clients like these to visit me at least a few times during the year to redress the balance.

“The first scaly layer to be revealed, says Jack Kornfield. is the pattern of tensions we keep in the body.” (Kornfield, 2000, p28). He refers to what people encounter as they begin to search for mind-body connection.

Self practices of yoga or Qi Gong pay attention to the mind-body connection and move and nurture the flow of qi (*chi*) *our life force*. However taking responsibility for daily exercise costs discipline so we may look to a therapist for support. With the support of a practitioner we may uncover and access tensions that we don't always reach in self practice.

Shiatsu works on all levels to restore balance, physical, mental, emotional and energetic.

What do clients want to achieve?

Primarily my clients want relief from physical pain. They also want relaxation, a calming the mind and to return to feeling and having contact with their physical body. Maria says “as you work on the extremities (fingers and toes), I return to my body, it keeps me sane and helps me to cope.”

JoJo says “my mind is driving me crazy help me to shift the focus back into my body ” Most people make the link between receiving bodywork and feeling more relaxed. As a person begins to feel more subtle sensations, they are able to explore deeper levels of themselves. For example deeply held, or old tensions, and lifestyle habits which may no longer be serving them. My intention in each meeting is to redress balance in body, mind and qi.

Sometimes people have a need to continue at the same pace, there is too much at stake to change current lifestyle habits therefore relief from tension or pain may be temporary. Even with chronic and painful symptoms, there can be a lot of resistance to making those lifestyle changes.

Take Roy:“ I am on my mobile phone to India for 6 hours per day” his chronic neck complaint after 22 years of pain and just two appointments stayed away for days and weeks at a time, but returned in times of stress unfortunately the lifestyle changes required for on-going improvement, proved difficult for him to address.

In a world where many people live solitary existence bodywork is also a manner of receiving physical contact from another human being which is in its self healing. Sometimes it is simply a time out from the demands of life.

Bodywork based upon Holistic Philosophies for example TCM and Ayurveda (The Indian medical system) take into account the whole person including; Constitution, life history and environment as well as emotional and energetic layers. TCM for example claims that all sickness starts with emotion. They don't view body and mind as separate. Ann Weiser Cornell writes of "The mind body split that has plagued our modern culture" (Weiser Cornell, 2013, p48) Our tendency is to experience pain in the body as annoying, a nuisance, something separate from the rest of us. Pain and tension is thought to be the last manifestation of an imbalance after it has passed through the subtler layers. It can be a loud and clear shout for help from an organism out of balance. says "Body is in mind, mind is in body" (Weiser Cornell, 2013 p48)

Acceptance of the presence of physical pain or painful emotions is crucial to any healing or transformation "Suffering only ends when you stop resisting the way it is and the way you are" (Cope 2003) in other words not separate and without judgement.

Another of my clients, Ria complains of lower back ache, sure it can be a physical injury like a pulled muscle or a constitutional weak spot. However holistic philosophies explore all levels of the being

The lower back in TCM is linked with the kidney energy. As we discuss the symptoms I would get a more complete picture of Ria. Any pain in the knees or ankles? Do you feel cold? Feeling tired or exhausted? Frequent urination? The answers to the above questions as well as observation and pulse, tongue diagnosis open up a whole spectrum of how treatment may proceed.

The emotional aspects of the Kidney area are very common causes of sickness. This area also encompasses first and second chakra (i) and is related to: survival, basic needs including home, money, nourishment, sexual energy vitality and motivation, need for support and the emotions of fear, safety and trust.

Thus treatment can be wide ranging using a combination of shiatsu to strengthen the kidney energy and move the qi where it may be stuck. Whilst checking in with Ria about what she feels she intuitively needs. Maybe entering into a *Focusing* dialogue to see if there is anything needing attention that is lurking underneath the explicit symptoms.

Methods I use, which include Focusing, Movement Shiatsu and breathing

Eugene Gendlin the founder of "Focusing" evaluated psychotherapy in the 1970's. He researched why some people were able to progress in their therapy sessions whilst others remained stuck. The results (Gendlin, 1978, p10) showed that people who connected with the sensations in their body, what he termed *felt sense*, were able to experience a *felt shift* or transformation of emotional or physical pain. *A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one.* (Gendlin 1978, p32)

Focusing is a technique where we pay attention to a sensation, pain, thought or repetitive pattern “a felt Sense “it brings us right into the present moment. Gendlin describes it as “a kind of bodily awareness that profoundly influences our life (Gendlin 1978, p32)

Magda mentions her knee hurts I introduce a “Focusing” dialogue “take some time to be with the pain in your knee, see how it feels to approach it in a friendly way, explore it observe without judgement, just follow the sensations, images, feelings.

The need that often arises around the knee is “support” one of its physical functions but also an emotional aspect related to the kidney energy which runs through it. The need for emotional support often resonates with the client as we explore the pain in this area. Exploring how the need can be met “often support is much closer than we think” (Bill Palmer) can bring a sense of emotional and physical release. This is what Gendlin terms a *Felt shift* “there is a distinct physical sensation of change, and we call it a body shift.” (Gendlin, 1978, p7)

Lately I am inspired by the approach of **Movement Shiatsu** as taught by Bill Palmer. This work supports an intuitive exchange with the client. By encouraging a client to sense areas that need work, then to direct me to how they can best be supported. Within this dance there is space to explore subtle sensations as described in Magda’s story. So much is achieved by just being present with the client as they follow sensations, permitting body and mind to feel the space that arises for the possibility of transformation and healing.

Paying attention to your breathing pattern

Holding the breath or shallow breathing is the cause of much neck, shoulder and back pain. This in turn can lead to symptoms such as migraine, insomnia, hernia, legacies of our hectic modern lifestyle. Avoidance of breathing deep into the belly is also unconsciously a way to avoid feeling sensations which are housed there. There are millions of nerve endings in the gut see: “our second brain’ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=gut-second-brain>

A few minutes of attention to the **breathing** pattern brings significant results and awareness. There can be a huge release of emotions usually followed by a sense of relief or an immediate feeling of well-being. Steve came to me with a double hernia, looking for a deep and firm treatment to relieve pain. With his agreement I gently supported his breathing which was followed by an enormous release of emotion whereby the back pain was gone.

I ask clients. “**Do you notice yourself holding your breath**” people are aware they do it but don’t know how to change the pattern. “I say just exhale, and allow this to become a new pattern.”

“I don’t have time to do that replied a busy stockbroker”

In TCM the air that we breathe Kong qi (chi) combines with the food and water that we eat - Gu qi, this combination is vital to our well being.

Following the journey from burnout to childbirth.

As the relationship of trust develops between client and therapist we are present during various life phases what I call “**from burnout to childbirth and beyond**”.

Cancer, burnout, RSI, even emotional pain from relationship break ups **can** serve as a wakeup call. I regularly treat clients in various stages of burnout. Fortunately in the Netherlands this phenomenon is taken seriously, Doctors and Psychotherapists encourage clients to review their lifestyle which leads them to me initially for bodywork. As they explore new ways of managing work-life balance we get the opportunity to explore all of their layers through the bodywork. These clients come for regular treatments, as the months and years pass I have the opportunity to support them in pregnancy, birth death, relationships, career changes, and whatever else life presents.

One client, Sheila mentions her Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) in the right arm, it was temporarily forgotten in our first discussion. I feel her arm it is tight, lifeless, heavy. I ask intuitively if she has experienced recent grief or sadness. "Yes" she replies "I have suffered two miscarriages this year".

The arms have many stories to tell: there are 6 meridians beginning in the hand. Two of these belong to the metal element, the element of grief and letting go. Two others are associated with the heart; the seat of joy, and love or when out of balance – sadness and depression. Frequently clients experience quick and enduring relief from RSI when we address underlying emotional issues.

Whilst I supported her painful Achilles, Magda began to talk about her mother who died of cancer 3 months previously. Tears came; she experienced both sadness and joy, telling how much she missed her. With attention and support the emotion that was trapped in her body was able to be released. After two sessions the pain was gone.

Frequently I treat guests at Puysseut cancer retreat Center in France. Just being able to hold space for the client and travelling with them a little way on their journey was a humbling experience,

To summarize;

People choose bodywork either to feel better, to reconnect body and mind or as a conscious route to transformation. Holistic therapies like Shiatsu, don't separate body from mind. Bodywork as therapy happens on different levels, each client has unique needs, and the skill is in listening and being present for the client and responding to those needs. All names have been changed to protect privacy.

- i) chakra – In Indian philosophy an energy centre in the physical and energetic body

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Resources:

Paula Charnley (2013) www.paulacharnley.com

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