

Shiatsu and the Energetics of Fear

by Brigitte Ladwig

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The phenomenon of fear is endemic in our culture. It is part of the pressure to deliver and to function well at speed and accompanies us in times of uncertainty, during challenges and life crises. In Shiatsu practice we may encounter fear as something directly expressed or maybe as a background feeling, a tension or frozenness, a restlessness, speediness, worry, a sense of the person protecting themselves, or specifically as problems with the nervous system. The experience of fear is also deeply connected with our identity. Depending on where we draw the line between the 'I' and the 'not-I' we will experience varying aspects of life as dangerous.

Every experience of fear is of course quite individual. Nonetheless there are some recognisable patterns which we can use to orientate ourselves. Out of the treasure chest of approaches to Shiatsu we will put the exploration of the energetic field in the foreground.

Fear is a phenomenon which can seemingly catapult a human being out of being anchored in their body, so that on touching we may find a body that feels somehow 'uninhabited'. This escape out of the feeling, sensing body can be an effective survival strategy for dangerous life experiences. Those who are simply overwhelmed by sensory input can, unconsciously, be more at home in the etheric field than when they are actually rooted in their own body. Experiencing oneself as an expanded field of energy or awareness can then pose special questions about one's own identity. Sensing and addressing these expanded energy fields, the connection with the universal energy field and an anchoring of the self into the bodily sphere, can support integration.

Functions and Dynamics of Fear

Fear is a necessary natural function of life, which alerts us to the need to protect ourselves. When we feel fear our perception narrows, focuses and forces us to react to danger. Reserves are mobilised and there are strong physical responses giving us the necessary energy for fight, flight, dealing with, or avoidance of, a situation. Fear also has several useful social functions. Expressing fear may lead to others calming or comforting us. Making someone afraid is also a tremendous tool of power. Fear makes people adapt to social expectations, norms and laws, in order to be part of society.

Fear may relate to existential issues, where from the outside there does not seem to be a reasonable trigger for the reaction: like fear of the unknown, of dying, of becoming insane, of separation and isolation, of low self-esteem or of the need to trust.

With pathological fear our reactions no longer serve us well, and the worry that fear may reappear at any moment can lead to a reduced way of living. People withdraw into themselves, social life is reduced, ease and real joy in life become rare. Daily living entails constantly dealing with fear and often turns to high performance as a coping strategy. Shame, depression and desperation increase, self-esteem diminishes.... Fear takes on its own dynamic which sustains the disturbance – the cycle of fear. The somatic experience of fear itself is perceived as dangerous and this strengthens the sense of fear, which then again increases the physical symptoms.

Fear is a response to threat and that threat is generally seen as coming from the outside. However it is possible to learn to perceive the threat as in reality coming from one's inner world. We can make the power and the qualities contained in the threat our own, so that within us we find an equivalent power and energy with which to face the threat. What may feel threatening to us is not necessarily something negative. **Fear of the unknown can also mean that we are so afraid of our own power and 'godly inspiration' that we fight them with all our strength**, in order to stay confined in our safety zone, without connecting to the full potential of our creativity.

To understand the depth of their experience it can be helpful not only to ask about our clients' complaints, diagnoses and their triggers for fear, but also how they relate to their life; what are the qualities and characteristics of their perceived threat from the outside? During the treatment one can refer back to those qualities and potentials.

The boundary between what we experience as inner or outer, as 'I' or 'not-I', can change, and so can the sense of self-identity. It is possible to discover what is needed to face threat and how eventually to live through fear.

Fear, Body and Energy

Our clients may present us with a varied range of physical symptoms, mostly associated with the autonomic nervous system. Fear saps our vitality! The constant mobilisation of survival instinct responses weakens our energy. People may feel tired, strained, with little capacity for curiosity or enjoyment. Symptoms of acute fear often include shaking, sweating, increased heart rate, disturbed breathing and headache. Dizziness or a feeling of sea-sickness are common, rather as though there is a conflict between two realities – 'that which I see and that which I feel don't fit together'. People may have weak legs, lack flexibility, they may move more slowly or more quickly than normal. The digestive system may be disturbed. Some experience a feeling of the dissolution of their boundaries or even a sense of leaving their body.

When we take scan during Shiatsu, tuning in to how the energy is distributed, what kind of qualities it has, where there is more or less activity etc, we can see patterns emerging. Often the energy moves upwards, sometimes it is 'frozen' and held inside. It can be chaotic or nervous, lacking organisation or feeling 'tied up'. Tension in the upper body is common, breathing may be reduced, the heart area guarded. The spine or the whole of the back can be stiff and also weak. Sometimes the physical space of the body seems totally still, strangely open and giving, but as though un-lived in, and the energy can be felt more in the expanded field outside the physical body.

Fear and Identity

Identity is the intuitive knowing of 'who I am'. A feeling of 'that's me' and 'that's not me'. We are who we think we are. Our deepest, and mostly unconscious, convictions give us our sense of identity - the feeling of being at home, feeling safe. Changing our convictions means changing our identity, and that is hugely challenging.

How we define ourselves in the universe is reflected in our energetic bodies and boundaries. Who is that 'I'? When I identify myself with 'my house', 'my car', 'my boat' I will experience life very differently than when seeing myself as an unlimited field of consciousness.

Fear is connected with identity at the level of experience. Descriptions of fear resemble experiences we know from many spiritual traditions. In Ted Kaptchuk's seminar 'The Ladder of

the Soul' (*1) he described the energetics of fear as sharing a resonance with wisdom: if we take away all the negative aspects of fear we may experience wisdom. Transformation happens when we live through the experience of deep fear. Seeing fear as a signal to hide in some realm of safety prevents our connection to what lies behind our self-identity. When we ignore parts of ourselves, or the world, in response to fear, we insist on too small an identity. If we are lucky these ignored parts will come knocking at our door revealing what appears as menacing to be actually some part of ourself which we cannot yet accept as our own.

With Shiatsu we can direct our touch in a way that supports the self-definition of the client, offering them a sense of expansion, using the wider field, or of integration of those excluded aspects of themselves.

Basic Ideas for Shiatsu treatment

How then should we work with people when they are afraid?

Firstly some basic ideas: Avoidance does not free us from our fears. So to overcome fear it is helpful to deal with what is threatening, although that may not always be possible. To face fear it is helpful to build trust in one's body and in a supportive environment. The open and respectful form of touch in Shiatsu is inherently trustbuilding and gives a person the feeling of being fully seen and accepted. Through Shiatsu touch people can reconnect with their physical body and with the cosmic Ki of their wider energetic field. The autonomic nervous system response to fear, often anxiety-inducing in itself, calms down quite quickly in response to the relaxed perpendicular penetration of Shiatsu touch, which addresses the whole sense of well-being in the body/mind.

Addressing Individual Qualities of Being

The focus of those stricken by fear often lies with the phenomenon of fear, but with Shiatsu we can reach past those problems into the sufferer's full potential and perfection in the moment. What can we see and sense that is already positively present? What potential can we see in their physical expression, the energetic resonance and in the qualities of their soul and being? With our touch we can energetically let them know: 'you are ok'.

From the context of our clients' life stories and how their energy feels we might get a glimpse of the transformational processes that are fear-ridden for them. Whatever condition the person is in, we can always see him in his perfection. On that we can rely during treatment.

Integrating Energetic Patterns

During first contact and diagnosis certain energetic aspects of our clients may speak to us. Where is there a lack of integration? Are there any patterns? For example, how and where do we see chaotic nervous energy, tightness, vitality or restriction, boundaries or instability? Where do we sense the connections within the energies of the physical body or the connections with the etheric bodies? How much exchange, space, connection, grounding and centering can be seen? These observations may form a central theme during the treatment and we can use the Shiatsu to support integration, liveliness, centering, change and 'one-ness'. **It is really important to understand that the more we look at what is good and whole in that person the less s/he will feel the resonance of being inadequate and separate.**

To engage with simple individual aspects of energetic patterns can be very freeing and integrating in themselves, e.g. when someone can breathe freely for the first time in a long while or when

there is a positive lively feeling in the body where before there was only frozenness and tension.

The Energetic Field

What is the energetic field? It is energy that expands out beyond the physical body, with varying frequencies and qualities. It is home to various etheric bodies and it is part of us as human beings. In the field there is a reservoir of energy that we can use, as long as the boundaries of these energetic bodies are permeable. We will also find energetic patterns there which correspond with our convictions and life-themes. These etheric bodies are bridges to 'One-ness'. "The soul is a field" said Matthew Fox (theological scholar and author). If someone seems not to be present in their body we may make more direct contact through sensing the field. We use the energetic field in Bo Shin, Setsu Shin and in Body Scanning, and we can also use it for Hara diagnosis. We sense or pick up the different energetic qualities when we focus on the field or work with the layers out from the physical body to the more expanded etheric bodies. We can feel with a relaxed hand through the field to recognise differences.

The general principle for the treatment is integration: all the way into the physical body. If we want to include the energy field during the session our touch has to be so 'open' that the contact to the field can remain open. However the touch should connect in to the bodily sphere as well as out to the field, balancing inner depth with expansion, so that no aspect is dominant. In this way – **with an expansive, open focus, staying centred and using an open touch – we can maintain connection with the energetic field even during deep physical work.** This deep work is often important in order to allow the energy to anchor back into the body. As usual we may choose particular tsubos, rhythm and tempo, outer (more physical) techniques and inner ones (like the meridian functions) in order to communicate with the energetic qualities and patterns in the field. This can then help integrate the energy back to being present in the body.

Hints and tips

Finally I would like to give some general advice for working with people in fear. Shiatsu is a very effective treatment, but it is important to recognise one's limitations and refer any potentially suicidal clients to doctors or psychotherapists or, ideally, work in conjunction with them. Having professional supervision when working with people with strong fears is very advisable. Fear can be contagious. When working with fearful clients it is important to look after ourselves, our own grounding and centredness, our joy of life; and to keep our own energy moving freely. During the treatment it is good to maintain an alert self-awareness, sensing if we tighten up or the breath becomes shallow, and then to relax and re-establish our own vitality and focus.

It is also important to hold our own boundaries. People in fear often think and speak fast and it is imperative not to try and match their speed but to stay at ease in one's own rhythm, even maybe consciously slow things down. It's also important to recognise the reality of their experience, however irrational it may be – after all humans are irrational beings!

This article has been developed from Brigitte's Webinar presentation for the 1st International Shiatsu Congress Online (ISCO) May 2012. The material can be downloaded for free until the next Congress at www.shiatuspace.net

(*1) York, UK, 1997 - as related to me by Dinah John