

Shiatsu – to the Point

The Focus in a Shiatsu Treatment

By Wilfried Rappenecker

Shiatsu offers an extraordinary range of possibilities for working with a client. At the same time, interesting - and even fascinating - moments of contact will continually arise during a treatment. Even experienced professionals may therefore become easily lost in a treatment and move without clear guidance from one moment to the next. Afterwards, everything appears somewhat nebulous; you don't know exactly what you have done, even if the treatment felt good.

It is more meaningful, however, and also more effective if, at the end of a treatment, you know why you have worked with a particular area. To achieve this requires an overview of what you are doing, and how this has an effect on what changes in the treatment. This overview can be achieved by working with a clear topic and a distinct focus.

The focus (i.e. topic) is the point of interest, where I can learn something essential about the client's situation, and where I can monitor the treatment effects. The focus also acts like an anchor, to which I can return time and again and, if necessary, from which I can start anew when I am not quite sure which course the treatment should take. Last but not least, a focus facilitates treatments that are not only shorter but also more effective.

The clarity of a treatment hinges on a clear focus – and this has a significant influence on the treatment effect.

The Focus Area

It makes sense to find the focus in a clearly defined area in the client's body – and not only while still studying Shiatsu or in the first years of practicing professionally. I would like to call this area where the treatment topic physically manifests itself the **focus area**. Such a focus area in the client's physical body will always provide excellent guidance, even for advanced Shiatsu practitioners.

The purpose for choosing a physical focus area is to facilitate maintaining the focus during the treatment; to be able 'to stay with the topic'. On the one hand one will work locally and perceive the changes taking place there. On the other hand, it becomes possible to relate the work in other locations clearly to the original focus area and, if required, to allow connections to be established with it.

The aim of a Shiatsu treatment is to increase the client's freedom in the focus area (and further, in the whole human being). The practitioner will therefore tailor the treatment according to the requirements in this area. Even when working more distally, he will remain in light and flexible contact with this area for the entire treatment, or he will re-establish the contact time and again, either through direct physical contact or with his attention. He will perceive any changes taking place there as well as changing requirements in that area, and adapt the treatment accordingly. The focus area becomes pivotal to the treatment.

Deciding on a focus area does not at all mean working exclusively with this area. On the contrary, other areas most relevant to the topic should also be addressed. Considered relevant are

areas, which most easily resonate with the focus area upon being touched. By touching these areas the focus area is provided with more opportunities for change. By the same token, the practitioner will consistently omit any other treatment elements that are not thus related to the focus area. In this way, any excess baggage is dropped and the treatment becomes lighter and clearer.

The energetic Kyo-Jitsu pattern of the focus area has a lively connection with the pattern in other body areas; indeed, it can only exist because other areas allow it to do so, based on their own Kyo-Jitsu configuration. A change in the focus area is possible therefore only if these other areas 'support' the change by undergoing a change themselves.

For this reason Shiatsu treatments are predominantly whole-body treatments – by working with other areas we connect the focus area with them, facilitating communication and balance among various associated areas. We offer the focus area more resonating space and thus the freedom to change.

Looking at the whole body and the whole person is therefore an essential prerequisite for working with a focus. Time and again the practitioner will let their gaze wander over the client's entire body in order to take in all the emerging changes. This allows her to see other areas that are relevant to the focus area and – if required – work with them. She will connect such resonating areas in various ways with the focus area and then check regularly if this has elicited a change in the focus area.

For an experienced practitioner, the focus to be chosen generally becomes clearly visible, and therefore easy to determine, following the discussion, observation, and body diagnosis conducted before the start of the actual treatment. Sometimes, however, things are not so apparent, especially when a client comes to the clinic for the first time. Then one will need some time and experience touching this body and this person until one understands what one would like to work with. This is perfectly all right, and the quality of the treatment will not suffer, as long as the practitioner earnestly explores which focus she would like to concentrate on. However, at the end of the treatment it should be clear in hindsight what one has worked with.

Sometimes there may be several good options for a suitable focus so that it can be difficult to choose one. Nevertheless, a decision has to be made since without a focus the treatment will quickly become overloaded and tend to be arbitrary. It is not all that important which focus is chosen. What is important is that a decision be made, thus giving the treatment a clear centre while omitting everything that should not be part of the treatment. By our decision we give greater importance to what we do.

What is the relationship between focus and focus area?

Some students find it difficult to understand the difference between focus and focus area. In many cases both will indeed be almost identical. For example, if a patient comes for Shiatsu because of lower back pain (or a sore knee), it is advisable to choose the site of pain, in this case the lower back (or the knee), as both focus and focus area.

Other clients, however, come with rather more general topics that cannot be clearly assigned to a particular body area, for example problems sleeping or 'because they simply want to feel better'. In these cases the practitioner may use Hara or back diagnosis in order to decide on a clear topic. The energetic organ, with which he will then work, encompasses many aspects of the person, many more than just the one site chosen as the focus area. These other aspects of the person can be of a physical, emotional, mental or even spiritual nature. They will obviously also be addressed by the focus but are much more far-reaching than the local *focus area*.

To sum up: The focus of a treatment is an all-encompassing term. The focus area, in contrast, is quite simply the location in the body where the focus clearly manifests itself.

When is it indicated to work locally with a focus area?

No matter how you have determined the focus, it is often useful to work directly with it at a very early stage of the treatment; afterwards the treatment can be expanded to the entire body. This approach makes it easier to both obtain and maintain a clear treatment focus. Sometimes it seems better to begin with an area far away from the actual focus area, preparing the work with the focus there, and only after this preparation turn to the actual focus area. This approach may be indicated when it doesn't feel right to address the affected area directly (i.e. without preparation), perhaps because a sensitive emotional issue appears to be located there.

Choosing a Focus

The focus of a treatment can be anything we focus our attention on and which is related to the client's concern that has brought her to our clinic; and which can be a gauge for the effectiveness of our work.

In principle, there are different ways of choosing a focus; three of these are listed below:

- the location of a physical complaint
- Hara diagnosis or other forms of body diagnosis
- the impression gained by the physical or energetic observation of the body

The focus with local complaints

If a client comes with specific physical complaints, such as back pain or joint problems, the site of the pain will be the obvious focus of the treatment. Let's stay with the example of acute or chronic problems in a particular joint. If this is the reason for the client seeking treatment, it will usually be sensible to choose as focus the painful joint and the surrounding area. Sometimes, however, one will choose an area, which seems to have a causative connection with the complaint in the affected joint. This can be an adjacent joint or other body areas having an effect on the location of the complaint and causing its symptoms.

The practitioner will then ask specific questions about the nature and history of the complaints. He will have a close look at the focus area, taking it in his hands, and will then work locally on this site. I have described the precise procedure in my article about Local Shiatsu. At this early stage, the practitioner may already notice whether and how the focus area responds to the touch with his attention and his hands.

Once the local work has been completed, the practitioner will integrate this area into the whole person by giving a full body treatment. Thus the client's entire body is offered as resonance space to the local area previously worked with. Usually, this will significantly deepen the effect on the original area. Even at this stage of the treatment the practitioner will contact the focus area again and again – with her hands or with her attention – in order to find out how it is responding to the expansion of the treatment area.

Sometimes, as already mentioned, it will also be useful to create a 'large' space by working with other body zones first and only thereafter turn to the focus area, working there locally. Both approaches aim to facilitate a better integration of the site of complaint into the whole body.

The basis for this kind of work (and for good Shiatsu in general) is the practitioner's attention being fully present in the area her hands are touching. The prerequisite for this is the practitioner's calm presence in her own body. On the one hand this presence allows the practitioner to perceive different energetic qualities and patterns (Kyo and Jitsu) in the client's body and to work with them (see my article 'Working with Kyo and Jitsu'). On the other hand directed attention is in itself an effective, and in my view the most important, tool of Shiatsu.

Emotional complaints are also often experienced in a specific part of the body, for example behind the sternum, in the upper abdomen, in the neck or between the shoulder blades. The practitioner will often already have an inkling about this area while talking to the client. At the same time it can be useful to ask directly where in the body the client mostly, or most distinctly, experiences a particular emotional state. This location can then, in the same way as described above, become the focus area of the treatment; it can be explored locally; and it can be connected with other areas in the body, such as areas with physical complaints. If the cause of a complaint is of an emotional nature it is often useful to work with other body areas before directly addressing the focus area. In this way one can open up the space for working with the focus so that the client can accept the touch in that area.

The focus in meridian work

In meridian work the focus can be found through Hara diagnosis (or another form of body diagnosis). The state of the energetic organ, as determined by body diagnosis, almost always manifests very clearly in the expression of the physical body. The focus area tends to be located where the state of the energetic organ, associated with the meridian one intends to work with, clearly shows itself. This will often be the area where the energetic organ 'dwells' in the three body cavities in the torso – e.g. the heart in the chest, the liver in the right upper abdomen behind the right lower rib cage, or the kidneys in the lower Hara and lower back. These manifestations of the energetic organs in the body can be perceived, 'seen', felt.

However, the focus area can also be a diagnostic zone in the Hara or the back, or any other area where the organ energy is clearly perceptible and its pattern is of interest. The practitioner will work with such a focus in the same way as with a symptomatic site that has become the focus area.

In Zen-Shiatsu treatments, it is common practice to work with two meridians or energetic organs. In contrast, I suggest selecting just one of the two corresponding Kyo-Jitsu organs, as determined by e.g. Hara diagnosis, which will represent the topic/focus of the treatment, and primarily work with this organ. This method makes it easy to appoint as focus area the site where the first organ manifests itself most clearly.

Although one will primarily work with just this one focus area, one can, if required, also use the second organ and its manifestation in the body and the course of its meridian. In this way the treatment topic can be addressed from an energetic counterpole, and the communication between Kyo and Jitsu can be supported. However, the second organ can be left aside completely if it does not appear to be required.

In the beginning students often find it difficult to decide on an organ as a treatment topic. This is mainly because at this early stage of their Shiatsu path they lack the experience to trust their subjective feelings; which feeling indicates most reliably the right decision and what to do. They also lack the criteria for decision-making simply because they haven't yet gained enough clinical experience. Furthermore, applying radically subjective views and decisions may appear unsafe and unreliable to an inexperienced person. However, with increasing experience precisely these views are the best guarantee for doing the right thing in Shiatsu.

For advanced students and practitioners it may also be appropriate to work with the relationship between two energetic organs and their meridians as Masunaga has suggested with the relationship between Jitsu and Kyo organs. However, this is just one possible way of working based on Hara or back diagnosis; and it is not always the best.

The focus according to the impression gained by observing the body

Before deciding on a treatment focus the practitioner will always observe the body as a whole, paying attention to its physical appearance as well as to the appearance of the energetic space.

Often, the impression gained by such an observation corresponds well to the information obtained by talking to the client and the results of the body diagnosis.

It may happen, however, that the impression gained by observing the body may differ considerably from information obtained through discussion and body diagnosis, thus providing valuable additional information. In such a case of seemingly contradictory information the practitioner has to decide which of the three sources of information he would like to follow in the choice of focus. If he decides on a focus according to body observation, he will choose as focus a location that appears to correspond meaningfully to the client's concern.

Shiatsu with a non-physical focus and focus area

The treatment focus does not necessarily have to be located in the physical body; it can also lie in an immaterial, non-physical area, for example an emotion like grief, anxiety or anger, which the practitioner perceives in the space or also in an area of the client's body. This could be a meaningful focus when working with emotional topics. The focus may also be determined by impressions of how a person deals with certain aspects of their lives; which strengths and opportunities, but also which limitations there seem to exist. Examples of a non-physical focus could be how someone deals with burdens and stress, general emotional and physical tension, exhaustion etc.

A prerequisite for meaningful work with an immaterial focus area is to 'clearly' perceive and feel it, and also to sense changes during the treatment. Advanced meridian work often 'morphs' into Shiatsu with a non-physical focus when the practitioner perceives the client's strengths and weaknesses with regard to the central function of the relevant energetic organ.

During Shiatsu training – and in the first years of professional practice – it is nevertheless sensible to find the focus area in a clearly defined area of the client's body. Even for advanced Shiatsu practitioners this will always provide good guidance, especially for clients who come for Shiatsu due to physical complaints.

Freedom

Working with a focus does not limit the practitioner's freedom but focuses her attention and orientation. This results in more freedom during treatment. It allows the practitioner to work with everything that seems meaningful and of interest to the client at this moment in time, thus establishing a connection with the focus. It is important to deal with the focus area consistently yet playfully; let go of it along the way, focus on something else and then return to it, perhaps to see what changes have occurred there in the meantime. Sticking too closely to this area would constrain the freedom of the treatment, weakening its potential effects.

Shiatsu also means playing.