

## What is pain from the perspective of Shiatsu?

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For health and the ability for us to live as humans it is important to be able to feel pain. Usually, this very acute pain (so called nozizeptive pain) is caused through damage or over strain of body tissue. It enables the individual to recognize a situation of danger and to bring herself and her body away from this situation in different ways (e.g. by removing a hand from a source of heat or, in case of an acute inflammation, treating the affected part of the body with care). Typically we know exactly what causes this kind of pain.

The far more common sort of pain, from which people in the modern society suffer, is of a completely different nature. They suffer from pain that they can't link to an exact source and often they don't really understand it. This kind of pain is often chronic.

Chronic pain is widely spread. There are estimations that 70 million people in west Europe suffer from chronic pain. This kind of pain includes headaches, back-pain, painful joints, menstruation pain and pain in other organs or pain that is caused by cancer and other chronic diseases.

The painful conditions we meet in our shiatsu practice are often of such a nature. Additionally to the pain conditions mentioned above, we are confronted with mental and emotional pain in our practice, which I want to state clearly as being equivalent to the mainly physically experienced pain. From an energetic point of view there is fundamentally no difference between physical and psychological pain.

There is also acute pain on the psychological level, which can be caused e.g. through an acute traumatic event such as the destruction of a safe life-constellation. Far more often the psychologically experienced pain is also a

chronic experience, in which the person concerned might often have a vague idea for the reason of the suffering, but cannot clearly link it to one source.

If we have a closer look, we notice also that the experience of physical pain isn't primarily a physical phenomena; it's always a very subjective psychological experience. "Pain belongs to the most subjective phenomenon of life, objectively it doesn't even seem to exist. The same physiologically provable nerve-impulses can be experienced as devastating pain by one person and as "so what" or even pleasurable by another." (From: "Shiatsu for chronic pain in the lower back", W. Rappenecker 1995).

### Pain and avoidance

What actually is pain? From the point of view of the experiences I was allowed to make in the past 27 years of working with energetic patterns, I would like to answer this question as follows:

There are many different causes but only two different categories of pain: Apart from the pain that is caused through acute damage or over strain of body cells / body tissue, pain is an expression of stagnating life energy.

In this context the common categorization of acute and chronic pain, nozizeptive and neuropathic pain etc. doesn't make sense. The pain caused through damage or over strain of body cells is mostly (but definitely not always) an acute pain. However, pain based on ki-stagnation can manifest as acute as well as chronic pain. The complaints of energy stagnation range from sciatic pain or

migraine to chronic back- and joint pain, from the psychological pain of an acute deep injury to pain in the context of a long-term life crisis.

Ki-stagnation is by far the cause of the most common states of pain and can on one hand be a necessary thing in human life, on the other hand it can be burdening and cause illness. Humans need to have the ability to align their energy field according to the requirements of daily life. When I want to concentrate on one thing, I must have the ability to fade out other things. Through our personality, which develops with our ongoing life experience, we also unfold certain possibilities we brought along from birth, while other ones are unconsciously dormant or actively excluded. The tracks we use keep digging themselves deeper, while the unused possibilities fade out more and more.

These restrictions of the possibilities of the energy field are a necessary process on the path of life, but they are mixed up with the restrictions caused by avoidance. The fundamental fear of a person makes him/her avoid certain possibilities, feelings, viewpoints and experiences. This happens through the creation of insurmountable "walls" around areas that are to be avoided in the energetic field, which help the person to not experience these areas.

Structuring the field with both kinds of restrictions gives safety. The person will have the feeling of having brought his/her life into ordered and visible structures and thus having mastered it for a while. Everything has its place and destructiveness or other fear causing experiences seem to be excluded once and for all. But the person keeps developing and formerly protecting, stabilizing and orientation giving restrictions turn into serious obstacles, which can express in physical and psychological unease, pain and suffering.

It is my impression that the pain and suffering become stronger, the more the

person holds onto his/her old restrictions. It is fear that allows him/her to avoid contact with old experiences and new possibilities. From my point of view it is somewhat accurate to say that pain is avoidance.

In the case of painful conditions caused by degenerative, arthritic joints or in the area of long past operations respectively injuries, this avoidance plays a major role. Arthritic joints don't have to cause any severe pain. It is the chronic protective tension of the surrounding tissue, which causes the typical pain of arthritis. In the area of old injuries or operations it can be that the person is subconsciously avoiding the contact with the old trauma. Shiatsu can sometimes have miraculous effects in such cases.

In the case of chronic headaches it's often the avoidance of experiencing a deep injury or a specific psychological injury, which – alongside an unfavorable way of living and eating – causes energetic tension and pain. In the case of acute sciatic symptoms, it might be an impulse of the wood energy that was not given space and allowance, alongside an energetic emptiness in the lumbar area (which themselves are also promoted through fading out and avoiding certain life experiences that cause the acute situation).

## Pain and Fear

There is one thing all these painful conditions have in common: usually the fear of experiencing pain leads us to the understandable attempt of trying to avoid and control the pain by ourselves. But, that's exactly how the pain, and the pressure of suffering connected with it, can be increased.

That's why in all states of chronic pain the fear of pain plays a central

role. It often happens that a painful condition keeps increasing like this, until it becomes almost unbearable. In such cases the tension and the inability of the patient to open up, to relax and let the pain happen, live the pain become very obvious. If the patient can succeed in letting the pain happen, usually the pain will decrease considerably.

That's not the only reason why saying that "pain is fear" is valid, but also because pain creates fear. Pain shows us our vulnerability and our mortality. It may be difficult to accept that my body does not anymore support my wellbeing in the way it used to do. Humans usually are afraid that the pain could be expression of a disease, that keeps getting worse and would typically end in an unclear or terrible suffering. Even this experience stays unconscious for most people concerned: it is avoided. But the shiatsu practitioner can often sense it very clearly in the space.

The currently dominating opinion that medicine teaches, asks to avoid letting the pain become chronic, so that the body does not have the opportunity to "learn" the pain. Medicine is referring to the highly interlocked situation of the different levels of avoidance. Paradoxically, medicine itself asks to keep a person from experiencing his/her pain, which would be a resolution for many conditions of pain (but not for all).

This opinion (as valid as it may be in a certain context) is also expression of the social ideology that pain is something bad that is not supposed to be and that must be fought by all means. Pain is a disease, which must be gotten rid of. Shiatsu practice has shown me the opposite: the pain we are talking about here is not primarily the consequence of pain-triggering external factors. Rather it is the result of the active liveliness of the person. When a person can let his/her pain happen, then he/she is opening up and the energetic narrowness that is causing the pain is diminished.

When a person with pain comes to the shiatsu practice, already the relaxation, which mostly happens in the course of a treatment, usually leads to a reduction of the experience of pain. The shiatsu specific relaxed and open touch offers the touched areas expanse and freedom. The direct work with the painful area as well as the work with distant zones of resonance in the body let connection and space evolve, so that the narrowness of the avoidance can (partially) dissolve.

Trusting in the situation and the person giving the treatment is just as important, so that in relaxation there can be an almost child like opening, a deep letting go, which is experienced as liberation.

What can also be important for the shiatsu practice is the fact that the breath can contribute significantly in dissolving chronically painful patterns of stagnation. Everything that breathes opens itself and connects with the environment. This fact can be utilized by asking the client to go into contact with the painful area and to breathe through it. The more relaxed and calm the breath is, the bigger the effect.

In my personal life as well as in my shiatsu practice I have made experiences that absolutely demand me not to see pain as something hostile and dangerous. My pain rather mirrors myself and my way of living in an accurate way. I am my pain. By going into contact with the pain and letting it happen, I experience my reality and at the same time the possibility to let go of my pain. It is a joyful moment in a shiatsu practice when a client has the courage to come along on this path.

The balance is to find out until which point it is of benefit for the person to be involved in this process and where a medical pain therapy is imperative to lessen the suffering.

Pain is life and offers the possibility for experience and learning. One can't get rid of pain, except by getting rid of life.

*Wilfried Rappenecker for the Second European Shiatsu Congress Kiental 2007*