

What is Health and what is Illness?

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As a young physician in the 80's, I turned to Shiatsu because I constantly had a sensation that something was "not quite right" in the way classic western medicine was being practiced. *At that time I did not really grasp it fully; it was as if the connection to the way life really is was missing ...it was missing a connection to the life of the patients in the hospital and practice but also to what life meant to me. It also lacked every trace of what life meant to me.* I wanted to know what this missing element was and to understand what truly defines health in relation to illness, because that also must be a kind of definition of life itself.

The definition of health (and illness) which classic western medicine gave seemed very superficial. Simply said, it stated that illness is when something is not "okay" with the body (or soul) and if no illness is at hand, one is healthy.

For a while I was enthused by the visionary proposition which the WHO made in their definition of health. They maintained that health was more than the absence of illness but rather an encompassing state of well-being. However, my work as a Shiatsu therapist disclosed to me that this definition was too visionary on the other hand. It did not really allow for a true or useful statement about a given person's state of being.

I for one have never met a person who has found himself in such an overall state of well-being for more than a few days or weeks. Thus most people would be considered in a state of health for only a few hours or days at a time but never for a meaningful length of time in their lives.

Therefore I would like to propose a different definition of health, which has proven to be quite meaningful in my practice and has

fundamentally influenced my teaching:

A state of health is a continuing and ongoing process of development of a person as part of a greater whole.

This process of development does not by nature follow an even and regular rhythm but is subject to take place in smaller or larger steps.

Such phases of development are an expression of health. Often these phases will be subjectively experienced as phases of uncertainty or feeling ill at ease ("disease") or even as illness, (be it expressed physically, socially, psychologically or on a more spiritual level). However, these phases are always an expression of a positive life force, which strives towards continual development and evolving, and they are by nature transient.

Thus, in this proposal of health, a state of unease or even the feeling of suffering or illness are not necessarily to be considered to be in conflict with the definition of a state of health. Instead, one would have to consider them as an important and integral part of health. Health and sickness principally do not contradict each other.

This may seem very paradox at first. Yet, it does make sense if one reflects upon it for a moment. This holistic perspective brings forth an understandable meaning to the typical children's diseases, which in a sense provide an essential building block for the development of a child. Likewise, painful experiences or crisis in a person's life, which may be manifested in physical illness or disease, become recognizable, when retroflexed as an important time of change and as a positive

occurrence in a person's life.

There are many reasons for this view on health.

Classical western medicine, which is based on a scientific orientation, looks at a person from an anatomical and physiological perspective of growth and development only during the phases of childhood and youth. However, as a fully-grown adult, the person is viewed as a static and completed piece of work. The definition of health being presented in this article stands in contrast to this static view because it presumes that a being is in an ongoing process of growth and development for the entirety of its life. Problems and crises are an integral part of this process of development and evolution.

Suffering and illness are strongly segregated from the concept of health in the general consciousness of our society. Health and well-being are defined as equivalent to "right". Suffering and illness are being labelled as "wrong". The definition of health, which is being proposed here, makes this concept of right and wrong obsolete and inapplicable. Suffering and many aspects of illness are the expression of a process of growth. They are a part of health; they can (without any sadomasochistic tendencies) be seen as an integral and welcome part of a positive process of growth and evolving.

The presumptuous notion of classical western medicine, as well as the "health" concept proposed by the WHO, have had the consequence that the absence of pain or discomfort are seen as a basic human right. Thus even the inevitable death of a person becomes disputable.

Such an outright rejection of suffering, illness and death has the further consequence that such periods in one's life become meaningless and fruitless, thus increasing enormously the subjective experience of this pain, suffering or illness.

If instead such periods (crisis, physical and psychological suffering or even the perspective of death that we all fear) are seen as necessary and positive, it lessens the perception of suffering and eases the process of development.

The perspective that suffering and illness are something fundamentally wrong which needs to be hindered or eliminated, creates a deep chiasm in a person which separates him from this kind of important and frequent experiences. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to discover and to understand the positive function or purpose that a painful experience has in my life. Thus the experienced pain becomes even greater.

On the other hand, if one understands suffering and illness as phase in which one's life as well as the whole person is simply less in balance or less in harmony for a particular period of time, one has a far more neutral point of view that does not automatically judge the experience as good or bad, desirable or to be avoided. This allows the person to accept; to experience suffering and illness, and to begin to understand it and the meaning it withholds about one's life.

Then what is Illness?

The definition of health that is being described here allows it to see and to understand illness in a totally new light.

Like any other human states of being, illness and suffering as emerge from a highly individual acting together of different forces. These can relate to each other in many different ways in different individuals and as well in different situations the same person experiences during his/her life. To me, the strongest and most relevant force among all active forces in this respect seems to be the one that brings forward never-ending change, permanent growth and development. It is the force driving to unceasing growth and unfolding in life and the most positive force in

our lives even though we do not always perceive it as such. This force seems to be an ongoing process or tendency towards a gradual liberation.

Accordingly, most problems and illnesses in life take place in times of crisis, that lead to a change. Insecurity, fear (which are often not being consciously experienced) bring about resistance, denial, not wanting to know. To me, these psychological attitudes are the strongest cause of the experience of suffering and the main root for physical and psychological illness.

When we look at it from this point of view it also becomes clear that the problems and illnesses created by this striving force are not only positive and are in fact the expression of growth itself, but that they are also transitory in nature. Their essence is that of a crisis. A crisis has a beginning, a climax and ebbs away until it finally disappears. The strongest influencing factor, which hinders this cycle finding its natural end, is resistance itself, mainly out of fear or ignorance.

Many problems and illnesses do exactly not come up because something is going wrong, but they occur because the energetic field and the body do a good job. Before any other reason it is lack of understanding and the resulting fear that let a human being experience a crisis as something threatening and evil coming up.

Yet, as mentioned above, there are also other roots of illness and suffering, other than the driving force to evolve and the resistance against it. These other forces do not by their nature strive for a solution. Instead - provided their influence does not cease or is balanced by some other force - they may cause great damage to the human being:

A great deal of suffering seems to originate from a kind of abuse of the body or even the whole person. This abuse comes in part from the resistance above described, partly from not being informed better, as well as from

following certain social conventions. We abuse our body through inadequate nutrition, use of drugs, out of laziness and a kind of unconsciousness of being in our body, just to mention some typical examples.

Since human beings are always part of a particular social context (i.e. their families or other social communities) in their joy as well as their suffering they experience the forces within a space which they have not created individually.

There are other external factors that cannot be influenced directly by a single person, and which can also bring forward sickness and disease. Among these are for example viral and bacterial infections, accidents and injuries that have external causes, or the effects of war and environmental catastrophes.

It should not be forgotten though, that human beings never exist separated from the surrounding environment, but in fact they are an integral part of it. Diseases as well as any other incident in the life of a human always take place as interplay of internal and external forces.

This means for example in the case of infectious diseases and epidemics that internal factors like stagnating developmental steps always have contributed to an infection: in a way, they prepare the ground for it. In the case of every-day infections like a common cold, these internal dynamics normally are a lot more important than forces that "enter" from outside. On the other hand in the case of e.g. a small pox epidemic the internal dynamics are a lot less important than aggressive viruses (even though there has always been a part of the population that did not get infected, though having been exposed to the virus). Also in the case of an accident the state of internal development of the inflicted person plays an important role.

Finally, there is suffering and there are illnesses which do not seem in any way

connected to that which takes place in the person's life. Different cultures and their different schools of learning or belief have different answers when asking where such illnesses come from. Some will call it karma, fate, God's punishment, genetic reasons, disposition, etc.

Of the above listed roots of illness none are to be seen as absolute. They cannot be isolated from one another. In truth, they consist in a complex interplay. They influence one another and are more or less obviously showing in an illness. The inner developmental dynamic of a human being always plays a pivotal role, which loses its importance only exceptionally.

This incomplete listing of some of the sources of illness also shows that not all suffering and illness is fundamentally transitory in nature and that not all "ends well". There is so much suffering in this world and we are all going to die. However, most problems and illnesses will end well and they show a strong tendency to dissolve, provided the person does not "get stuck". This especially counts for those that we most often encounter in a Shiatsu practice. Typical examples are: most problems of the body's muscular-skeletal apparatus such as pain in the shoulders, joints and back; also functional disturbances of inner organs such as headaches, stomach ache or menstruation problems; psychological suffering or life crisis etc.

This understanding of health and illness can have far reaching consequences for our work. In Shiatsu as well as in any other holistic therapeutic approach it means that it is not in any way our purpose to work against a pain, a crisis or an illness with the objective to eliminate it.

Of course we wish that our client will be better soon – our compassion for this human being brings forward this wish, and – honestly – also our need to run a successful practice. We will do anything and will use all our resources to help the client as much as we can.

This is an important aspect of our professional Shiatsu, yet it does not reach it's core.

The essence of our work is to accompany another human as these states present themselves, to encourage the person and support them to walk the path and find new solutions. The direct work with the body is a first class method for this approach. Also the importance and meaning of support by counselling within our work becomes obvious.

This is certainly a positive perspective for our work! Imagine there is nothing which needs to be fought, and nothing, which needs to be eliminated. Nothing, neither joy, illness nor suffering is without purpose nor do they become present within a person's life without a reason. Everything has its place and its purpose. This does not mean that a person must remain stuck in the suffering of his or her illness, on the contrary.

Everything in a person is an expression of the most positive life force. To acknowledge this force in a person, in all its strength and beauty, is far more useful for resolving the essence of a problem than any attempts to combat the problem or to trick it into elimination. This means that we still can implement all our knowledge, all our experience and all our know-how. However, the goal is not to eliminate anything, on the contrary. It is about allowing things to happen and to allow this life force to do its work.

No matter what the problem or the illness, both are always infinitely smaller and less significant than the strength and beauty of a person which need to be acknowledged. To focus primarily on the illness creates confinement and fear. It is therefore our job to look for and see the strength in a person, to see their beauty. Then things do become liberated to move on: new space is created, new solutions found, a new state of well being can establish itself.

This article far from exhausts this issue in all its different facets. Many things have not

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been discussed, such as questions about: the interrelation of illness and suffering (they are two very different things); the nature of pain (pain always means separating, not accepting, not allowing something to happen); what can one do (we, as well as our clients) in order to

lead healthy lives. Although these questions were not treated in this brief article, the here proposed definition of health provides the basis to find answers to these questions.

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