

Being in the Hara

Thoughts on the meaning of the Hara in Shiatsu

by Wilfried Rappenecker

During my first Shiatsu course my then teacher, W. Ohashi, emphasised the outstanding importance of the Hara within the body of the giver. This view became engrained in me and was for many years a kind of dogma in my Shiatsu practice. For a long time I would try to anchor my attentiveness as often as I would be thinking about it. It was frustrating to experience how quickly my mind would jump away again and occupy itself with anything that would randomly enter my mind. I quite simply was not able to hold my attention in my Hara. Only as the years went by did I realise that every attempt 'to be in the Hara' is doomed to fail as long as the body space doesn't, at least partially, open itself up as a whole.

Slowly, I began to understand that our body is primarily an energetic space that can unfold its potential only when its various compartments and areas can communicate with each other more freely and easily, becoming quasi-wide. Only when this space experiences itself as whole, as being expansive and connected to its environment, can the Hara become a powerful centre. The Hara is, of course, the centre even before this state is achieved but it is a centre whose power and expressiveness is more or less strongly restricted.

Indeed, it is my experience that this centre will be more powerful as the space forming its energetic centre becomes lighter and wider. Vice versa, lightness and expansion can be experienced more vividly as the centre becomes more powerful. The power of the centre and the lightness and expansiveness of the space are mutually dependable.

Chronic tension prevents lightness and expanse

Typical causes that limit the unity and expansiveness are the various tension and blockage patterns which we find in our clients and, obviously, also in ourselves. These could be, to name just a few examples: a tense diaphragm, a tight stomach, tension held in the pelvic floor, tension or rigidity in the chest, or tight shoulders, tension in the wrists or ankles, or in the neck and occiput. By resolving one or more of these tension patterns a person will be able to experience him/herself as being freer and lighter, as resting more within him/herself, as being more centred. The person will then be more grounded in their middle.

One example of such a tension pattern is tightly held shoulders. The reason for chronically holding one's shoulders is primarily the subconscious realisation that within the three burners in the torso one doesn't feel able to cope with life. In such a case one or more burners will in some way communicate to the shoulders: 'You up there – could you please take over? Life is too difficult down here, it scares us.' And the shoulders willingly take over. When, after years of Shiatsu practice and patiently practicing Yoga, Qi Gong, Aikido, and meditation, the affected burners feel more confident again, *then* the rigid shoulders can increasingly relax. Subsequently, our presence within the body spaces of the torso will become more natural.

It is amazing how much more one feels to be within one's body once the shoulders have relaxed. This is equally true for the other tension patterns mentioned above.

To be in the Hara requires letting go of tension patterns and being able to feel relaxed within one's body space. The more it is possible to allow a relaxed presence in the expansiveness of the space, the more important the Hara becomes. To be in one's centre always means to experience relaxed expansiveness in the whole body. The relationship between the Hara and the body mirrors the principle of *'focus and expansiveness'* – one of the basic principles of Shiatsu, which can also be found in many other aspects of Shiatsu practice.

This is a major reason why Yoga and other body-exercise routines play such an important role in our work. Every professional Shiatsu practitioner should discover one or two of these routines for him/herself and commit to regular, long-term practice. Hara self-massage (Ampuku) is a further beneficial practice to promote opening the body space based on a relaxed presence in one's own Hara. In addition, the practice of Shiatsu is in itself a form of highly-effective quiet Qi Gong which continuously promotes one's presence in the body space. The same applies to the 'Inner Techniques' of Shiatsu as developed at the Hamburg Shiatsu School; they, too, represent a form of quiet Qi Gong, and they, too, promote the presence of oneself in one's body.

Resonance

It is absolutely exciting to experience how, during a Shiatsu treatment, being present in one's own body space (and thus in one's Hara) influences the connection between the giver and the client. Time and again, both when teaching and in my own practice, I experience how even a minute correction of the giver's posture, thus facilitating a deeper presence in one's own space, can trigger a deep wave of breathing in the receiver, combined with the feeling that the giver is now palpably connected more deeply with the client. In such moments clients feel more deeply touched and 'seen'.

The explanation for this phenomenon lies in the fact that our body space is an energetic space which communicates, by way of resonance, with the body spaces of other people. The more open and relaxed our own body space is, the louder and livelier will be the resonance. Once we have learnt to be relaxed in ourselves when giving Shiatsu, then we can encounter the client on a deeper and more meaningful level. Many of the vital effects of Shiatsu take place on this level; a level which cannot be entered by certain techniques or by doing but *exclusively* by resonance (*not doing*).

Resonance is also one of the foundations of energetic perception. Therefore the relaxed presence in one's own space is a prerequisite for using energetic perception reliably in our work. The complete perception of the client on a non-material level, as well as Hara, pulse, or back diagnosis, requires the ability to enter a resonant state in one's own body space – by the same token the practice of perception and of the various diagnostic techniques leads to the development of precisely this ability.

Good postures in Shiatsu can be easily defined: a good posture is one that allows for a relaxed presence in one's own body space (since this facilitates resonance). A posture in which this is difficult to achieve is a bad posture and should be given up *immediately*. Tension patterns that are necessary to maintain a not-good posture make it impossible to be relaxed in one's body. An equally big obstacle is a lack of experience and not-knowing as well as lack of practice.

The meaning of the solar plexus, the breast bone, and the inguinal region in the context of the encounter

Over the years I have further noticed that it doesn't matter whether the focus of the presence in the Hara is located precisely in the *Tan Den* below the navel (the *Tan Den* automatically becomes the centre,

not through increased attempts to be there). In the majority of students, at least in Europe, the place where the presence retreats to is the solar plexus in the upper abdomen. The lack of a presence in this area sometimes gives the impression of the person having collapsed there instead of being upright as is necessary for energetic work. The collapsed area lacking in presence can sometimes extend to the whole Hara and also upwards to the lower or middle sections of the breast bone.

The solar plexus is the space in our body with which we enter into active contact with other people. Many people avoid this contact; during a true encounter they virtually flee from their solar plexus – unless they have learnt (practiced) to hold their presence there.

The open presence in the upper abdomen makes it easier to inhabit one's body space and to direct one's energetic field forwards towards the client. Some schools emphasise an orientation and presence predominantly along the extended spine rather than (as described above) in a forward orientation. Although in this case the procedure and the effect differ from a presence in the solar plexus and the forward oriented body space, the crucial effect remains the same: to be relaxed in one's whole body.

In the high position it is the presence in the inguinal area which, in my view, is neglected by the majority of practitioners. This looks as if the person is buckling in one or both groins. An active presence in the inguinal area will, on the other hand, result in the groins moving just very slightly forward. In this way the body can establish a lively connection from the Hara and the whole body space to the floor – a connection which is important for an open contact. Practitioners who would like to master this position may initially feel insecure or even 'wobbly' in the new high position *with activated groin*. However, even after only a short and not very persistent training they will experience that their touch reaches a deeper level and that this position makes it much easier to remain upright during the contact and to feel light and free in the upper part of the body.

Maybe some readers will have gained the impression that the presence within the body space and the Hara can only be achieved through hard and laborious work. Of course, it takes patience, a certain gentle and kind discipline towards oneself, as well as a degree of persistence in order to experience the open space more and more clearly over time. However, even at a very early stage of this development there will be rich rewards. Even right at the beginning one will find oneself again and again in this wide open space – be it after a Yoga session, during meditation, or quite simply during a Shiatsu treatment. These moments will become increasingly frequent; they feel so absolutely wonderful that one could sink to the ground for the sheer joy of it.

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