

## Shiatsu

Leny Carbone, EST™, C.Ac.



### What is Shiatsu?

Shiatsu is a Japanese word meaning finger – “shi” pressure – “atsu” and is characterized by the systematic application of pressure with the fingers, thumbs, palms, elbows, forearms, knees and feet on specific points – tsubos and areas – meridians on the body. Shiatsu differs from acupressure in that it not only uses the main acupuncture points located on a meridian but also the spaces in between the points as well. Shiatsu does not use massage mediums such as oils or creams and as such can be done through clothing. Shiatsu is traditionally practiced on the floor on a thin futon.

### History

The roots of Shiatsu are from China – from a style of massage called anma. Massage is considered the oldest form of healing primarily because it can be done on oneself without any equipment or external props. The earliest writings of massage as a healing modality date to the Statesmen’s Patriot and General circa 2,700 B.C. in China. Though much was written about herbal medicine and acupuncture far less was written about massage as a healing modality.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. there was a migration of Buddhism from China to Japan. Along with this there was also a migration of Traditional Chinese Medicine including anma massage. Anma, the precursor of Shiatsu, underwent a considerable refinement in Japan and flourished during the Edo period 1603 – 1868. In the early 1900’s Shiatsu started to become more popular. As Japan was becoming more westernized so too did Shiatsu undergo some refinements. In 1915 Tamai Tempaku wrote Shiatsu Ryoho – “finger pressure way of healing,” and in 1919 he wrote Shiatsu Ho – “finger pressure method.” Then in 1925

Tokujiro Namikoshi started the Clinic of Pressure Therapy in Hokkaido and in 1940 the Japan Shiatsu Institute. In 1955 Shiatsu gained official recognition as a treatment modality and in 1964 as a distinct form of bodywork from Anma and Swedish Massage. Shiatsu was introduced into Canada in 1971.

The main influence of modernization of Shiatsu is that the ration of pressing to rubbing was reversed. Anma held an 80% rubbing to 20% pressing ration which Shiatsu reversed to 80% pressing and 20% rubbing.

### Mechanics

The basic premise of how Shiatsu works is that pressure is applied at a perpendicular angle to the plane of the body and held for 3 to 7 seconds. In many styles of shiatsu there is a support hand and a working hand, so one hand remains stationary while the other applies pressure along the meridian and the duration of pressure is sometimes longer than 7 seconds. The most common application of pressure is with the palm and thumb. The depth of pressure or weight is gauged according to the patient's condition and constitution.

The sustained application of pressure activates the mechano-receptor cells in the body and the parasympathetic nervous system often resulting in a change of brain wave. This helps to relax the body and promotes the smooth flow of Blood and Qi (Ki in Japanese) or vital life force. This in turn helps to activate the natural or innate healing power of the individual and bring attention to the area of the problem. Shiatsu uses the primal sense of touch along the body's largest organ (skin) to exact change on a cellular level. In doing so, sometimes stored traumas and emotional factors can be released and resolved.

### Benefits

Shiatsu can be used to treat a wide variety of conditions with pain being the most common of these. Often pain, particularly in the soft tissues, is treated by western medicine with muscle relaxants and pain killers. Shiatsu seeks to treat the underlying cause of pain as well as the symptoms.

7 or 8 years ago a patient visited me with severe TMJ (temporo-mandibular joint pain). It was so severe she could not open her mouth fully and was restricted to eating soft, mushy foods. She had been feeling pain in the jaw for about 1 ½ years and had gone to see several specialists. Surgery had been recommended and she was experiencing severe headaches. I indicated that I felt her condition was treatable, though she remained skeptical. After doing work on her neck and shoulders she felt considerable relief after the first treatment. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> treatment all pain and symptoms were gone – I was surprised that the recovery came so quickly – I had anticipated 6 – 10 treatments. She couldn't believe it and even managed to smile! The role of the therapist in Shiatsu is to help activate the natural healing and recuperative powers of the patient. Regular

treatments are important when there is a chronic condition, but Shiatsu is most effective when used as a preventative. The cumulative effect of treatments helps to strengthen the immune system, tonify the organs and keep the Qi and Blood flowing smoothly.

The minimum standard of practice for professional Shiatsu practice is 500 hours. This standard is used in Britain, Europe, Australia and some parts of the U.S.A. Shiatsu is unregulated in Ontario and Canada and there are both longer and shorter programs available. A prospective student should look for things such as course curriculum, experienced instructors, quality of teaching and a supportive learning environment when selecting a school.

Shiatsu is very old, powerful medicine that has its roots at least 5,000 years in the past. It however remains an important and potent way for people to connect with themselves, their health and their environment in the fast-paced 21<sup>st</sup> century.