

The Zen of Watsu

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“Life itself is the cure of the disease.”

Shizuto Masunaga

The strength of Watsu lies not only in its techniques, but also in its guiding philosophy. This beautiful groundwork derived from Zen provides an empowering context to join people together in Truth. As we remain faithful to its founding principles, Watsu will survive into succeeding generations, the blessing to humanity that it deserves to be.

Watsu evolved from Zen Shiatsu, rather like how the dolphins evolved from an earlier land dwelling species, taking to the water to become freer. In the translation from land to water, from East to West, Harold Dull preserved the Zen basis of his teacher, Shizuto Masunaga. Let us survey the Master’s accomplishments and sample his thought, the foundation of both techniques.

Shizuto Masunaga (1925-1981) transformed and revitalized shiatsu during his life, achieving an integration of its Eastern roots with Western psychology. He discovered supplementary meridians in addition to the traditional fourteen and introduced a system of hara diagnosis. He established the kyo/jitsu method of treating energy imbalance in the body and invented a system of stretching the meridians. As a degreed psychologist, Masunaga taught the importance of understanding the link between the emotional state of the patient and his symptoms. Above all, as a student of Zen Buddhism, he stressed the necessity of relating with empathy. In effect, he created a holistic approach to shiatsu.

The influence of Zen pervades Japanese culture, most especially in the arts, touching each in a way specific to its nature. When it comes to shiatsu (and Watsu) we are speaking neither of archery nor of flower arrangement, but of a therapeutic interaction, an exchange between two people to promote health and healing. Let us allow Masunaga

to speak for himself with a selection of quotes from his book, *Zen Shiatsu*, to see how Zen doctrines shaped his art of shiatsu. In his preface he declares unequivocally,

“The fundamental purpose of Zen is to achieve total human enlightenment through the discovery of one’s self.”¹

And then, in the context of practicing shiatsu, he asserts,

“You can achieve *satori* by curing diseases and restoring health.”²

Satori is the sometimes sudden, extremely personal experience of enlightenment on the path of Zen, achieved through consecrated meditation. The origin of the name Zen is from the Sanscrit word, *dyana*, signifying ‘meditation’. To receive a Watsu is very often a spontaneous meditation on the self. The life changing emotional breakthroughs and shifts in consciousness that receivers undergo in the water could be considered steps toward *satori* -- partial, if not final attainments of this state. To give a Watsu is also meditational, putting us deeply in touch with our inner being. The promise that Masunaga extends is true – it lies with us to realize it over time. But how exactly is this to occur, through what attitude of mind and heart? Masunaga tells us in the themes he returns to repeatedly:

“He (the practitioner) should not be critical of a patient’s weakness, but instead by compassionate toward his patient’s pain.”³

“Sympathy and compassion for the patient is very important in oriental diagnosis.”⁴

“In shiatsu, the giver and receiver create a warm and understanding human relationship through touch and body pressure and become sensitive to each other.”⁵

“Touching diagnosis is maternal affection toward the patient to feel his pain. This means that we are not treating the patient’s problem but rather sharing his pain.”⁶

“Oriental touch diagnosis *setsu-shin* is performed with instinctive compassion and without scare.”⁷

Compassion in our presence and in our touch would be the key according to Masunaga. Like shiatsu, Watsu is concerned with relating, and our challenge as practitioners is to be in balance, ‘feeling with’ in a way that is neither invasive nor suffocating, a positive and spacious presence. If we can live and relate at all times in this vibration, have we not already awakened?

The Zen way has been said to be down to earth, practical and direct, with a preference for action over words. The Zen monks had no use for the otherworldly; they found the divine in the commonplace, the proverbial ‘chop wood and carry water’. Silence and meditation were favored over abstract philosophical discourse.

This Zen way is evident in Watsu trainings, where only through the practical experience of giving and receiving do students come to understand the work. And the work itself -- cradling and rocking, skin to skin -- what could be more direct? Peter Schröter, the co-founder of WaterDance and a psychologist himself, once said we get to come ‘around the desk’ and instead of merely speaking about inner states, facilitate the receiver in directly accessing them in our arms. Instead of interpreting the client to himself we remain silent, allowing insights and feelings to come and go in the flow.

There are other Watsu ‘scriptures’ we may turn to for inspiration. Harold’s most recent book, *Watsu, Freeing the Body in Water*, naturally carries the flavor of the work more strongly than any other source. Elaine Marie and other teachers have written their own inspiring course notes. *Body-Centered Psychotherapy* by Ron Kurtz, founder of the Hakomi Method, outlines a therapeutic approach based very much in the spirit of Zen. What I wish to present here, though, are writings that may be less familiar to the student of Watsu, but no less valuable.

The Book of Tea, a beautifully written essay penned in 1906 by Kakuzo Okakura, delves into the history of the tea ceremony, another Zen tradition from Japan. Here we find further insight into the nature of Watsu. A tea ceremony and a Watsu session have much in common, as different expressions of the same unseen source. Allow me to make my point by describing a tea ceremony. Let us picture two guests. Invited into the Tea Master’s presence, they proceed down a secluded path, leaving the world and

its distractions behind. Awaiting the call to enter the rustic teahouse, they wash their hands in purification. Stooping through the low entrance way in humility, they find the Master has placed a single flower in the vase upon the altar. The Master appears and their communion begins, aided by the subtle intoxication of the tea. The world reduces to the tiny interior, an empty space, yet adequate for the heart to expand, to heal and refresh.

Should not a Watsu pool be like a teahouse, a sanctuary and refuge from the world, beautiful, yet unpretentious? Is not an unseen Master Spirit presiding over each session, lending support to the process of healing and awakening? Both guests in a Watsu, giver and receiver, drink at the font of Being, drawing closer together in their common humanity. And the space they occupy, like the interior of the *sukiya*, is significant not for its décor, but for something intangible it may contain, as an arena in which true Beauty may arise.

The author, Okakura, speaks of the Zen concept of the vacuum, what Harold has referred to as ‘the emptiness’:

“The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is all potent because all containing. In vacuum alone motion becomes possible. One who could make of himself a vacuum into which others might freely enter would become master of all situations.” 8

Even in the West, the value of emptiness is understood. We seek the vacant table at the café to be with our thoughts, the unpeopled glade to expand into nature, the unoccupied studio in which to dance or play music. Space becomes a field for personal truth to fill.

In Watsu, space is more than a private pool large enough to do the moves. It is also a mental stance, an attitude held by the practitioner in relation to the receiver. Our space is a deep silence of receptivity that the wounded subconscious senses as safe. It is warm and inviting, holding out acceptance. The absence of intention leaves the space we generate refreshingly empty. Our willingness serenely to embrace sadness and pain makes it big.

Taoism was the predecessor to Zen. As it spread throughout southern China, Zen carried over many of the earlier Taoist teachings. The eternal classic, *The Tao Te Ching*, by Lao-tzu, speaks to us across the centuries from this tradition, rich with wisdom and paradox. Although more than two thousand years old, its 81 verses could well serve as a modern day manual for the inner game of Watsu. In verse 78 Lao-tzu tells us,

“Nothing in the world
is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
nothing can surpass it.”⁹

So true. Tense muscles and closed hearts melting in warm water come to mind. Verse 43 begins,

“The gentlest thing in the world
overcomes the hardest thing in the world.”¹⁰

Was he speaking of water here, too, or of something less tangible? Like Masunaga, Lao-tzu has graciously left us a good measure of grandfatherly advice on how to cultivate the heart:

“Love the world as your self;
then you can care for all things.”¹¹

“Not seeking, not expecting,
the Master is present, and can welcome all things.”¹²

“Empty your mind of all thoughts.
Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.”¹³

“If you want to become full,
let yourself be empty.”¹⁴

“Know the male,
yet keep to the female:
receive the world in your arms.”¹⁵

“The master views the parts with compassion,
because he understands the whole.”¹⁶

“If you keep your mind from judging
and aren’t led by the senses
your heart will find peace.”¹⁷

Lao-tzu formulates that which we know on another level, giving us courage to be even more intuitive with receivers.

“Not knowing is true knowledge.
Presuming to know is a disease.”¹⁸

Zen mind is mindless, beyond thinking. By not presuming to know better than the receiver, we remove all psychic pressure and allow his own understanding to surface into awareness. We give a green light to the enigmatic to occur, that which defies logic, those miraculous shifts on every level of being that take place in Watsu. Zen is a way very much in tune with biological and emotional life, adequate to guide us through the mysteries of human incarnation, through the perplexing dynamics of relationship, that tide ebbing and flooding between conscious, living systems.

Free Flow is the real creativity and art of Watsu insofar as it demonstrates a sensitivity to the unfoldment of partner’s process. This process can manifest as the self-healing principle of surrender to movement impulses. Such ‘unwinding’ constitutes a powerful synchronization of body and inner being, a sort of therapeutic dance. Although Lao-tzu was referring to governing when he spoke of leading and following, he has given us the perfect guide to Free Flow. Let’s see what he has to say...

“acting without expecting
guiding without interfering...”¹⁹

“... the Master takes action
by letting things take their own course.”²⁰

“If you want to lead the people,
you must learn how to follow them.”²¹

“The Tao nourishes by not forcing.
By not dominating, the Master leads.”²²

The pronouncements of Lao-tzu seem so familiar, seem to encapsulate our experience in the water. Would it be exaggerating to say that to share Watsu is to be immersed in the Tao?

The sublime states we attain sharing Watsu beckon to us with their potential to extend out from a few isolated hours to all our waking moments. We begin to realize how the serenity and attunement of the Watsu experience serve as a model of being and relating. Then, just as the masters of the spiritualized arts of the Orient sought not merely to practice art, but to *become* it, we can discover Watsu as a way of life.

What is the heart of Watsu? What is its essential nature? As we ask this of ourselves, a living answer comes from within, out of the experience of giving and receiving, and from hearing the heartfelt feedback of our receivers at the wall. All else that we study and read serves only to provide a context for these direct experiences. Thus reflecting, we may daily refresh our dedication to the work. Over time, a personal philosophy of Watsu evolves, not to talk about, but to live. It will differ for each of us, as we are each a unique creation embodying an unrepeatable frequency of love. And even though the finer potentials of human nature are innate, it may take someone to ‘activate’ us, to resonate them up out of our depths into awareness.

The essence of Watsu is experienced in this way, by transmission. If we were born to good fortune, the voice and touch of our parents were imbued with affection; in their arms we felt unconditional love. If not, we may first have had that experience in a training, cradled in the arms of our partner. Perhaps an instructor demonstrating radiated a quality of presence that touched our heart, supplying the spark to a pilot light. Just as love is learned from one who loves, the essence of the work is felt from one who embodies it.

In *The Book of Tea*, Okakura relates a story:

"Hiakujo was walking in the forest with a disciple when a hare scurried off at their approach. "Why does the hare fly from you?" asked Hiakujo. "Because he

is afraid of me," was the answer. "No," said the master, "It is because you have a murderous instinct."²³

Nobility of intention is not enough in our profession; nobility of soul is required before we earn the privilege to facilitate healing, before our presence inspires trust. Have we won those internal victories of character, made sufficient progress toward *ahimsa* (Sanskrit for 'harmlessness')? Is there yet a 'murderous instinct' in us or have we felt enough of our anger and fear that they no longer define us?

What disciplines and habits of living will purify us, we might well ask. To be moving toward peace within oneself through some form of spiritual practice and to be advancing toward emotional mastery through some sort of process work are surely necessary. Then, when we enter the pool, we will embody a greater degree of awareness, rather than be reaching for it in this one special encounter. Then, we can enter the pool with gratitude and humility, with a quiet mind in tune with the energies of Heaven and Earth. We realize the uniqueness of the occasion, remembering the words of the Japanese Tea Master, "*ichigo ichie*", or "this meeting -- but once in a lifetime!" Collecting ourselves, we focus our being into the moment and breathe in unity with our partner. Gazing upon partner to appreciate his or her beauty, we wonder what touch, what movement is this person calling for?

Masunaga says that our receiver is our master, guiding us by his responses in how to proceed. In trainings in Brazil, we often used the Portuguese word *companheiro* in place of *parceiro* (partner) or *recebedor* (receiver). It implies the friend, the fellow traveler who accompanies us on the journey. And walking down the road together, if we listen well, he may have an interesting story to tell about himself.

Since the initial development of Watsu, its technique and ethics have come more into line with its unchanging essence. Present-day teaching demonstrates more sensitivity to the neck and lower back. When physical therapists embraced Watsu in the early 90's, they brought to it their knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and disease conditions, while still recognizing the magical power of relating compassionately to their patients. They termed this 'unconditional positive regard.' Today, students are

better taught the primal importance of respecting the receiver's physical and emotional boundaries while maintaining their own. In the refinement of the Transition and Expanded Flows, moves that were stressful to the giver have been taken out. The use of floats and noodles has brought greater comfort to giver and receiver, alike.

Technique and compassionate presence need to be in balance. One without the other is ineffective for healing. The deepest empathy cannot be conveyed in the absence of technique; the most superb technique without heart is sterile. In Watsu, 'soft-heartedness' translates not only into touch, as in land-based work, but into cradling and full-body movement, as well. The key is in preserving this tender quality of the work while mastering a technique sufficient to maintain partner in comfort and administer effective bodywork.

In Watsu we see the marriage of yin and yang: technique in service of essence, knowledge supportive of intuition. The technique of matching our breath to partner's breath leads directly to the essential felt sense of oneness. Once body mechanics become second nature through practice, our attention is freed to be more fully present. On a larger scale, as we comprehend more of anatomy, physiology, psychology, and spirituality, a broader and more informed range of options suggest themselves to our intuition.

The way in which we execute technique is thoroughly Zen, showing reverence for life, supporting peace and blossoming self-awareness. We do not force stretches as this would only generate resistance. Our tempos are generally slow so as not to overwhelm. We provide an adequate number of repetitions to give internal processes time to unfold. We transition smoothly so as not to distract partner out of his inner flow of Being. We move partner by shifting our body weight, rather than with the strength in our arms, so he does not feel manipulated and objectified. In every way we demonstrate our absolute faith in the healing wisdom of the innermost self, the very self that Zen proposes to uncover.

We have looked for and discovered Zen in philosophy, presence, and execution -- the 'how' of Watsu. Will we find the spirit of Zen in the 'what' of Watsu as well, in the

actual sequence? Flowing movement alternates with stillness; closeness and distance cycle in and out of each other. The messages embedded in these integrating dichotomies are a subtle yet powerful teaching. A session is a season of experience with more intensities, more profundities than we might normally expose ourselves to.

Developmental movements lead into positions reminiscent of pre-natal and infant states, mixed with moves of ultimate freedom. They sweep aside our mental constructs as to how life must be: we recognize the reality of love, realize that we belong in the universe, recapture hope of truly healing, and safely surrender to all our feelings. Events come and go and yet we persist, a part of it all and at the same time, floating just above, witnessing the 'isness' of things. In a Watsu session the wheel of experience turns farther and faster than on land and we climb newborn, dripping from the water, a full revolution wiser, having passed through comfort, sorrow, memories, visions, freedom and sensuality – always held in an enveloping safety. The world no longer has the dry, sharp angles of the intellect, rather the fluid, yielding roundness of the whole self -- body, feelings and soul.

Masunaga confides, “The sensation of life is, I believe, the sensation of two-as-oneness. When you feel oneness there is life.”²⁴ He says it is an instinctual feeling that adds zest to the occasions in which it arises. Two become as one when lovers meet, when a person is in touch with his inner nature or is fulfilling his life purpose. The glow of life we see in receivers' eyes at the end of sessions is the guarantee that Watsu is indeed a means to this oneness.

The stream of Watsu has broadened into a river down the years as an ever increasing number of individuals have dedicated themselves to its practice. Each teacher, organizer and practitioner embodies the tradition today. Watsu lives through people, assuming a rainbow brilliance, reinvented in our varying temperaments and perceptions. The contributions of its matured sister disciplines, WaterDance, Healing Dance, and Jahara Technique, have also enriched Watsu. From its encounter with physical therapy, Watsu has gained a broader and more precise applicability. With the advent of David

Sawyer's pre-natal work we have a context in which to understand and work with some of the manifestations of the bodymind.

After two decades the moment of generation transfer in the teachership is arriving. As the first generation of instructors nears retirement, the second generation is at midpoint, and the third has already embarked. We may be proud of this overlapping succession, preserving what is of value and growing the work at the same time. We should ever bear in mind that ideas attain their fullness as the expression of living beings. "The virility of life and art lies in its possibilities for growth,"²⁵ says Okakura. Through adaptation and mutation ideas evolve to keep pace with life's stream. As the number of people involved has grown into the thousands, the art of Watsu is more than ever a creative, collective phenomenon. We may look forward to further developments and offshoots, wondrous new growths springing up at a distance that on closer inspection will be seen to share a common root structure.

*Come, let us linger together for a quiet hour
in a shaded pool on the bank of the Great River
flowing to the Sea.*

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