

Finding yourself in warm water: the spiritual possibilities of Watsu®

by Andrew Yavelow (©1999)

Who are you? What is the essence of the soul you were born with? Why were you put in this body, on this planet? What is your highest purpose in life? How do you fit into the grand scheme of the universe?

If you're interested in finding answers to these and other spiritual questions like them, you might try a new type of therapeutic bodywork, called Watsu.

Watsu (whose name comes from "WATER shiatSU") is, at its simplest level, a floating massage. With the help of the therapist, you float comfortably in a large pool of warm water while your muscles are massaged, your joints mobilized, tissues stretched, energy pathways opened, and your whole body is swished and swayed gently through the water. Most people find Watsu to be "blissfully relaxing." Physical therapists, massage therapists, and other bodywork practitioners all over the world use it for treating stress, chronic back pain, orthopedic problems, arthritis, sleep disorders, fibromyalgia, and a host of other conditions. So there is plenty to appreciate about Watsu on a purely physical level.

But one characteristic that makes Watsu stand out from massage and so many other forms of bodywork is that it gives you the opportunity to go beyond the physical. Because when the body relaxes so deeply – as it can in the warm weightlessness of Watsu – the mind can cease its chatter. And when the body and mind are quiet, what you're left with is the fundamental essence of your being. Your soul. Your spirit. The real you.

How does it all happen?

From the receiver's point of view

For someone receiving a Watsu, a session can seem deceptively simple. You put on a bathing suit and get into the warm water, you receive a few instructions from your therapist, and are gently lifted off your feet and supported floating on your back. You don't see anything but the interplay of light and shadow, because your eyes are closed. You don't hear anything but the water, because your ears are submerged. And what you feel is the water's warmth, and the weightless movements of your body as it gently waves and sways through the currents. Occasionally you might be aware of some deep massage in a tight muscle, or a big stretch. But very quickly all the touch and

movements blend together into one harmonious, timeless, flowing dance. And what you notice is not the work being done on your body, but the results of it: a profound physical release, letting go, and relief from tensions and pain.

At the same time as your body is letting go, so too is your mind. There is a theory among bodywork researchers that every physical pain carries with it an analogous mental thought pattern. If you're holding onto soreness in your toe, for example, you're also holding onto the emotional story about the circumstances surrounding the injury or accident. In Watsu, as your body thoroughly lets go of its physical discomforts, the corresponding mental stories are released as well. Not that you'll necessarily notice your mind letting go; in fact, it's more like the *absence* of noticing. You might not have any thoughts – just a mental quiet and peace that accompanies the physical freedom of your body.

And once your body is free and your mind is at peace, there is nothing left to keep your spirit from shining through.

What exactly do we mean here by “spirit”? For many people, it's a sense of seeing themselves with a new, clearer perspective. It's as if they forget about the daily *stuff* that they deal with – duties, obligations, busywork – and instead are freed to focus on who they are inside, and what they truly want. Watsu receivers feel comfortable and safe and protected. They feel understood and appreciated, beautiful and strong. They feel forgiveness, compassion, and love for themselves and others. And many feel connected to a clearer purpose in their lives. Maybe that purpose has just occurred to them consciously for the first time during their Watsu sessions; maybe it's something that they've always known. But somehow, the Watsu experience brings many people's awareness back to that central knowing. It brings them back to themselves. It brings them back to spirit.

Virtually everyone who receives a Watsu opens their eyes at the end of a session and describes it as “The most relaxing experience of my life.” Most are moved by the remarkable depth of the work. And many, many people report “a profound feeling of oneness – with myself, the practitioner, the water, the universe... everything!” It's extraordinary – and something you have to experience personally to truly appreciate: therapeutic bodywork and spiritual opening, all in one extremely pleasurable hour.

From the practitioner's point of view

Watsu is the brainchild of former San Francisco Renaissance poet Harold Dull, Director of the School of Shiatsu and Massage at Harbin Hot Springs, just north of California's Napa Valley. In 1980, Dull first combined the stretches and meridian work of Zen Shiatsu with floating people in warm water and the results have been

delighting the guests at Harbin – and the clients of Dull’s many students all over the world – for nearly 20 years. Today Watsu is practiced by more than 1000 carefully trained and certified practitioners on 6 continents, in settings ranging from public hot springs and backyard pools, hospitals and physical therapy clinics, to leading beauty and wellness spas.

For practitioners, learning to give Watsu is a rigorous initiation into the demands of doing body/mind/spirit work.

The premise of learning Watsu, like that of so many other therapeutic forms, is that practitioners can only give to the extent of their own personal development. The Watsu training program, therefore, is intensive. Students spend hundreds of hours learning and practicing the various hands-on techniques of how to move and free the body in water. They also learn about themselves, both through the spiritual openings that come from receiving so much Watsu, and by processing the emotional effects of doing and receiving such deep and intimate work. Not that Watsu is generally either taught or practiced as a form of psychotherapy. Rather, as bodywork founded in the roots of Zen, it is a practice of simply observing – and accepting – what is. Watsu practitioners learn to love their clients unconditionally, and one of the most powerful steps in that process is learning to love themselves.

In a professional session, a Watsu practitioner can draw on a variety of techniques and approaches. Beginning level Watsu classes teach practitioners a strict sequence of moves and positions to follow with each client; as with Tai Chi and other fixed forms, the Watsu sequence allows practitioners to free their minds from the distractions of having to think about “what should I do next?” The more advanced Watsu classes abandon sequence for the limitless possibilities of “free flow”, which begins with the client’s breath, and grows spontaneously in each moment from a place of deep energetic connection and opening.

Either way – sequenced or free flowing – every touch, move, and aspect of the Watsu experience has a very different, and important effect on the receiver. Being in warm water softens the tissues and soothes the mind. Floating creates a sense of lightness, and an altered perception of gravity and time. Following the rhythm and movements of the breath creates a sense of ease, and of being felt and understood. Massage soothes sore muscles. Stretching opens the tissues. Trager® loosens the joints. Shiatsu opens the flow of energy throughout the body. Chakra work opens the body’s energy system to that of the universe. Flowing movements give a feeling of freedom, sleekness, and beauty. Being loved unconditionally creates a sense of acceptance. Being held closely and non-sexually creates a deep feeling of nurturance and safety.

Taken together, all these aspects of Watsu – and more – combine to create a

profound and holistic bodywork experience that is literally like no other. Part soothing massage, part return to the womb, and part expansion to everything beyond. It's bodywork. It's mental peace. It's a spiritual coming home. And if you're looking for the one word that would best describes it all, the closest must surely be "healing."

Try it. If other people's experience is any indication, on many different levels you're going to be profoundly glad you did.

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