

Neck and shoulder problems:

Reflections on Freedom Issues

By Graeme Docherty

The one thing I like most about shiatsu is that it pays homage to the fact that everyone has a different life story. Looking at the person holistically – seeing how each part of the person resonates with and affects each other part – is very relevant for the treatment of neck and shoulder problems, one of the top three issues I see in my clinic.

The reality of modern (Western) daily life – working in a sedentary position in front of computers, driving on busy roads, traveling in crowded transportation facilities, multitasking, continually speeding up our response rate to information input – largely accounts for this statistic. For obvious reasons, manual work also places a burden on these areas of the body, as it always has.

When working with neck and shoulder issues, I mentally divide my clients into two main categories: physical injuries and “freedom issues”.

By categorizing them this way, I am able to work out a more concrete prognosis for each client based on their individual history and journey, and to find the appropriate working angle from the onset of treatment.

This approach also gives me an idea of how long it may take for a change to happen, what roads I may have to take, and what obstacles I may find along the way.

The first category comprises clients who have suffered a specific physical injury (i.e. following an accident or sustained physical pressure over a period of time), and who have been experiencing pain ever since. The injuries, which can result in revolving¹ pain in neck and shoulders, include concussion, whiplash, slipped disks and even more serious local damage to the spine and shoulders.

After a first treatment, I decide to move a client into the ‘physical Injury’ segment if I find that there is either specific structural damage and/or the area in the neck or shoulders shows particularly severe stagnation and blockage.

However, the majority of the clients with neck and shoulder issues belong in the category I label ‘freedom issues’. In reality, all clients automatically belong in this category unless there is a physical injury.

¹ a cycle of pain which keeps coming back in the same area of the body, following unresolved and increasingly stubborn energy blockages.

'Freedom Issues' in the neck and shoulder area

Clients don't need to meet any particular criteria to enter this category of neck and shoulder issues, except to experience pain or discomfort in their neck or shoulders. Typical symptoms include headaches, migraines and general neck and shoulder tension or pain.

The practitioner is not focusing on injury when treating this category of neck and pain issues, and the problem is mostly that of congestion in the meridians. It is ultimately more straightforward to treat than injury, because the basic shiatsu principles of meridian work and energy flow apply, and are most often sufficient to help clear the problem.

Here, the main issue is that there is something limiting the client's sense of freedom on one or several levels in their lives: physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. This is making them feel tense, and they start tightening up their bodies, especially around the neck and shoulders.

Visually, you can imagine a person in a straightjacket. Look at the physical expression of this picture: there is a sense of compression in the upper body, where the shoulders turn in and/or up because the lung-metal energy is closed down. There is also a compression all around the upper body. Five element-wise, one can say that the wood energy is not being burnt in the fire – the wood becomes like a 'creeper' around the torso, contracting it, gradually solidifying, and eventually the lung energy can't move it any more (referring to the controlling cycle in the five element system, metal can't 'cut' the wood). In the end, the natural flexibility found in a balanced metal element is lost.

With these clients, we don't get bogged down trying to move deeply stuck stagnations – as is the case with the category of 'physical injury' (including cases of deep and particularly stubborn stagnation). Here, it is sufficient to help the client by redirecting their energy and breaking up the pattern – helping them in time change the energy pattern that is tensing them up. As said earlier, their problems are in the flow of energy; it is either too strong or too weak. This means that, in treatment, the symptoms are seldom resolved by deep work in the area of the problem alone – in this case the neck and shoulders. The answer will be found somewhere else on the body, which connects to the problem area. Issues like this can be viewed like congested traffic which needs to be redirected to run smoothly into other avenues. This can be done by rerouting the energy away from the congested meridians in the neck and shoulder area and into other lesser used ones, gradually breaking the pattern.

The Five Element recipe for neck and shoulder problems is to 'throw the wood on the Fire' and at the same time regulate the Metal. The Wood has a tendency to trap and stagnate energy in the diaphragm and the sides of the body. When this happens, it can have a strong negative effect on the joints, sinews and ligaments, which tighten up. Wood controls how flexible we are on all levels, and how we deal with stress and frustration.

In treatment, the best way to deal with an overactive liver energy is not only to work on the liver meridian but to work on the liver and heart meridians together. It's possible in this way to transfer the extra wood –that has gathered and started to stagnate – to the heart and thereby connect it into the fire to burn. At the same time, it pays to fortify the lungs, “the masters of change “, freeing the energy in the upper heater, which in turn keeps energy moving through the body. General shiatsu has a good effect on the liver Chi as well, due to the liver's overall control of the flow of energy.

Putting the wood in the fire can also mean working around the (physical) liver organ area and working on the Pericardium and Heart meridians at the same time. The therapist could for example have a mother hand on the liver area on the front or back of the body, while working on the Heart meridian with the other. As far as the lungs are concerned, you can help them keep the energy pumping through the body by using techniques for ‘opening the chest’ and working on the lung energy through the meridian. One technique I use is to hold GB21 while working on the Lung meridian in the arms. GB21 is an excellent medium to send energy down into the Hara, releasing the ‘straightjacket’-like pressure in the shoulders which is keeping the metal energy closed. Working on the Lung meridian simultaneously will open the lungs and get them connected to the underlying cause of their imbalance (in this sentence you can also replace ‘lungs’ by ‘Lung meridian’ or ‘lung energy’).

When working along these lines, the practitioner will also need to identify relevant meridians or sections of meridians, points or areas on the body that help the client link deeper into the unconscious aspect of the local congestion. By doing this, we can help our clients create space in their bodies – and by extension in their lives – so they get enough ‘breathing room’ (figuratively and literally) for finding out what they truly want. The freedom to do what they want is at the core of releasing the congestion in the neck/shoulder area.

Indeed, it's not enough merely to move the stagnation away from the congested area, which only means relieving the symptoms temporarily. If we just clear the client's problem away for them without linking them to the source of the issue, they will likely recreate the symptom or pattern and get re-congested.

It is therefore very important, when we move the blocked area, at the same time to help the client link more profoundly with their core. In this respect, the deeper – often unconscious – source, or heart connection, is a vital part of my work. By working on re-establishing this heart connection, one can help the client get an insight into why they are hampering their own freedom, and how to release the blockage. The Heart or source connection can be contacted on any meridian. It is the frequency on which the contact happens that matters here, not what meridian you are on. In a session, the connection between the giver and the receiver naturally gets deeper. At some point,

you will hit the heart frequency, and you will need to pick the exact moment to interact with it. Typically, your client will travel in their consciousness at this stage, and there will be a sense of merging. The boundary between giving and receiving ceases to exist – the practitioner stops ‘giving’ shiatsu, and travels with the client. I call this moving from the dual wave into the single wave. In the dual wave, there is a clear separation between the roles of receiver and giver. When you jump into the unified frequency, or the single wave, there is no need for this division of roles. This is when a treatment becomes exciting and fun. If nothing else, when you feel the treatment is doing itself, you have hit the source/heart frequency. It’s the opening of a new phase in the treatment – the *shen* phase. This is what I see as the most profound work with the client.

The more the client experiences the contact with their own ‘being’, the more they will accept that that is who they truly are, and the more they will seek a way to make this state more permanent – this is a more or less conscious process.

Based on this experience, and if applicable, the role of the practitioner can also be to help identifying the client’s possibilities for creating movement and freeing the pent-up energy themselves in their daily lives. Often, he or she got stuck in everyday life patterns that at the time seemed necessary to palliate overwork, emotional issues and other common pressures. The question is how to consciously work at changing these response patterns once they are no longer needed. The conscious process is not always necessary, but if you feel comfortable and equipped to do so, you can help the client use it as another avenue to work on in-between treatments.

This is where the way in which Shiatsu looks at a person – holistically – is of great value in perpetuating the healing effect of treatment.

Treating clients for physical injury in the neck and shoulder area

The main difference between ‘physical injury’ and ‘freedom issues’, is that clients in the first category typically are in chronic revolving pain in the neck and shoulders by the time they visit your clinic. At this point it has become clear that the injury in the area was not cleared up properly either by time passing or by treatments received to alleviate the symptoms. The client may have tried other avenues to promote healing, or he may not. In any case, there is still ‘wreckage on the road’ – the energy traffic in the area of the injury (or deep congestion) has grinded almost to a halt. There are deep, particularly blocked pockets of energy trapped in the body, which through time have become increasingly difficult to communicate with through the meridians.

In this case the problem has become so complex, that although the client initially may have the same underlying issues as in the ‘freedom’ category, they are in a stage of such deep structural and energetic blockage that meridian work alone will not resolve the issue.

When the ‘wreckage’ is still on the road after initial treatment (i.e. physiotherapy or chiropractic), this means that the physical body was moved back into place, but the energy in and around the

injured area was not activated. At first, the physical manipulation may have helped the acute tightness, relieving much of the initial strong pain.

Unfortunately, in many cases the physical manipulation is far from enough, in time the pain returns, a residue of under-stimulated energy remains trapped deep in the injured area, an area that has become increasingly empty. The residue now starts to echo out to the surrounding area in the form of pain. This pain is of a more underlying and chronic nature, and is now not only re-activated by moving the injured part, but has also started to integrate with the client's life story – impacting their overall energy and their personal history. Initially, the shock is integrated in the story straight away, but the injured area is still dissociated – it can't just be a part of the story, because it carries a frequency of pain that the body wants nothing to do with.

But at some point, the body will need to integrate the injured part in order to function, be it only at the most basic of levels. The show must go on, so the client's life story accepts the 'broken' part in an attempt to harmonize, heal and move on. When the body starts accepting the injured area, the injured area has started to resonate back with the client's life story, gradually merging and becoming one with it.

More concretely, this translates into the body compensating to allow the injured area to reunite and resonate as one with the rest of the body, although it actually is not yet fully whole.² Through time, this will weaken the client's overall energy. The process through which the client's body compensates, and allows the chronically injured area to merge with the rest, can be measured by the way the client experiences and adapts to pain over a period of time, and by the fact that the pain has gone from being isolated and clearly located in a spot of the neck and shoulder area to a more diffuse and harder to place kind of discomfort – from being acute it now has become chronic.

Supporting energy in the injured area

As stated earlier, it is not enough only to move the physical body back into place or dampen its outcry. More often than not, this leaves deeply stagnated energy in the area, giving rise to chronic revolving pain later.

This is why energy work (almost any kind, e.g. shiatsu, cranio-sacral, acupuncture) in the acute stage is crucial for the healing process of any injury. The energy work may at first seem to have little or no effect in comparison to the physical manipulation, but it is the key to proper healing.

² When this happens, it is easy to get confused and misled when treating – even though the chronic pain is integrated with every part of the person again, it has to be treated separately. Otherwise, it is my experience that you can give a seemingly good treatment with all the desired results, but these will only be short-term until the chronic pain/the original injury is treated as an entity in its own right.

Working on the energy in the injured area as soon as possible, solely or in conjunction with the physical body being moved back into place, is the bridge between the physical aspect and the client's consciousness (*shen*) - it will bring consciousness to the injured area and help resolve the issue.

This way, we release energy that would otherwise stay trapped deep in the body and give rise to chronic pain that would become quite difficult to treat at a later stage.

Stopping 'energy leaks'

When the energy is not supported in the injured area at the time of the accident, it can weaken the client's overall energy over time.

This is frequently the case for neck and shoulder injuries.

The client will experience a tiredness which is quite different from the one felt after a long day's work or a sleepless night. After the accident, it doesn't seem to matter what the person does, even if they rest continuously, they still seem to lose energy. I call this 'leaking Chi', a process which eventually weakens people's overall constitution. This process will typically be noticeable in the water element. If I first meet such clients long after their accident, their reserves are badly depleted. When this is the case, there is no point in trying to refill and build up energy in the injured area – any energy that is 'put in' will just leak out again. This situation has to be dealt with before any real change in the chronic symptoms can take place. The client will need energetic support work on their spine and lower Hara, along the Governing and Conception Vessels, which nourish our entire energetic system.

An effective way to do this is to gently hold GV14, which is the great junction between the neck and the spine, with one hand. With the other hand, move down the spine vertebrae by vertebrae, intuitively feeling areas that are disconnected. You are tuning in to the resonance in your mother hand. If you are a visual person, disconnection can communicate itself to you through an image: possibly a darker area, a picture of vertebrae melting together (a blurry picture). Move your attention all the way down to GV4. Believe in yourself. What you see is your interpretation of what is there, the way your intuition draws a picture of a particular imbalance. You don't need to analyze this. Just notice it. Your intuition is working on an energetic level here. What you *think* of the impression you get is not the important thing. It's how you *interact* with it that matters. At this stage, we are entering something other than theory. We are in the realm of empirical knowledge – meaning that which arises from experience, from doing, from trying again and again. This makes it difficult to present like a structured and well-defined recipe. The best I can do here is to give you an example of a possible process.

Say that you get a picture of a dark area at T7. Don't believe this is telling you something negatively charged about the vertebra. Focus your attention on the quality of connection between your hands. You will typically sense that there is a line between them. It could be light, or an

energetic charge, heat – anything of this kind. From that point, your attention may be drawn to other areas that seem to want to interact, or seem to attract your interest. Following it will lead you into treating the right ‘path’ for closing the leaks.

It is also possible to do this holding around GV4 and scanning the spine with the other hand off the body. However this gets us into another ‘ballgame’, beyond the scope of this article.³

Chronic Pain: telltale signs and healing approach

A typical aspect of acute pain becoming chronic and spreading to the rest of the body, is that the side of the body opposite the injured one starts to compensate by tightening up. The more chronic and weak the injured side becomes, the more the healthy side compensates. The client will very rarely feel any pain here, and will be surprised by how tense it feels when touched. In this case, we need to examine and treat both shoulders and both sides of the neck, as well as both sides of the entire body, with equal care.

Another sign of chronic injury and pain is a particular response from the practitioner: the intuitive thoughts and images we as therapists can receive around the injury are static. They are like freeze frames compared to the ever changing intuitive thoughts and images that occur when working where no chronic pain is present.

When working with chronic pain, we can experience some of the following states or sensations:

- Stuck and heavy in our body
- It almost feels as if our hands are ‘glued’ to the client
- The reactive areas we find lie deeper than normal and are often on, or closer to the bone
- The client’s response to our working there is much slower in the area of chronic pain than in other areas of the body
- The area feels isolated and is difficult to bring change to
- The epicenter (the main reactive point/area) does not move around from treatment to treatment and may only change in depth (the level at which you are able to work with it may move up closer to the surface)
- Our intuitive thoughts and images freeze.

How to use points in diagnosis and treatment on the neck and shoulders

Examples:

In treatment, I use the acupuncture point GB21 in a number of ways. Most importantly, I use it to check how my treatments are progressing. GB21 should normally feel tense, strong and painful

³ The central aspect of my explanation is that I started to understand that the seemingly random intuitive information we as therapists can receive was not random at all. It seemed more and more likely that the flow of the client’s energy in a session equaled the flow in my intuition and vice versa.

and have a robust quality on, in and around it. If it's soft and weak, the damage in the area is more serious and is affecting the deeper flow between the neck and shoulders. GB21 can be viewed as a bridge, which the energy moving to or from the head has to pass through. I find that by working as deeply as possible on GB21 on the weaker side of the body, I can affect the deeper flow in the whole area. It is also good to work this way when treating nerve pain that radiates out into the arm.

I use the acupuncture point ST8 to check the flow in the head and neck, albeit in a very different way. ST8 connects well with the face and the jaw, so when the client is lying in supine, it tends to give me an overview of the head and neck. It gives me a good holding position as well. I use it to scan the head and neck, sometimes also the whole spine, and to visualize the movement in the whole area. I sit behind the client's head holding ST8 and I visualize that whilst holding ST8 I can (in my mind's eye) turn/adjust the vertebrae in their neck one by one. It's a bit like turning a car steering wheel with the power of your mind: I don't actually turn the head but imagine that I am. In this way I check each vertebra through a form of resonance, to find out how flexible or blocked they are. Then I work intuitively, holding on or close to the vertebrae with one hand and energetically connecting areas on the head and neck with the other. This reconnects and unifies the neck and spine energetically. The method focuses on oneness between the hands. It is devoid of meridians. I usually work like this towards the end of a session, at a stage when the connection between me and the receiver is well installed.

On the one hand, a meridian-free approach for energy work on injuries to the back, neck and spine may place great demands on the therapist, because it will require intuition, courage and creativity. Each practitioner has their own personality and talents, and each will have to walk their own path. Developing your own style is an essential part of being able to work intuitively and freely. On the other hand, the therapist can, and actually *needs* to *relax* totally into the treatment, as it is only from a place of 'here and now' that they can comprehend what is needed in a session to work with deep-seated blockage.

Even though you will need to resort to your theoretical knowledge, you will first and foremost have to hear and listen to your instinct and experience – as a human being and a therapist.

What you choose to work with, and how, will vary greatly from client to client, day to day, and moment to moment. To me, this is the most interesting type of shiatsu work, one that we as practitioners can struggle with, but which because of its inherent challenge provides us with great opportunity for growth. In the end, all the client really wants is for you to connect with them at the source and, by doing that, set them free.