

## The Healing Art of Shiatsu

By Grace Visconti

Tokujiro Namikoshi, the originator of Namikoshi Shiatsu, was born in 1905 in Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, Japan. Namikoshi developed the concept of shiatsu at a very early age. After his family moved from the warm climate of the Seto Inland Sea to the colder climate of the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido, Tokujiro's mother developed rheumatoid arthritis. Since no doctor or medicine was available in the village where they lived, Tokujiro and his siblings took turns stroking and massaging their mother. At seven years old, Tokujiro started his hands-on therapy and was praised by his mother as she confided "his hands felt the best." This gave him the confidence to work harder at helping his mother, and so he became even more sensitive to her condition.

Though Tokujiro had no knowledge of anatomy and physiology, he 'listened' to his mother's body with his hands, and as a result of this receptivity, he sensed differences in skin condition, heat and stiffness. He experimented at changing the application of pressure according to these variations. When he used pressing, he found that it was more effective than massaging. So he continued this procedure of pressing 80% of the time and rubbing 20%, while focussing on the places that were stiffest and coldest. By pressing on both sides of the spine in the mid-back region where it was the stiffest, he was unknowingly stimulating the suprarenal body releasing cortisone, which is the natural cure for rheumatism. Eventually, his mother was totally cured, which taught Tokujiro the power of healing. This was the birth of the systematic approach and application of traditional shiatsu.

The 'shi' of shiatsu means 'finger', and the 'atsu' means 'pressure' in Japanese. The purpose of shiatsu is to relax the nervous system, and improve one's health by stimulating the body's natural powers of recuperation. It is particularly effective in removing the fatigue and anxiety.

Shiatsu is a gentle, soothing pressure applied to specific points on the body using the thumbs, fingers and palms. There are 700 pressure points in the body. If you have a stressed area on your body, you may experience some 'feel good' pain during the treatment. However, the focus of shiatsu is to encourage the body to heal. It is not the amount of force that assists the therapeutic value. The art of shiatsu is the application of the appropriate amount of pressure on the correct point.

Namikoshi only teaches use of the thumbs, fingers and palms because shiatsu utilizes pressure from the hands only. Hands, especially the fingertips, ball of the thumb, and the thenars of the palm contain sensory receptors that are highly developed so the practitioner can detect the patient's condition better.

Shiatsu is administered to a client lying on a soft mat on the floor, special therapy table or chair. Loose fitting clothing is worn during the treatment. The length of the treatment varies in time, depending on the nature of the problem but usually takes one hour. Pressure is applied to the whole body except when there is a specific pathological condition, in which case the treatment is localized.

People who suffer from pathological conditions such as whiplash, migraine headaches, lumbago, and repetitive stress/strain injuries (i.e. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, tendonitis, etc.) find an increase in mobility and return of strength to the affected areas. Also, shiatsu alleviates menopause, premenstrual stress, depression, diabetes, arthritis, insomnia, hypertension, sciatica, asthma, constipation and numerous other conditions.

Shiatsu is not applied when these conditions are present: contagious illnesses, pleurisy, peritonitis, appendicitis, pyelitis, pancreatitis, peptic ulcers, duodenal ulcers, cirrhosis of the liver, leukemia, twisting of the bowels, intestinal obstruction, cancer, high fever after surgery, extreme debility, and infectious skin ailments.

Reference: Toru Namikoshi, The Complete Book of Shiatsu Therapy, (1981; fourteenth printing, 1992, Tokyo and New York: Japan Publications Inc.)

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