



The Structure of Awareness

By Adam Hellinger FwSS

Throughout my interest in bodywork, Shiatsu and Chi Kung, a recurring theme and question has always returned: 'How do we develop our sense of awareness and touch and how do we translate these aspects of ourselves into our practice of interacting with and supporting others?'

Soon after I had graduated from my Shiatsu training, this specific question came up in a workshop, 'How do we create a reflective space to touch someone while remaining open and interactive both to their energy field and to our own?'

That question has stayed with me for the past 25 years! My interest in Shiatsu has always run alongside an interest in Chi Kung - and in particular a certain style of Yi Chuan (intention training/development), the main cornerstone of which is Zhan Zhuang (standing pole/standing like a tree). These aspects of the form have, for me, always been inextricably interwoven, both in their development and in their support of each other.

Form, structure and awareness

Over time I've come to realise that the form and structure we physically create, and how we create it, directly relates to our sensory awareness. This does not mean that we 'have to hold a certain posture' but that our posture creates a relationship within us, which in turn can support the development of our senses and therefore of our self awareness.

The principles of the practice create a universal framework around which we can build and develop our senses. Our senses literally 'hang' suspended, grow, entwine, create and are part of this frame. Our bones, muscles, tendons, connective tissue, organs, nervous and endocrine systems are all inter-related around their own frame. And as a result, so are our senses, both internal and external, along with our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

We can only know what, where and in fact who we are through the feedback of our senses to 'ourselves.' Inside our brain is total darkness and yet we have a kinaesthetic sense of our location in a 3D environment (even if we have sensory impairment).

We can begin this journey with the bony structure of our skeleton. When we ask our body to do anything, the request is mainly carried out by the body referring to learnt patterns of response and behaviour. We live our lives following habits and patterns of muscle and neurological response. Some of these may not be the most efficient response or even be healthy for our system but they are our 'go to' answers and we tend to select them. This can also be seen to manifest in patterns of Chi/Ki. When we ask our systems to do something, these habitual patterns are the reference points for carrying out that request.

In Zhan Zhuang Chi Kung we begin to develop our structure using the bones and their relationship to each other. What controls how our bones relate to each other? The muscular and tendon system is controlled and monitored via the nervous system, both conscious and subconscious.

We can ask our body's skeletal system to interact and we can monitor its responses via our nervous system and our conscious mind. Remembering too, that this is against the backdrop of our familiar muscular patterns. As I assume a posture, I do so with my habits, both mental and physical. How I interact with that posture and instruct it can also be the actions of my conscious mind. I can begin to listen to my neural feedback, if I focus on it.



Adam began studying bodywork in the mid 1980s and graduated from the BSS-Do in 1996. He has gone on to become a senior teacher for the BSS-Do as well as teaching throughout Europe. He also studies classical Chinese medicine, Tuina, Chi Kung, Seiki and Clean Language - always integrating these into his practice via the universal aspects of Yi Chuan Chi Kung. Adam will be leading a workshop at the next Shiatsu College Residential in April '22. If you are interested in attending this Residential please visit: www.shiatsucollege.co.uk/the-residential or contact Hannah Mackay: hannahmackay@hotmail.com





For example, I ask myself to stand with my feet approximately shoulder width apart, with the medial aspects of my feet in parallel to each other, with my knees 'unlocked'. How does my body respond? It tries to carry out the request, to the best of its ability. But is it physically able to do it? What is the muscle tension and alignment in the required joints? Perhaps it can do it, but after a short while it begins to feel uncomfortable, and if one persists it can even become painful. Or perhaps it can carry out the request easily...

One of the interesting aspects of Zhan Zhuang is that the practice asks you to interact with your system and ask it to follow your instructions. Perhaps that requires some muscles to lengthen and others to shorten - you can say to your body, 'relax that...'. Your nervous system is designed and programmed to follow that request. Even if it's not your usual pattern or habit you can ask it - but will it or can it obey?!

That's the practice; asking your body to follow your requests and developing its ability to adhere to them. But why would it do that? What is there to gain? The answers lie in the core principles of this art.

Integration and connection

Structural integration and connection present 'the potential for the sum to become much greater than its parts.' Our systems are designed to work and interact as a unified whole. This approach very much links with that of classical Chinese medicine.

How we interact and respond creates our relationship with Chi

as well as its functions, where the interplay of Chi manifests and maintains us as a human being. The most efficient and effective way for this to happen is via Chi and physical interactions manifesting with the minimum of resistance relative to the required task. When you ask the body to do something it requires an 'effort' from your system. Using any more of its resources than are needed for this effort could be seen as a waste or a surplus. Over time this can become an aspect of our habits and may be seen as going on to create a pathology.

Returning to the efficiency of our structure. The most efficient, strongest and most simple structure in our 3 dimensional world is that of the triangle. As we allow the idea of structure to create a framework in our practice, so our system is able to begin to reference 'with it' and 'against it' - rather like giving our spatial sense a map to find its positional reference. This is controlled and monitored by our nervous system, particularly through feedback from the sensory motor system. As we enter into our practice we can begin to ask and reference these map co-ordinates as a sense of self. The process of asking ourselves to relax and soften in relation to these references creates a supportive

framework for our connective tissue and muscular system to come into alignment. The difference is that we are using our senses, and therefore our sense of self, to construct and interact with this framework.

A small personal exploration

- A) • Allow yourself to sit on a chair or on the floor
 - Reach out and pick up an object close to you
 - Make a note of any thoughts and or feelings which may come up during the process, and also once you are holding the object
- B) • Allow a sense of connection with your chair/floor and your sitting bones
 - Gently rock forwards and backwards around these points



Supporting triangles



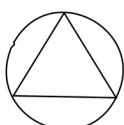
- Become aware of the area around GV1 (anterior to the tip of the coccyx)
- Allow yourself to move forwards and backwards within the triangle created by the interaction of these 3 points by adjusting your weight
- Allow the corners of this triangle to connect with GV20 (at the top of the head) while feeling in balance with the lower triangle - creating a pyramid
- Note any sensations, thoughts and feelings
- Using this framework as a reference - reach out and lift the same object as before
- Do you notice any differences?

From this exercise we can begin to see how the structure can support and develop our sense of self and our awareness.

Taking these principles forward into our Shiatsu practice

As we can see from the image above right I am illustrating a few of the triangles I can use to support and develop my awareness and connection.

Next we can look at how to develop a quality of touch which has the direction and intention of a straight line - supported by the very efficient triangle's properties - but with a softness and listening aspect. Classical Chinese Taoism



Triangles and circles to develop space and awareness when treating



Supporting triangles while working.
(Thanks to Maria for use of photo).

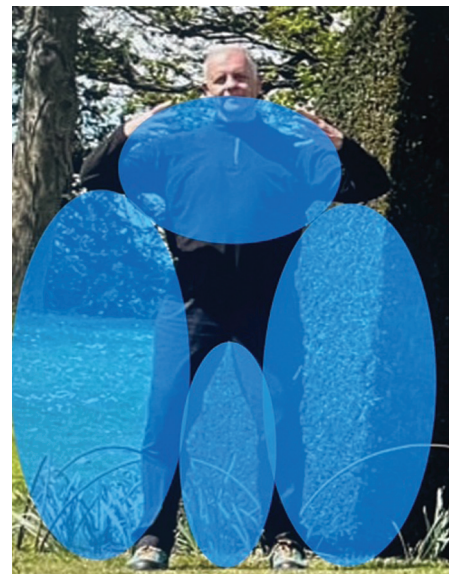
comes to our aid here, with its concept of Heaven meeting Earth. This intersection provides the potential energy and space for the manifestation of human beings. Earth is represented by a square - straight lines and 2 triangles. Space is represented by a circle.

The most efficient way to cover an area is a circle. When a triangle interacts with a circle we have the two most efficient ways of constructing a framework. We need therefore to incorporate a circle into the construction of the framework we are creating. Imagine lying against a large inflated ball. This feels soft and supportive but at the same time the inflation of the ball pushes back against us and this 'pushing back' gives us a sense of where we are.

The framework is now supportive, strong, efficient and flexible. The practice develops our ability to relax into our framework and to interact with our own senses via the boundaries created by their feedback. I feel this is an exceptional method and process for self development. When we ask our body to assume a posture we now have a method of relaxing and resting into it - while at the same time we can connect with its power and potential. We can both relax and be 'pushed' into alignment.

Fundamental principles of offering Shiatsu include:

- Relax
- Relaxed connection
- Weight not force
- Centre oneself and remain centred
- Listen rather than lead



Supporting circles

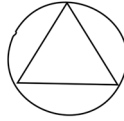




How does the framework we are developing support these principles? Remember the difference between picking up the object with and without the supporting pyramid? This feeling/awareness translates into our touch. The focus of the practice is to develop a space in which we are not only aware but also comfortable. This comfort leads to a sense of relaxation, both in the body and eventually in the mind. Our nervous system learns to recognise our postures as they become more integrated into our default patterns of behaviour.

We are using and interacting with our perception as we ask our muscles to relax both against and into this structure. Usually when we ask ourselves to relax it will be against the floor or a breath. Here we are relaxing against ourselves. It's a process which manifests from within our own senses and as a result can be much more organic in both its origins and manifestations. When we come into contact with another with this approach we have a sense of ourselves and from here a reference point for our interaction with others. If we revisit the diagram we see that the circle is not quite perfect. The small 'gap' represents the potential for change within our systems towards a more balanced, efficient and therefore whole system.

We can also call this the Kyo/Jitsu interaction - within which the entire system is seeking to rebalance itself. Kyo and Jitsu manifest from our intention/lifestyle. They can also be seen as patterns of behaviour, just as we can view our habitual muscle patterns. Using our



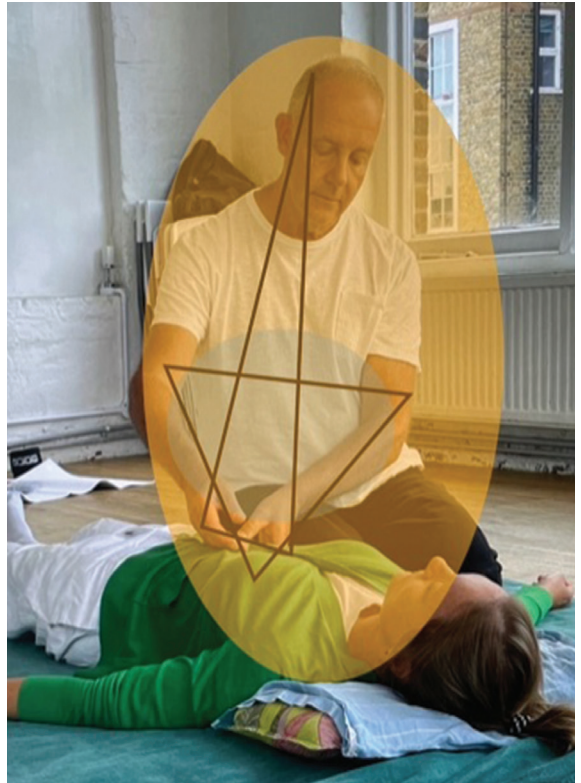
developed sense of self, we have a place for observation and interaction with these Chi/Ki patterns which can be applied to different diagnostic approaches. As modern science explains, it's not what we observe, it's from where we observe that defines our experience. As I interact with another person, my perspective is defined by my senses. As we are interacting, I can develop and refine my senses within the framework against which I reference those senses.

As we develop our Yi Chuan practice we can refine the requests we ask of our system.

When I ask my shoulders to relax, they can respond! This is a slightly unusual concept to explore in a written article as it's a sensory 'felt experience'. Eventually our system begins to relax into its space and in this quiet we can develop our potential for reflection and observation.

Here's a metaphor I discovered recently: it's like trying to cut a hedge with a ladder

which is too short. You can't see the overall picture, you're not comfortable, not stable and it's difficult. Find the correct size and stabilise the ladder (your framework) and you can get to the right relationship with the hedge to cut it efficiently! It's exactly the same when offering Shiatsu. The space one is in defines the interaction and the potential for the entire session - the stability of the triangle with the expansion and contraction of the circle, the stability of the circle with the expansion and contraction of the triangle. These are interacting from my perspective, in my awareness of space and framework, with the receiver. Heaven and Earth in a true dance of interaction and manifestation.



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