

The structure of awareness.

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 and supporting others?”

From first graduating, the question which came up in a workshop “How do we create a reflective space to touch someone, and remain open and interactive to both your and their energy field?”

That question has remained 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 that 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, in both their development and support of each other.

And over the course of time the realisation has come to mind 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 the posture creates an interrelationship to ourselves which in turn can support the development of our senses and therefore self awareness.

The principles of the practice create a universal framework which we can ‘build and develop’ our senses around.

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 its own frame. And as a result of this 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 our bony structure (the skeleton).

When we ask our body and its systems to do anything the request is mainly carried out with it referring to learnt patterns of response/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 be

healthy for our system but they are our “go to answers” and since we aren’t aware of many alternatives we tend to select them. (This also can be seen to manifest in patterns of Chi/Ki as well).

When we ask our systems to carry out a request, these patterns of behaviour are the reference point to carry the request out.

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 monitor its responses via our nervous system and our conscious mind’s instructions.

Remembering this is against the backdrop of our ‘muscular habits and 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 made with my conscious mind. I can ask my body to...

I can begin to listen to my neural feedback: (if I focus upon it).

So 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 instruction/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 you persist it can 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 asks it to follow your request/instructions: perhaps that requires 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 in your 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 in developing its ability to adhere to them. But why would it do that?

What do you have to gain?

The answers lie in the core principles of this art.

Structural integration and connection present “the potential for the sum to become much greater than the parts.” This approach also includes how we integrate the parts towards the whole.

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 to 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 the Chi and physical interactions to manifest 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, at the same instant any more of its resources which are used for this ‘effort’ could be seen as ‘a waste or surplus’: this surplus over time becomes an aspect of our habits which we mentioned earlier. It also can later be seen as going on to create a pathology and manifest as a sign and or a symptom.

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.



We can add as many triangles as we wish. 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 gain a positional reference. This is controlled and monitored by our nervous system, particularly our sensory feedback in reference to our 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 relationship/alignment. The difference is that we are using our senses and therefore sense of self to construct and interact with this framework.

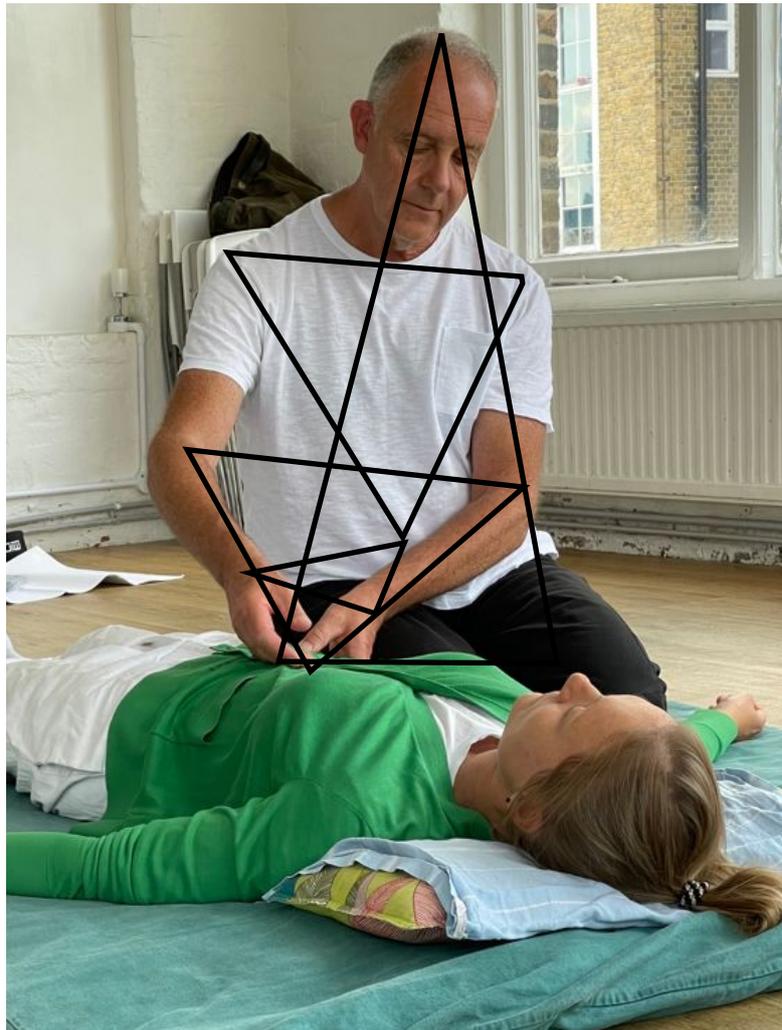
A small personal exploration.

As we begin to orientate/integrate our bodies in relation to ourselves so our senses and sense of self can begin to develop

- Allow yourself to sit in 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.
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- Allow a sense of connection with your chair/floor and your 'sitting bones' (Ischial tuberosity/ BL36).
 - Move yourself rocking forwards and backwards around these points.
 - 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 DU20 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.
 - What if any differences do you notice?

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

Taking these principles forward into our Shiatsu practice.



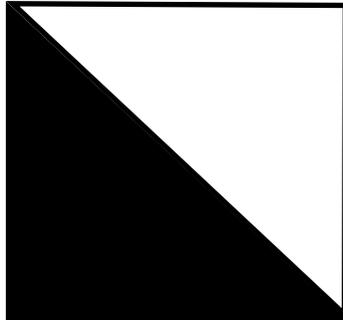
As we can see from the image I am illustrating a few of the triangles I can use to support and develop my awareness and connection (Thank you Maria for letting me use this photo).

The next principle which we can briefly begin to explore is in our sense of touch.

How do we develop a touch which has the direction and intention of a straight direct line, supported by the very efficient triangle's properties with a softness and listening aspect ?

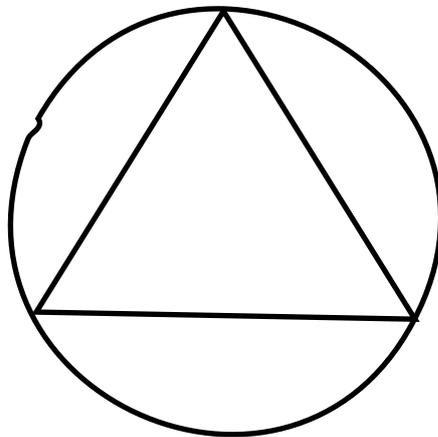
Classical Chinese Taoism comes to help, with the concept of Heaven meeting Earth. The intersection being the potential energy and space for humans to manifest.

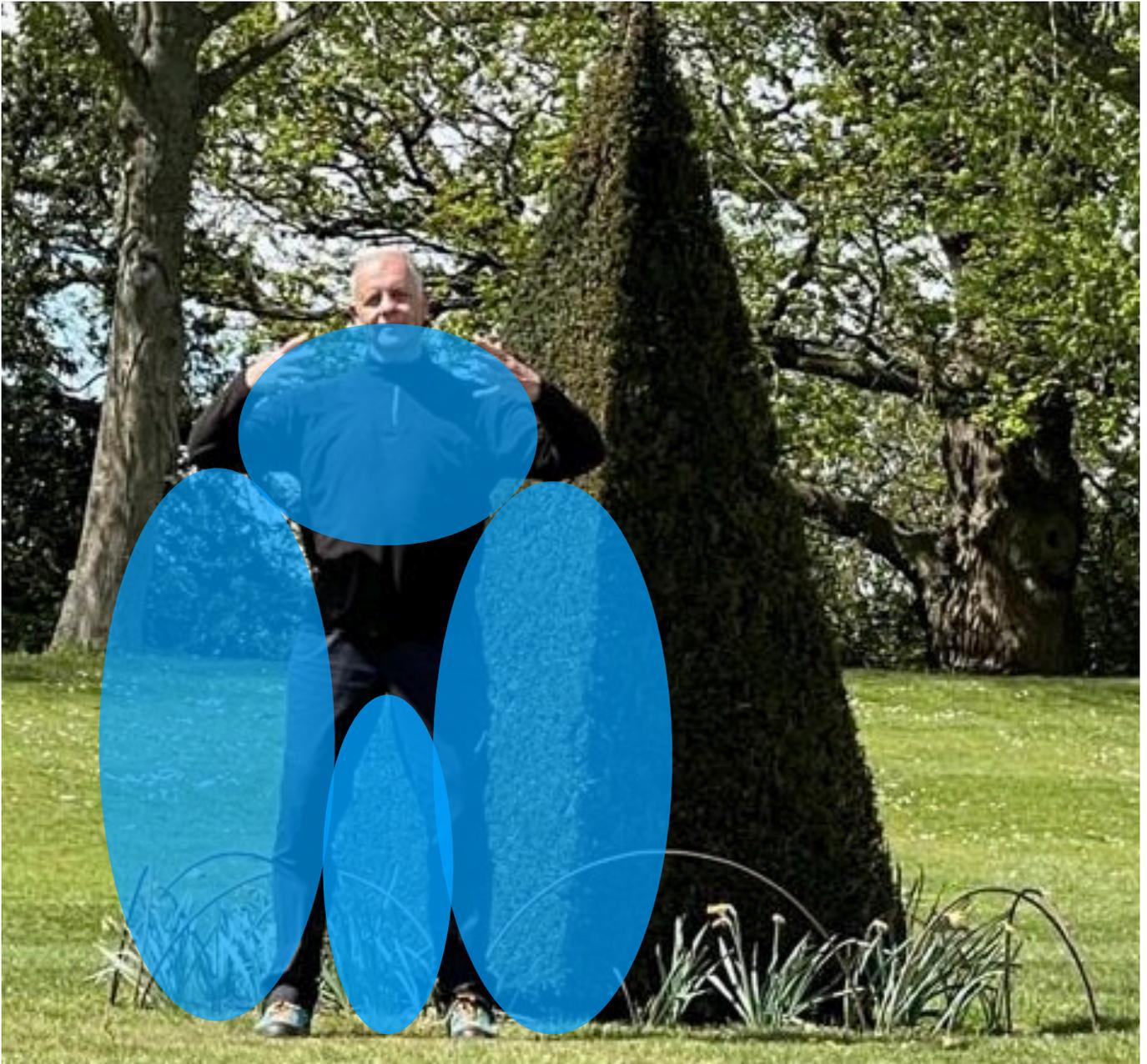
Earth is represented by a square (straight lines and 2 triangles).



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 to construct a framework.





We need therefore to incorporate a “circle” into the construction of the framework we are creating.

Rather like lying against a large inflated ball, which whilst it is soft and supportive, at the same time the inflation of the ball ‘pushes’ back against us. This ‘pushing back’ gives us a sense of where we are.

The framework is now supportive, strong, efficient and flexible. Imagine allowing your weight to push against a large inflated ball/balloon.

The practice develops our ability to relax into our framework which is simultaneously interacting with our nervous system. The practice therefore allows us to interact with our own senses via the boundaries created by its own feedback. This process I feel to be an exceptional method and process for self development.

When we ask our body to assume a posture/relationship we have a method to relax and rest against whilst at the same instant we have the selective 'power and potential' in that same tension into which we can both relax and be 'pushed' into alignment.

Applying these principles to Shiatsu

The fundamental principles of offering (rather than giving) Shiatsu include:

Relax

Relaxed connection

Weight not force

Centre oneself and remain centred

Listen rather than lead

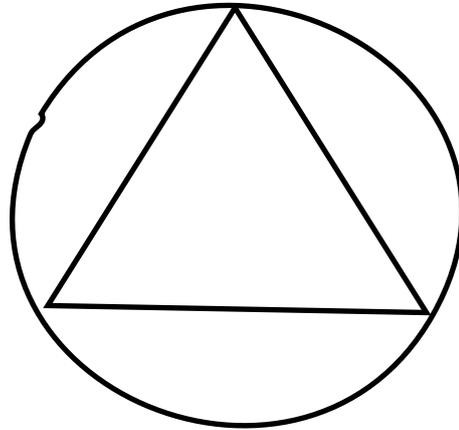
How does the framework we are developing support these requests ?

Was there a difference in the feeling when you picked up the object with and without the idea of the supporting triangle/pyramid?

This feeling/awareness translates into our touch. The focus of the practice is to develop a space which we not only are aware of but become 'comfortable' in. This comfort eventually leads to a sense of relaxation both in the body and eventually the mind. Our nervous system eventually recognises the postures as a place it can reside in and against, as they become more integrated into our 'default' patterns of behaviour.

We are using and interacting with our perception/senses as we instruct and ask our muscles to relax against and into this structure. Usually when we ask ourselves to relax its can 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 to interact with others. When we revisit the diagram we see that the circle is not 'perfect'. This small space 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 field/system is seeking to rebalance itself.

Kyo and Jitsu manifest from our intention/lifestyle. They can also be seen as patterns/habits of behaviour exactly as the muscle patterns can be viewed. Using our developed sense of self, we have a place for observation and interaction of these patterns of Chi/Ki which can be applied to different diagnostic approaches. As modern science explains to us. Its not what we observe its where we observe it from which defines our experience.

As I interact with another person, my perspective is defined by my senses and as we are interacting I can develop and refine my senses with the framework I reference my senses 'against'.

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 an 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.

As I discovered recently (a metaphor) "it's like trying to cut a hedge with a ladder which is too short, you cannot see the overall picture, you are not comfortable, not stable and it's difficult. I find the correct size and stable

ladder (framework) and I can get to the 'right' relationship to the hedge to interact with it efficiently."

It's exactly the same when offering Shiatsu. The space/framework one is in defines the interaction and the potential of 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, 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.

With thanks and gratitude to my family, teachers (in particular Ole Eskilsden) peers, and students.

“I let go in every way I could.

It didn't lessen me.

Letting go made/allowed the space to be full in a satisfying way.”