

Breathing as a Gateway to Emotional Regulation in Shiatsu

(Dr. Eduard Tripp)

Breathing occupies a special position between the body and the mind. It accompanies us continuously and largely unconsciously, yet reacts immediately to everything we experience. It quickens when we become agitated, falters when we feel anxious, becomes shallow when we hold back, and deep and free expands and flows freely when we feel safe, laugh or relax. In this way, breathing reflects not only our physical state but also our emotional experience.

However, this connection does not work in just one direction, for emotions do not merely alter our breathing; the way we breathe also influences our emotional experience. This is because certain breathing and movement patterns go hand in hand with specific forms of experience, whilst at the same time potentially restricting others. Breathing is therefore not only an expression of an inner state, but also a potential means of changing it – and thus an important starting point in supporting work with for work that supports psychological and emotional processes.

Of particular significance here is the fact that distressing experiences are not merely reflected in thoughts and memories. Rather, anxiety, insecurity, inadequately processed emotions or repeated stress can also become embedded in chronic physical patterns. Breathing plays a special role in this, because its restriction represents one of the earliest and most fundamental physical ways of regulating and warding off intense or overwhelming emotions. Even infants can react to prolonged stress or frustration by reducing the depth of their breathing and adopting a more uniform breathing rate. The control and restriction of breathing thus forms a fundamental mechanism for emotional defence from a very early age.

For example, the chest cavity constricts rib cage becomes constricted, the diaphragm loses mobility, muscles remain permanently tense, exhalation is held back, or breathing increasingly shifts to the upper chest. However, what was originally a protective – and therefore sensible – reaction to a specific situation – such as holding one's breath to avoid feeling fear or pain so intensely – can, over time, develop into a habitual pattern of breathing and tension, and thus increasingly becomes, in itself, a restriction on emotional experience. However, what was originally a protective and therefore sensible response to a specific situation – such as holding one's breath to feel fear or pain less intensely – can gradually develop into a habitual pattern of breathing and tension that increasingly restricts emotional experience.

Seen in this light, the breath 'tells' a part of a person's life story – though not in the sense that a specific biographical experience can be deduced from a particular breathing pattern. Rather, it can, in a sense, reveal an embodied reflection: the impact of a formative experience or the sum of many interrelated experiences show traces of experience held in the body: the impact of a significant event or the cumulative effects of many interacting experiences.

Ultimately, the breath thus also reveals how freely or restrictedly a person is currently able to respond to also reveals the degree of freedom a person currently has in responding to internal and external demands. For whilst a freely moving breath – depending on the demand and situation – can deepen or shallow, quicken or slow down, and expand into different areas of the body, a chronically restricted breath loses a significant part of this adaptability. When breathing is unrestricted, it can become deeper or shallower, faster or slower, and expand into different areas of the body, depending on the situation and its demands. Chronically restricted breathing, however, loses a significant part of this adaptability.

It is precisely this that makes the breath so significant for Shiatsu, as Shiatsu does not aim to uncover psychological issues bring specific psychological content to light or evoke specific emotions. Rather, its fundamental approach is supportive and regulating: to instil a sense of security, strengthen resources, release tension and create conditions under which the organism can more fully rediscover its natural self-regulation regain more of its natural capacity for self-regulation.

From an energetic perspective, this means, in particular, strengthening and nourishing emptiness and weakness nourishing and strengthening what is depleted or weak – Kyo. Jitsu – fullness, tension or stiffness rigidity – is primarily understood as a compensatory reaction to this emptiness and is therefore harmonised more indirectly through the strengthening of Kyo rather than treated directly harmonised primarily by strengthening Kyo, rather than through direct treatment. A freer breath is both a consequence and an expression of such regulation.

A similar dynamic is also evident in the breathing support technique described below: if the exhalation is deepened, thereby simultaneously facilitating the release of tension, the subsequent inhalation – provided there are no specific restrictions – can largely deepen of its own accord. Inhalation therefore does not need to be forced directly in order to increase the respiratory volume and, consequently, to strengthen the patient's energetic state support the energetic state of the person receiving treatment. Rather, conditions are created under which the breath as a whole can regulate itself more freely and vigorously breathing as a whole can regulate itself more freely and with greater vitality.

When the breath becomes freer

The significance of the breath, however, extends far beyond relaxation, for when chronic tension restricts the breath, it simultaneously limits the scope for emotional experience. When breathing becomes more fluid again, this therefore not only creates more physical space for deeper and more flexible breathing, but also potentially more psychological and emotional 'leeway' 'room' – and with it a greater capacity for emotional regulation and a more nuanced sense of self affect regulation and a more nuanced experience of oneself.

This becomes particularly clear during exhalation. Whilst inhalation is associated with activation and intake, exhalation represents, both physically and symbolically, a greater degree of letting go, yielding and entrusting oneself is more closely associated, both physically and symbolically, with letting go, yielding and allowing oneself to trust. A calm, prolonged exhalation promotes the activity of the parasympathetic nervous system and thus supports calmness, regeneration recovery and the reduction of autonomic arousal. A prolonged exhalation therefore provides an important pathway to parasympathetic (vagal) regulation and can, in this way, also have a psychologically stabilising effect.

In Shiatsu in particular, this aspect can take on special significance when the person being treated receiving treatment does not have to consciously control their breathing – that is, they do not have to breathe 'correctly' or follow specific breathing instructions. For whilst consciously influencing the breath can certainly be beneficial, it represents a different form of working with the breath. In Shiatsu, on the other hand, the breath can remain largely involuntary and unconscious, yet still change over the course of the treatment – becoming calmer, deeper, freer and more even, without this needing to be brought about deliberately. What is crucial, rather, is to create conditions under which the breathing can re-regulate itself from within the body breathing can find a new balance through the body's own regulatory processes.

In practical terms, this is achieved by the Shiatsu practitioner first observing how the person being treated breathes attuning to the breathing of the person receiving treatment and then adapting their touch and the rhythm of the treatment accordingly. This initially creates a sense of going with the flow, in which the practitioner follows the rhythm of the person receiving the treatment. Initially, the practitioner follows the breathing rhythm of the person receiving treatment.

Over time, and depending on the objective being pursued and the level of intervention the person being treated receiving treatment can comfortably integrate – but particularly once sufficient trust and a sense of security have been established – the practitioner can increasingly provide guidance of their own accord and gently support the breathing towards greater freedom, depth and balance gradually begin to introduce gentle impulses through touch, supporting greater freedom, depth and balance in breathing.

Conscious stimulation of the breath, as is used in particular Deliberately intensifying breathing, as practised particularly in body psychotherapy and structural bodywork approaches, is in

principle also conceivable in within Shiatsu – for example, to raise energy levels and thereby facilitate greater vitality, awareness and expressiveness. At the same time, this can bring restrictions and blockages in the breathing process more clearly to the fore, allowing them to be addressed in a more targeted manner.

However, this can sometimes fundamentally alter the nature of a Shiatsu treatment. The work becomes more intrusive, confrontational interventionist, more confrontational and less supportive. Furthermore, intense emotional reactions may be triggered; there is also a risk of hyperventilation and associated anxiety reactions. In contrast, the form of breathing support described above is much more in keeping with the fundamentally stabilising and resource-oriented nature of Shiatsu.

Working with the breath in Shiatsu practice

In practical terms, the work with the breath described above means, first and foremost, creating conditions under which the breath can become freer of its own accord – in particular through relaxation, the release of muscular and fascial tension, an 'opening' of the chest and ribcage area rib cage and costal margin region, and, last but not least, through an appropriately calm and steady treatment rhythm.

Specifically, this may involve, for example, a diagonal stretch between the shoulder and the pelvis, as well as supporting the breath in the area of the rib cage costal margins, the lateral ribs and the chest. The person being treated receiving treatment usually lies on their back. Depending on the need, the legs may be raised or supported by a roll under the knees the person's needs, the knees may be bent with the feet resting on the treatment surface, or a bolster may be placed under the knees, for example to prevent tension in the lower back. The jaw should be as relaxed as possible, and the mouth slightly open if necessary. It is crucial that breathing can flow freely into the areas being treated, without strain or additional pressure.

If breathing is to be further supported and deepened through direct intervention by the practitioner, the focus is primarily on deepening the exhalation. In this case, the practitioner first observes the rhythm and depth of the breathing and then applies pressure in such a way that it coincides with the exhalation, accompanying and supporting its natural movement and thereby gradually deepening it. In this way, the exhalation can become longer and deeper without the person being treated receiving treatment having to consciously or actively 'breathe'. Inhalation, by contrast, occurs largely automatically and – provided there are no restrictions – resumes of its own accord following a sufficiently deep exhalation.

This rhythmic application of pressure acts as an external rhythm and can be unconsciously absorbed by the body, thereby producing structure-strengthening effects. This rhythmic

application of pressure provides an external rhythm that the body can take up unconsciously and that may have a structuring effect. Breathing thereby becomes calmer and more even, tension eases, and a sense of surrender and letting go is fostered a sense of trust and an ability to let go are encouraged. This, in particular, constitutes an important psychological and emotional aspect of the treatment, for it is not merely a matter of mechanically moving more air, but also of facilitating the experience of not having to hold on to or control everything.

However, the level of pressure applied is crucial, as too little pressure may fail to deepen the breathing, whilst too much pressure can cause counter-tension or even anxious tension provoke muscular resistance or even tension associated with anxiety. The breath itself provides an immediate indication of how the intervention is being received: if it becomes deeper, calmer and more balanced, this suggests that the treatment is being well received. If, on the other hand, it becomes shallower, stutters or loses its fluidity falters or becomes less flexible, this is at the very least a signal to exercise caution. Breathing thus becomes not only the objective of an intervention, but also an important tool for process-oriented awareness during the treatment means of noticing how the process unfolds during treatment.

Working 'into the arms' Extending the work into the arms is also of particular importance, as the chest region continues, in a sense, into the arms – anatomically, fascially and in terms of meridian theory. The position of the arms – and thus the question of which meridian is being worked on primarily – is also significant. Depending on what the person being treated receiving treatment is able to respond well to and which objective is being pursued, the focus, within the framework of the 'classical meridians', can be placed on the Lung, Pericardium or Heart meridians. The possible positions thus range from a comparatively minor opening in the Lung meridian to a significantly greater opening in the Pericardium meridian and, finally, in the Heart meridian position. The arm positions therefore range from a relatively small opening in the Lung meridian position to progressively greater opening in the Pericardium and then the Heart meridian positions.

At the same time, the arms serve a direct function of also play a direct role in emotional expression. We can use them to draw someone close to us and embrace them, but equally to create distance, protect ourselves or push someone away. It is precisely against this background that the following applies here – as it does generally in treatment: the aim is not the greatest possible opening, but rather the one that the person being treated receiving treatment can actually accept and integrate well.

From breath to emotional expression

As the breath becomes freer and chronic muscular tension eases, feelings that were previously dampened by clenching holding on, muscle tension or breath control can also be perceived more

clearly. However, this need not happen in any spectacular way. Sometimes it manifests simply as a deep breath, a spontaneous sigh, a tremor, or in the sudden emergence of sadness, relief or some other feeling that was previously difficult to access.

Sighing, in particular, is significant in this context. A deep exhalation may spontaneously turn into a sigh, or deepening breathing work may be accompanied by a sigh work aimed at deepening the breath may be accompanied by sighing – as an audible expression of tension easing and inner pressure releasing, which, from the perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine, can be understood as an expression of the movement of Qi becoming freer once again.

Furthermore, sound and voice offer a further means of supporting this process and, with it, the connection between the physical and emotional levels. This not only allows the breath to move more freely, but also enables emotional expression to gain in range and intensity. This can allow breathing to become freer and emotional expression to broaden in range and increase in intensity. At the same time, access to emotions can be facilitated, so that pent-up feelings are more likely to come to the fore and can be released more easily. It should be borne in mind, however, that such vocalisation is not immediately accessible to everyone and should therefore not necessarily be forced does not come readily to everyone and should therefore not be pushed as a matter of course.

Above all, it is important in this context not to equate emotional 'liberation' with the most intense emotional release possible. Whilst a cathartic reaction can indeed be relieving bring relief, it becomes problematic, in particular, when the emotional release becomes an end in itself. It is far more significant and sustainable, however, that emerging feelings can be acknowledged, contextualised and integrated into one's own experience. What matters more and is of more lasting value, however, is being able to notice emerging feelings, understand them in context and integrate them into one's own experience.

In summary, it should be noted that the aim of a Shiatsu treatment should under no circumstances be to force feelings to the surface or to provoke a violent an intense emotional outburst. This is because the distressing experiences triggered in this way can be overwhelming and may impair psychological stability. This applies in particular to people who are emotionally vulnerable or have experienced are affected by trauma, for whom overly intense stimulation is more likely to lead to feeling overwhelmed and additional distress than to be of any help.

Even though an emotional release or an intense expression of feelings may well be 'justified' in certain situations, it is usually more meaningful – and, above all, safer and more sustainable of more lasting benefit – for the person receiving treatment to regain greater capacity and to experience their personal strength in being able to feel, perceive a wider range of possibilities and experience their own strength through being able to feel, notice and make sense of their emotions – without being overwhelmed by them.

A key psychological and emotional benefit of Shiatsu lies precisely in the fact that it does not target specific content or emotions, but rather creates the general physical conditions that enable a person to become more aware of and regulate themselves once again. An important part of Shiatsu's psychological and emotional potential lies precisely in its creating physical conditions that allow people to regain greater awareness of themselves and a greater capacity for self-regulation, rather than targeting specific psychological content or feelings. Here, the breath breathing acts, in a sense, as a link between the autonomic and musculo-motor levels autonomic processes and muscular and motor function on the one hand, and the psychological and cognitive levels psychological and cognitive processes on the other. It thus mediates between the autonomic nervous system and conscious perception, between tension and relaxation, and between physical sensation and emotional experience.

The fact that the breath is particularly well-suited to supporting self-regulation processes is primarily due to the fact that, whilst it occurs predominantly involuntarily, it can at the same time be consciously perceived and, to a certain extent, influenced at will. Breathing is particularly well suited to supporting self-regulation because it is largely involuntary, yet can also be consciously perceived and, to a certain extent, deliberately influenced.

In this process, the breath acts as a kind of link between the vegetative, muscular-motor level and the psychological-cognitive level, thereby mediating between the autonomic nervous system and conscious perception, between tension and relaxation, and between physical sensation and emotional experience.

Although Shiatsu can provide valuable support in gaining greater inner calm and emotional freedom, and at times in making previously repressed feelings accessible and helping to release them, it differs from targeted psychotherapeutic work. Although Shiatsu can offer valuable support in finding greater inner calm and more emotional room, and can sometimes help people access and release feelings that have previously been held back, it differs from targeted psychotherapeutic work. In psychotherapy, such processes can be consciously facilitated and directed towards a specific psychological goal. The primary task of a Shiatsu practitioner, on the other hand, is to recognise such processes, to give them space and to support them within a safe and stable treatment framework.

However, if strong intense, recurring or destabilising psychological processes emerge, it is the professional responsibility of the Shiatsu practitioner to recognise their own professional limits. In such situations, whilst Shiatsu can provide stabilising and complementary support, the targeted psychotherapeutic treatment of psychological disorders or profound mental disorders or deep-seated emotional conflicts requires appropriate psychotherapeutic training and expertise.

It is precisely this clear stance and conscious setting of boundaries recognition of professional limits that gives rise to a particular quality of working with the breath in Shiatsu: The the focus is



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neither on a specific emotional outcome nor on a predetermined path, but rather on creating a supportive framework within which greater mobility flexibility, awareness and self-regulation can develop once again from within the person themselves.

More on this Further reading

Eduard Tripp (2025): Shiatsu meets Körperpsychotherapie. Berührungspunkte zwischen Shiatsu und Psychotherapie. [Shiatsu meets body psychotherapy: Points of contact between Shiatsu and psychotherapy.]

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