

The Principle of Non-Intention and Effectiveness – A Contradiction?

(Dr. Eduard Tripp)

Absence of intention, “Non-intention”, as a concept in Shiatsu emanates from the Chinese principle of Wu Wei and means in this context to follow the flow of the Qi (Ki) without conscious



aim, to accompany the client out of an inner emptiness, from the innermost centre, the Hara. Non-intention is an essential element in many approaches of Shiatsu and following the theoretical approach contributes much to the quality and effectiveness of treatments. “Why”, we could ask starting from this intuitive approach to Shiatsu, “is it necessary to apply diagnostics” and, even more pointed, “doesn’t diagnostic actually prevent an effect of the Shiatsu-treatment?”.

Diagnostic generally makes sense only where it leads to treatment concepts and specific treatment. For example taking Chinese diagnosis as one of various diagnosis and treatment applications, if one were to find a weakness in the area of the kidneys and a relative fullness in the area of the heart, this implies a clear line of treatment: replenish the “kidney” and (depending on the overall context of a more specific diagnosis) calm the

“heart”. This treatment strategy is being implemented by means of herbs within phytotherapy or with a corresponding shiatsu treatment.

Doing this, however, we become ‘intentional’. We pursue an aim and restrict ourselves in favour of the selected concept. With any diagnostic approach – whether according to the Chinese medicine, the Five Elements/Transformations or according to Kyo and Jitsu – we always arrive at the same narrowing down, a restriction in the encounter. Treatment concepts, so it seems, explicitly contradict “non-intention”, the absence of any intentional aim, rather following the energy instinctively.

This contradiction, in which we find ourselves in every treatment, means according to my understanding, a real decision (do I follow my intuition in a specific situation, or do I follow my concept of treatment?) as well as an apparent contradiction that constitutes our whole life.

To illustrate the dialectics of “non-intention” and “acting with intent”, I would like to reflect on the philosophic approach of the “Zwiefältigen Welthabe des Menschen” (“twofold worldly possession of man”) by Martin Buber, with a jewish-christian background. In his main work “I and You” (first published in 1923) he states that the human relates to the world in two ways for which he coined the two basic terms “I -It” and “I - You”.

“I - It” describes, in the sense of Buber, the relationship between a subject (human-being) and the objects (everything surrounding the subject). A human-being experiences the world in this manner. It creates for it self a knowledge about things, objects and living beings. It learns something about them and deals with them. An experiencing person, however, does not form part of them, is separated from the objects of her experience. The experience of the world does not relate the person to it, especially since the world does not participate in the person’s experience.

The basic term “I – You” however pictures the world as encounter. A human-being to whom you speak on “I – You” basis, is not an object about which you learn something, but stands in an immediate relationship with you. Only when you get out of this encounter, you learn something about the other person. Experience (knowledge, insight) is a result of distance, the “you-distance”. The relationship to the “you”, however, is always an immediate one. In the true encounter between “I and you” there are neither fantasies, nor intentions. Every purpose and every intermediary would be a hindrance, and only where all intermediaries vanish, true encounter takes place.

The dialectics of the various possibilities of relationships of “I – It” and “I – You” are described by Buber as ‘being’ and ‘experience’. Being is the present, the moment of the encounter is in the present. Experience, however, is the past and all contents of experience are in the past. Every being, in which the “you” is present, forcedly becomes experience, becomes past. As present as the “you” may be in the direct encounter, after the end of the present process, the encounter

becomes experience that we can recall, evaluate, classify and reflect upon. Every “you” always becomes an object, every object may become a “you”, an “opposite” again.



“Non-intention” may thus be understood, according to Buber, as the immediate encounter, the “non-intentional present” of the being. And here, already the dialectic contradiction becomes evident when we strive for being non-intentional in a Shiatsu-session: “striving” always implies intention. Every encounter which pursues an aim, a purpose and, therefore, makes use of certain means, stands in contradiction to “non-intentional present”. Every purpose and every means makes an ‘it’ – an object - out of the opposite, an object which we can thus treat with a specific aim.

The world of objects, of knowledge and of experience is of basic importance for our lives. We experience the world in this way, and the in-this-way-experienced world is fairly reliable, it has density and durability; it has coherence in space and time; can be overseen and we can act in it, as well as have an effect on it by planning and acting.

We encounter “being” and “becoming” as far as possible for us at this moment, as our “opposite” totally and exclusively. The world meets us and opens up to us in this way as “being”. Nothing else is present than this “one”, but this “one” is all-encompassing – “welthaft” (“worldlike”), in the language of Buber. We cannot live forever in this present, however, due to our inborn nature. We have to overcome it again in favour of an “I – it” relationship. The world of objects constitutes an essential aspect of human nature, which is neither bad nor of object value. The “I – it” relationship only becomes problematic, when it becomes dominant: “Without



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‘it’ the human cannot live, but he who lives solely ‘it’ is not the human”, so says Buber. Entering into relation means taking part in an immediate reality (a being) without being able to possess this reality (being). Where there is no relationship (participation) however, there is no “reality of immediate encounter”.

For Buber, both described poles of the human being are equally valid and equally important. Every human-being lives according to inborn nature in the “twofold I”. The purpose of the basic term “I –it” is the experience of the world and the use of things, the acting and planning. The purpose of relationship, however, is the encounter, the “touching” of the “you”.

The “I” that inevitably extricates itself from an encounter, does not lose this immediate reality completely, however. The participation remains vivid in the “I” and this is the area of subjectivity in which the “I” becomes aware of both its connection as well as its extrication at the same time.

Life occurs thus by changing between the present (the encounter within the basic term “I-you”) and the latent past (experience and use within the basic term “I –it”). Every “you” has to become “it”, and the “it” becomes “you” again in the encounter. The past corresponds to the “holding the breath” during the present, in which the “you” still stays present (can stay present). Here, non-intention and purposeful acting flow together into one point. And exactly this seems to me to be the (frequent) misunderstanding in the discussion of non-intention and effectiveness. Non-intention in itself is not contradictory to effectiveness in the sense of an “I –it”-relationship (and the other way round); they rather form a dialectic unity, related to one another, constitute cause of and complement to each other like Yin and Yang. The aim of treatment – simply seen as the diagnostic and the resulting strategy of treatment – constitutes the framework, the form, and the encounter occurring within this frame form the content. At no point in time are form and content completely separated from each other, as the form determines the content and the content determines the form.

And not only the participation in an encounter stays alive in us when we extricate therefrom, but also the “inner observer” (some techniques of meditation call it “pure awareness”) stays vivid when we consciously meet the “you”. Without the function of the “inner observer” there is the danger that what is being lived and actualised in the encounter has its sources above all in the unconscious wishes and motives of the practitioner, which are lived in the form of transference (i.e. unconscious actualisation of conflicts and wishes from the past). The “inner observer” that we obtain and strengthen through training and self-experience, is able to teach us corrective insights into our work (and thereby also the treatment course) and keeps us and our clients from un-reflected acting out of unconscious, personally motivated impulses.

If the encounter with the you, the participation, goes lost, the treatment becomes formal, technical and without love (even if still “perfect” in the sense of an “objective” fulfilment of a task). The other way round, a session without set purpose may yet enable deep experiences,



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but entails the danger to sink without aim and direction into chaos, driven to a large extent by un-reflected impulses of the practitioner. When intention and non-intention of the practitioner meet, however, in one point (at the same time “attentive and acting presence”), the effect unfolds at the highest level.

In closing, another quote from Buber, when over forty years after his work “I and You” he wrote about the situation of the psychotherapist: “If the psychotherapist is content to “analyse” the patient, i.e. to bring to the surface unconscious factors from the patient’s microcosm, many a “repair” may succeed. He can, however, so Buber, at best help a diffuse poorly structured soul gather and reorient itself somehow. What would be the therapist’s actual task, however, the regeneration of a stunted “person-centre”, will not succeed in this way. This can only be achieved by grasping the latent whole of the suffering soul – and this can only be reached by way of an attitude of partnership (within a real relationship) and not through the mere observation and examination of an object.

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