

Introduction of Japanese Acupuncture

Considering the Therapist's Hand

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1. Introduction

What characterizes Japanese style acupuncture and moxibustion? Many times I have been asked this, but it has been difficult for me to give a reply, because there are different styles of Japanese clinical acupuncture and theory.

If I try to characterize Japanese style acupuncture and moxibustion, it would have to be the importance of palpation throughout the session. During the process of examination the therapist touches the patient's skin, perceives its condition and decides the treatment location and protocol. Then, during the treatment, the therapist continues to touch the patient's skin to grasp any changes, and according to the level of change, he can adjust or finish the treatment. I feel this process of nearly constant palpation is a very important characteristic point of Japanese style acupuncture and moxibustion.

In Japan, palpation has undergone unique changes during its long history. Unfortunately, these techniques are disappearing from Western Medicine as well as Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Japanese practitioners of acupuncture and moxibustion diagnose by palpating the skin, connective tissues, muscles and organs. Special techniques and skills are needed to distinguish stiffness or hardness in a muscle, to delicately assess apparent changes in the body surface and its connective tissues. The therapist has to understand, with the fingertips, the distinction between, so-called excess and deficiency in the skin and connective tissues. In Japan, the importance of deficiency on the body surface and connective tissues has stimulated the development of various techniques to grasp and to change the surface of the body. As a result, Japanese therapist training has included uniquely delicate palpation and acupuncture techniques.

2. Palpation in East Asian Medicine

There are four fundamental methods of diagnosis for acupuncture and moxibustion: inspection, listening/smelling, inquiry and palpation. These methods are common to the fields of acupuncture, moxibustion, massage, as well as herbal therapies in Japanese East Asian medicine. It is vital that the practitioner grasp the patient's subjective interpretation of the symptoms with one's own five senses. Despite the patient's subjective interpretation of their symptoms, the essential diagnostic methods characteristic of Japanese medicine allow the practitioner to objectively use his or her five senses to precisely grasp the patient's condition.

Roughly speaking, of the four methods, inspection, listening/smelling and inquiry are indirect methods. That is, the practitioner does not make direct contact with the patient. Only touch or palpation brings the patient and practitioner into direct physical contact.

Palpation, the foundation for touch diagnosis, represents the most important characteristic of Japanese acupuncture and moxibustion. Not only diagnosis, but actual treatment relies heavily on the art of palpation; the area of the body to treat, the treatment depth, and the level of stimulation. Palpation allows the practitioner to discern the factors essential to determining the treatment methods and protocols. A further characteristic of palpation during treatment is the quality and quantity of stimulation to the surface of the body. Further, the collaboration between the patient and the practitioner provides the chance for contacting/healing the heart of the patient.

Determining the point location with anatomical landmarks and proportional measurements represents the theoretical foundation for the practice. Then, discrete palpation for physical responses or unique anatomical features adapts the method to each individual patient and their condition.

Within the field of palpation, pulse diagnosis continues to hold great importance. Abdominal palpation has, to a limited extent, been examined. But from the point of view of clinical diagnosis and practice, research into the palpation has been insufficient.

3. Meaning of touching and developing of human hands

Throughout history, the human hand has enabled us to receive and acquire valuable resources and information, to express ourselves and to transmit and transfer various forms of information and stimuli. All in all, the human hand is an outstanding feature of our species.

Fingers can be called our second eyes, when our eyes cannot catch certain details, our fingers and hands can fill in the gaps: the sensations of heat and cold, knots, thickness, sharpness, dullness, texture, etc...

Also, an example closer to our practice, a needle of 0.2mm in diameter can be distinguished with practice. Palpation can be defined as the process of getting information about the surface of the body with the hands and fingers. In this way, our hands help us get from the object of palpation to detailed information. Also, we can assess how the object is moving and changing in response to our touch. Moreover, our will and intention can be transmitted.

In addition, in Japan, “hand” sometimes means human; “hand” sometimes means emotional state. For example, “talking hand” means “speaker”, “bitter hand” means “weak” and “poor”. Hands work, make things, transmit and accept others.