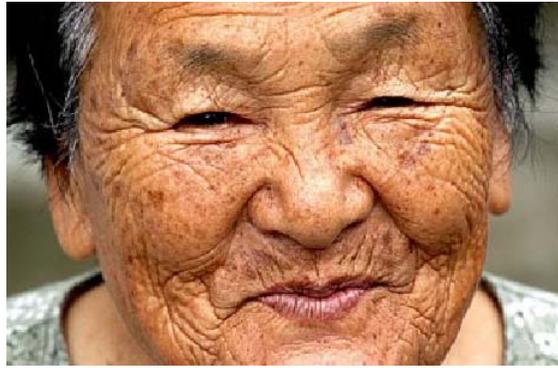


Some Unusual Aspects of Touch – Part I

© 2010 Jack Blackburn



At the end of May I presented a seminar: *The Power of Touch*, in Yokohama for bodyworkers, counselors, other caregivers and the general public. The purpose of the seminar was to present different aspects of touch, different body conditions, and different mental conditions, problems that come from the absence of touch, and why touch is so important in our lives. I have been a professional bodyworker, healer, teacher, and counselor for many years and all of my work has centered on how touch affects a person's awareness and quality of life. The following aspects are some unusual learnings about touch that come from my experience of almost 30 years. This is the first of three articles, drawn from the seminar, for my colleagues and friends in touch.

■ All of the body's systems are supported with touch
Unless forbidden, we are continually touching our bodies. As we become adults we learn that certain kinds of touch are not permissible, at least in public. We touch our bodies for many reasons, and much of the touch is in response to signals and symptoms that come from the body. There is not one bodily system that is not supported positively through touch. There are kinds of touch that can damage bodily tissue like hitting, deep pressure, or scratching. But contact with the hands that does not cause damage is deeply supportive. The same is true when we receive touch from others. Touch therapists are giving the oldest kind of support to their clients.

■ Touch is always reciprocal, two-way, even in sleep
All parts of the body have touch receptors or proprioceptive receptors. There is a difference between inner touch, which is felt through proprioception and interoception and outer touch, which is communicated through various receptors of the skin. In our minds we distinguish between inner and outer experiences. If someone touches us we do not think about the fact that we are also touching them. The exception is when we are expressing a strong emotion like love or hatred. We are then much more receptive to our inner and outer sensations.

■ Practitioners can learn to feel clients' consciousness or somatic awareness
There are many things touch practitioners can learn to feel in the client's body. We know that we can feel the heart pulse and the breath pulse in certain large parts of the body, like the chest. But we can also feel them in

Some Unusual Aspects of Touch – Part I

© 2010 Jack Blackburn

very small parts of the body, far away from the heart and the lungs. We can also feel temperature, moistness, hardness, softness, subtle reflexes, and resistance to movement. We can also feel some of the internal bodily conditions: tonus of connective tissue, bloating, dehydration, gas, and energy. The most amazing touch skill however is the ability to feel the client's state of awareness in any part of the body. If the client is deeply involved in a bodypart we can feel it. If the client is afraid to feel pain in a bodypart, we can feel the absence of awareness. If the client feels into a bodypart by sensing it from inside, we can learn to feel that. If clients touch us or interact with us from inside their bodies we can feel that.

■ Hard or painful touch can produce fear responses in the client's body and mind. When we approach a tight bodypart with hard touch to tissue, the autonomic system responds sympathetically. Tightness is the body guarding against more injury or pain. In the facial muscles the tightness is often for suppressing unwanted emotions. This tightening of some facial muscles produces unwanted sagging in other facial muscles. We sometimes tighten the sagging muscles instead of relaxing the muscles that are already guarding. When we use force against the body's defenses, we can produce even more muscle guarding by stimulating adrenaline receptors. This requires more mechanical pressure especially for large body parts. Thus we create more work for ourselves, more pain for the client, and release of sympathetic toxins into the bloodstream.

■ Pain relief does not have to be painful. Pressure and tactile stimulation can send signals to the brain that are temporally stronger than pain signals. This is why clients often request more pressure from our hands. However when the pressure and other stimuli are removed the pain can return. We often work harder and longer to overwhelm the body's defense. Clients have come to expect the "good pain," from shiatsu, setai, and deep massage. Instead we can learn to work *with* the body's guarding tightness; to assist the shortening and tightening of connective tissue. We can reduce the pain, without producing more pain, and pressure. We can keep the client in a relaxed but alert state. That is very comforting and relaxing to the client, who often is expecting lots of pain and pressure.

■ The body and mind are continually reflecting one another – somatic awareness. Meditators and the new brain research reveal that there is constant interaction between the body and the mind. All of our thoughts are accompanied by feeling responses in our bodies. And the brain is continually monitoring the changes that are occurring in our bodies. By paying closer attention to our body sensations, we start to become more conscious of these interactions, this interplay between body and mind. Some practitioners in medicine and psychology believe that as this *somatic* awareness grows, our minds can join with the body's own healing processes. This may greatly reduce the need for medical intervention, for drugs, for surgeries, for psychotherapy in the future.