



TECHNIQUE

Tools for a higher purpose

Intention and finesse in massage and bodywork

BY BOB HADDAD, RTT

If you are a massage therapist or a professional in the healing arts, here are a few questions for you: Which techniques do you almost always use in your treatment sessions? In other words, what are the standard “default” techniques for certain parts of the body that you use for most people? In your mind, how did they become your standard techniques? Did you learn them in your first training, or from the first sequence you were taught? Did a

teacher tell you that they should be done in a certain order? Have you assembled a routine of techniques that you use almost every time you work? Take a moment to think about your patterns of work, and consider all these questions.

Now think about this: To work at an advanced level, the techniques we use should come to us naturally; not as a result of premeditated thought, or because we learned them in a particular way, or because they are part of a fixed

sequence. They should arise based on what we sense and feel and intuit during every moment of a treatment.

Whenever a little bit of ego enters the process, your intention and your therapeutic work can become contaminated. Don't use a particular technique because you are “supposed to” do it, or because you have always done it that way, or because it belongs to a sequence that you once learned. Consider how other parts of the body may be affected by what you do in each area, and remember that every person needs individualized care. Work with great sensitivity and incremental pressure. Work more slowly when you sense a blockage (even stop your movement temporarily), and try to not think about where you are headed or what you might do next. As you learn and use techniques, remember that they are simply tools for a higher purpose. The techniques themselves are not the only factors that bring about healing. It is your intention, and the skill or finesse with which you use techniques that encourage the receiver to surrender to a process of self-healing.

Intention

Touch can be received in different ways. In therapeutic massage and bodywork, well-intentioned and supportive touch can lead to positive outcomes and promote physical and psychological well-being. On the other hand, disjointed, sharp, quick or intrusive movements and techniques can make a person feel uncomfortable, nervous, or concerned, and can ultimately lead to a less positive outcome. In some aspects of life, the intention behind touch isn't conscious or presumed. Handshakes, social kisses, and hugs are usually benign because the underlying intention is to greet, support, or encourage another person. In a crowded place, when your body accidentally touches another person, there is no intention or purpose, and when this happens, you usually acknowledge the unintentional contact by excusing yourself.

We often go through our busy lives without an understanding or a constant awareness of the power of intention. We sometimes do things unconsciously, and as a result, our actions may become disconnected from our intentions. So, what should be the intention for each person you touch in therapeutic

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massage? First and foremost, it should be to impart a level of comfort, respect, and dignity to the receiver. For people who have experienced physical, emotional, or psychological traumas, touching can be a very sensitive issue. When we honor a person's need for comfort and we confirm through our touch that our intention is never to invade, harm, or bring about discomfort of any kind, then our work can be more easily accepted.

Sensitivity, boundaries, and conscious intention

Be aware of the receiver's comfort level at all times – the physical, psychological and emotional comfort. Glance at the face and observe body language at regular intervals, and if you suspect that something may not be right, ask if they are comfortable or if your pressure is too strong. Remember those techniques that seemed to cause discomfort, and record them in your post-session notes for future reference.

The abdomen is a sensitive and private area for many people, so working here often requires extra care and sensitivity. If you sense tension, a defensive tightening or a blockage when you begin to palpate the area, or if you notice restricted breathing and you decide to work more deeply in the belly, it's often best to ask permission first, or at least to softly announce that you'd like to continue to work more deeply in that area.

When you work therapeutically in one area, don't inadvertently touch or lean against the receiver with a different part of your body. This can cause a feeling of restriction, restlessness, or even claustrophobia in some people, and it can detract from the overall effect of your work. Try to make contact with your body only in the area that is receiving therapy. In this way, the receiver will feel only one point of contact while the rest of his body remains free. As you deepen your practice, take note of when you may be touching or leaning against your clients' bodies unknowingly and unnecessarily.

Adding conscious intention to every technique, posture, and movement creates a deep level of connection, and fosters feelings of safety and trust. Make the intentions behind your work pure, deep, and respectful, and always foster an environment for safe, supportive, therapeutic touch.



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Finesse

Skill and sensitivity are important vehicles for transmitting pure intention and applying therapeutic pressure. Whether using thumbs, palms, forearms, elbows, or other parts of your body, first touch, then sense, and finally begin to sink slowly through the layers.

Working with the layers

In traditional Thai massage, my preferred modality, the application of physical techniques is done with regard to a person's physical condition, elemental disposition, and by incrementally and sensitively sinking pressure through various layers of the physical body. One of my teachers used to say, "Land like a butterfly, and sink like an elephant." As you slowly descend through layers, be aware of reactions (even small ones) that may come about, and react accordingly.

In traditional Thai medicine, the body is perceived in five layers:

- Skin: three sub-layers – superficial, medium, and deep
- Tissue: fascia, fat, and muscle
- Sen (energy conduits): ligaments, tendons, nerves, veins,
- and arteries
- Bone: including major joints of the body
- Organs: classified in two categories: a) those that connect to the outside world, such as lungs, bladder, stomach, intestines, and b) those whose functions are internal, such as kidneys, spleen, and liver.

In most types of therapeutic bodywork, a skilled therapist sinks into the

body slowly with incremental pressure and breath awareness, and avoids quick, sharp, or intrusive movements. In Thai herbal medicine, the healing properties of individual or combined herbs must penetrate the layers in order to benefit certain parts of the body. The layers absorb medicinal properties at different rates, and for this reason, balms, oils, poultices, and herbal compresses are applied in a variety of ways.

Use broad pressure first

In sequences developed to treat people through Thai massage, the preferred general pattern is to warm the area and work with broad pressure first, and then to progress to more targeted pressure. Usually, light-medium compressions using palms, forearms and other parts of the body assess and open the area. Then, if the situation allows, deeper techniques with thumbs, fingers, feet, toes, and elbows may be used, or acupressure protocols are performed for specific conditions.

Work around blockages first

After some years of practice, it becomes easier to identify blockages and places of tension in the body, but how we work with them is another matter. Over time, experienced therapists learn to not immediately target a place in need of prolonged therapy. Instead of working directly at the very center of a blockage, it's usually best to first work in the general area around the blockage.

With certain types of techniques such as compressions to the abdomen, chest, or back, pressure may be applied in two

main ways. One way is to sink into the first level (the first depth where you feel resistance) and then to completely release the pressure as the client inhales. When he begins to exhale again, follow the exhalation with your pressure and go to the second level of depth. Hold it there, and then release all pressure as he inhales. Continue in this way a third time, going to the deepest level on the exhalation and releasing completely upon the inhalation.

An alternate way of working at different depths is to hold the compression at each level as the client inhales against the pressure. With this pattern, you follow the person's exhalation with your pressure to the first point of resistance. Stay firmly at that depth as they inhale against your pressure, and when he begins to exhale again, fall in with your pressure a bit deeper to the next level. After the third and final exhalation, release all of your pressure and let your hands rise to the surface with his final, deep, and complete inhalation.

Coaxing

Coaxing techniques can be done with slight shaking, rocking or pulsing movements. As you work, if you feel the slightest resistance, stop your movement. If the body opens by itself in that period of non-movement, follow the opening and take it a little deeper. But if it remains rigid or tense, or if the client is "holding," continue to gently coax the body by making slight pulsing, jiggling, or rocking movements.

The human body often holds conditioned tension and fear, and it needs to feel safe and trusted before it can relax and open completely.

Refinement, ease, and grace

In this article we've affirmed that pure intention is our first priority. Sometimes, the greatest therapy occurs spontaneously, without thinking too much, and by working with moment-to-moment sensitivity. Never practice in an uncomfortable way. Don't constrict the people you treat; always work with awareness of

boundaries and privacy. Send all your awareness to the parts of your body that make contact with your client, and modify or release your pressure whenever you feel a resistance or when you notice a response that may indicate discomfort. Rock and project your core (hara) as you work, but also allow yourself to stop moving from time to time while maintaining consistent light or medium pressure. Observe your clients' expressions and body language, and make sure they are comfortable at all times. When you have pure intentions, and when your techniques are done with refinement and finesse, your work will become more meaningful; both to you and to the people you touch.

Each of these methods has advantages in certain situations. Practice them first with friends so you can get feedback about how different they feel. Based on what you sense and perceive as you work, you might use either one or both of these methods at different times during a treatment.

