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Using Feng Shui in Massage

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The power and importance of place often goes unrecognized. For a moment, close your eyes and imagine receiving your ideal massage. If it could be anywhere, where would it be? What would that place look like? How would it smell? What would you hear there? How would you feel in this space?

Environment is but one piece of the healing experience we call massage, and it is the piece that tends largely to be ignored. In my massage trainings I ask these same questions of my students and overwhelmingly their "dream locale" is somewhere in nature, often near flowing water, gently colored with living sounds and pleasing smells. Some prefer the warm touch of sunshine on their skin, while others imagine a cool caressing breeze. For most, it is the land of no worries, a place to surrender to feeling and sensing.

Almost no one envisions their ideal massage in the kinds of places where it is typically practiced. As massage therapists and body-workers, we tend to work in small, enclosed spaces, with artificial light and stale air. Of course, with only limited space to work from, we try to make it more appealing. We dim or soften the lights, and perhaps accentuate the mood with candles. We might have an aromatherapy diffuser breathing sweet smells into the air. We try to have soothing music or relaxing soundscapes as an unobtrusive backdrop. We accentuate the feel of this self-contained world with the addition of plants, fresh-cut flowers, an inviting "escape" poster of a beach in Bali, warm tapestries and rugs, and, if there is room, perhaps several large pillows on the floor for sitting and talking.

Other massage therapists may intentionally eschew the casual and intimate ambience of such a healing womb in favor of a cooler atmosphere of professionalism and clinical competence. Such a space may be brightly lit, with anatomical charts on the white walls. There is the massage table as the central feature and a stool with wheels. If there is not a separate waiting room or interview room, the work space may also include two chairs -- simple, upright no-nonsense chairs for communicating, not for relaxing. It's the kind of space we've become accustomed going to when a problem needs "fixing," but not the kind of space we'd choose to linger. "Move them in, move them out."

Some massage studios have tried to integrate aspects of a more natural environment into their workspace. One such attempt to balance inner and outer environments is to build a garden sanctuary inside the commercial structure and to perform massage within the orderly calm of a Japanese meditation garden or the lush richness of a tropical rainforest. In my own practice, weather permitting, I often work with clients outside in my garden, surrounded by greenery, chirping birds, herbs wafting in the breeze, and usually at least one of my cats lounging nearby, supervising.

Since we seem to overwhelmingly intuit the healing power of a natural environment, why do so many of us settle to work in a lifeless box of concrete and steel?

The Art and Science of Space

Feng shui (pronounced "fung shway") is the art and science of place. Originating in China more than 3,000 years ago, feng shui was concerned with discerning the most favorable location for building homes and other structures, as well as how to blend harmoniously with the surrounding physical environment. Proper placement of one's home or business aligns one's life with the natural flow of energy and helps to promote success, health, wealth, love and happiness. In modern times, most of us do not have the luxury of choosing the most auspicious site for our home or business. Contemporary applications of feng shui therefore tend to be most useful in optimizing harmonious energy flow in and around the existing dwellings in which we work and reside.

The subtle flow of electromagnetic energy called qi (or chi) interconnects all things. Jing Meridians, the 12 vertical channels of energy flow in the body, and the finer horizontal web of collateral Luo Meridians, together form a "continuously interconnected semiconductor electronic network"¹ affecting and affected by every molecule in the body. This energetic matrix is a continuous vibratory network, communicating with every part of the body, even to the level of the nuclei of every cell. James Oschman, in *Energy Medicine*, suggests "Each component of the organism...is immersed in, and generates, a constant stream of vibratory information. This is information about all of the activities taking place everywhere in the body."² In reference to bodyworkers, they are working, knowingly or not, with energy flow and vibratory information in the body, feng shui looks at the home much as we might look at the body, and in very similar ways works to bring about balance.

Bodily health, or balance, corresponds to the harmonious interconnection of all parts of the body. The qi of the body is also in communication with and interconnected to the qi of the surrounding environment -- plants, animals, buildings, communities, mountains, wind and water. "Wind-water" is the literal meaning of feng shui, suggestive of the way qi moves -- like the ebb and flow of tides and air circulating in and around things. The qi of one's immediate environment influences moods, emotions, physical energy, and, over time, health. In the same way we learn to discern the energy of the body, we can develop sensitivity to feel the energy of dwellings and of place. Applying feng shui principles to create better energetic communication and harmony in a physical space is similar to helping restore the unobstructed flow of qi in the body through acupuncture or Shiatsu.

Imbalance clearly affects body, mind and emotions. It affects what we are capable of doing, both now and in the long-term. It affects our interactions with people and how we are perceived by others. Imbalance in the environment in which you live or work affects you in these same ways, no less profoundly than an imbalance in the body. Through seeking to balance yin and yang, harmonizing the five elements, supporting the energetic grid, clearing congestion, and clarifying and focusing intention, we can begin to create healthier bodies, homes, workplaces and communities.

Balance Yin and Yang

Take a walk through your home or workplace and note the energetic feelings you sense from different areas. Some areas may feel intense and busy, while others may seem quiet and comforting. These latter areas we call yin in comparison to the former, which would be yang. Yin and yang describe relationships of opposing, yet complementary, energies. Other yin qualities might include dark, cool, empty, spacious, interior, receptive, small, low and moist. By contrast, light, hot, full, congested, exterior, active, large, high and dry, all describe more yang tendencies. Yang areas tend to be more productive, stimulating and engaging, while yin areas might incline toward conserving or resting, nourishing or introspection. Notice whether the space overall has a predominant yin or yang character or whether the two aspects seem to be in relative balance.

Where there is an imbalance in a particular room or space, a simple remedy is to add and subtract yin or yang elements until more harmony is felt. If the walls are painted a cool color (yin), choosing furniture of a warmer color will help. If the furniture is sharp and straight-sided, bringing in plush cushions, thick rugs and simple tapestries will soften the space. By nature, yin and yang attract one another, seeking completeness. The areas that tend to feel good and nurture you will usually have equal measure of both.

Harmonize the Five Elements

The five elements -- wood, fire, earth, metal and water -- are the basic building blocks of all constituted things and arise from the interplay of yin and yang. Human beings, too, are comprised of the five elemental energies. It is no surprise then that we are most comfortable when our homes and workplaces have a proportionate balance of elements.

You may find the elemental energies present in their basic or represented forms. Wood, wicker, bamboo and paper are pure forms of wood (sometimes, called "tree") energy, columns and tall, thin green objects also can represent the wood element. Fire, heat, candles, stoves, fireplaces, sunlight and lighting embody fire energy. Fire can be represented by the color red, pointed objects, animals and animal objects, like fur, leather, bone, feathers and wool. Yellow or brown colors, long flat surfaces and low, square or rectangular objects represent earth. Earth energy is present in soil, plaster, china, clay, ceramics, bricks, tiles, soft stone and natural fibers, such as cotton or linen. Metal appears in round, silver, gold, or white objects, as well as in stainless steel, brass, silver, iron, bronze, copper, gold, or hard stone like marble or granite. Lastly, water energy is conveyed by sinks, bathrooms, aquariums, fountains and pools, as well as glass objects, cut crystal, mirrors and things which are black or dark blue or wavy or irregular in shape.

It is perhaps simplest to work with the elements on a room-by-room basis. Look at the objects in each room. Is there an equal representation of all five elements, or are some missing? Does one element dominate? Generally, a room will feel most harmonious where all five elements are present and in relative balance. Explore creative and personally satisfying combinations.

Support the Energetic Grid

The bagua (pronounced "bah-gwah") is a useful map or template which correlates nine basic gua, or energetic aspects of your life, with areas of your home or work space, much like a reflexology chart. Each gua corresponds to a particular "treasure" in life, such as love, wealth, family, health, etc., as well as to specific attributes such as colors, elements, compass directions, areas of the body and individual family members.

To use the bagua, draw a floor plan of your house or work space and fit the entire building within the ba-gua grid, aligning the bottom edge of the grid with the wall through which you enter the dwelling. If the building is irregularly shaped, missing sections will become evident and will need some energetic therapy. You can also use the ba-gua to map out the areas within any given room, again orienting the bottom of the grid with the wall through which you enter that room.

As qi circulates through the home or workplace, its flow is directed and shaped by the space itself and by all the objects in its path, causing certain energy patterns to develop. These energy patterns condition and mold the qi of our bodies. The bodily qi communicates with the qi of the world, drawing resonant life situations (people, relationships, jobs, etc.) to it like a magnet. These life situations, in turn, return energy to the world at large. Through the bagua it is possible to influence energetic flow, and thus life situations, by simple alterations to things in the environment and coming into balance with the natural flow of life.

Work first with the gua associated with areas in your life you'd like to enhance. Look for things which may be adversely affecting these energies. Draw qi into this space. Add items which will support and strengthen the energies you wish to affect. You can follow your intuition in creating "cures" for your ailing space, but also reading some of the books listed at the end of the article or hiring a feng shui consultant will be money well spent.

Clear Congestion

In the same way congestion and blocked energy flows within the body create a cascading progression of problems, stagnation and obstruction of energy flow in the home or workplace can create similar problems. One of the main causes of energetic congestion is clutter which blocks and distorts the natural flow of qi. Clear it out. You'll feel immediate results.

Clarify and Focus Attention

The space in which you reside and work is a reflection of yourself. Is it an accurate reflection? Why are you there? What do you want this space to support in you and for you? What do you want it to communicate?

By crystallizing our intentions, we regain some power over the forces that shape our lives. The feeling of always swimming against the current is no more normal than a cold. Our bodies are temples, our homes (and ideally our workplace) are sanctuaries. This is sacred ground.

Feng shui is a powerful system for working to restore proper energetic alignment and flow in all aspects of our lives -- in our bodies, our environments, our relationships, and our personal growth and evolution. For bodyworkers, it provides useful tools for seeing the larger patterns of dysfunction which may be contributing to our clients' (and our own) illnesses and difficulties, and practical ways to bring about solutions. "For better or worse, qi connects you to everything," says feng shui consultant Terah Kathryn Collins, "making all things in your life important."3 Don't settle for anything less.

References

1. Oschman, James L. *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis*. (Edinburgh UK: Churchill Livingstone, 2000), 71.
2. Oschman, 71.
3. Collins, Terah Kathryn. *The Western Guide to Feng Shui*. (Carlsbad CA: Hay House, 1996), 9.