

The story I'd like to share is one about a strong experience in the treatment room. It is the story of learning about the need to gather a client's background information on his/her illness. It is the story about the impact of certain conditions, which are not in our direct control, but which nevertheless influence the outcome of a Thai therapy session. It is the story about recognizing the person that we touch as our teacher.

What happened?

I was giving a Thai bodywork session to a client of mine, who I'll call Jeff. He came for his second Thai session to my treatment room. It was a Tuesday afternoon and no one else was present in the house. Toward the end of the 1 1/2 hour session, it looked like Jeff had relaxed completely and had fallen asleep - even starting to snore – very much like at the end of his first session. So I decided to give him some peace. I left the room, went to the restroom, washed my hands, drank water and changed my sweaty shirt. When I came back into the room and asked him if he was all right, Jeff did not answer. He had lost consciousness and his eyes were wide open. He was bathed in sweat and his shirt was wet. He was breathing and he had a pulse, but it seemed like his physical body was shutting down. Jeff, what are you doing? What's going on here? I grabbed the phone and called 911. "Do you want to report an emergency?" Yes! And something else: Dear God, Jivaka, everyone, please help us!

I stayed next to Jeff holding his left hand. Both of his arms and hands went into spasm. A tsunami of fear flooded the treatment room. After five minutes, family support arrived and we waited for the ambulance. The paramedics realized very quickly that we were dealing with diabetic shock. The blood sugar was down to 19. The threshold is 40 – anything below that is life-threatening. They managed to bring Jeff back, stabilized him, and he had regained consciousness by the time they left for the hospital. The next day, he and his wife came back to pick up his car and some personal belongings. Jeff was fine.

Background information

The first time I met Jeff, he came to try Thai bodywork because of chronic pain in the left hip area. After completing the intake form we spent half an hour discussing all the health issues he'd reported. Jeff is a 73 year-old man with long term diabetes II, high blood pressure, heart surgery with 3 bypasses, 3 spinal surgeries (including fusion of several lumbar vertebrae), 1 surgery on the cervical spine, 2 surgeries to the right rotator cuff, 1 surgery to the left shoulder, and 1 hip surgery to remove the piriformis muscle on the right side to relieve his sciatica. The latter was the cause of an imbalance in the pelvic area and his pain in the left hip was what he was hoping to address in his sessions with me.

After the session, I realized that the complexity of the health issues had distracted me from asking more about the stability of his diabetic condition. I was much more concerned about the implications of the vascular and spinal status of the client on Thai bodywork.

This was the first time in my practice I had to deal with such a complexity of disorders. Did I feel comfortable about it? Well, I doubted that I could find a way to give him what he needed. I thought his body would introduce me to a new level of sensitivity, sensing and feeling. So it's important to always be careful and to always listen. I could never have imagined what happened on my mat that day.

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Diabetes & Thai Massage, *continued*

Because of his delicate health history, my repertoire of Thai techniques was very limited. My focus was on intensive foot reflexology, careful line work along the legs, careful stretches, avoiding deep compressions, no double leg work, no arterial compressions, no twisting, and guiding the client to breathe deeply in order to facilitate deep relaxation. The boomerang area around the left hip joint seemed to be inflamed – I felt an unusual heat there. This meant that I could only approach this area indirectly. So I worked around the hip, not on the inflamed area, using line work and the pressure points that were still comfortable. I also gently laid my hand on the inflamed area intending to send it healing energy. But instead I received a transfer of heat into my hands and from there my whole body heated up as if I'd gotten a fever. I started sweating.

The first session went well. Jeff felt great and even found some pain relief. I was exhausted, and although I do not like cold showers at all, this time I was craving one. I admit that when Jeff came back for a second session, my mind was still set on paying attention to his vascular and spinal limitations. That mindset was the reason why I had speculated that Jeff was going into a coma as a result of stroke or a cerebral bleeding.

While speaking to Jeff's family after the incident and learning more about the development of his diabetes, I found out that a similar event had happened before the diabetic shock on the Thai mat that day. The reason he had suffered such a sudden and dramatic decrease in his blood sugar was a *change of medication* a few weeks before – resulting in a dangerous instability that he hadn't mentioned at his first appointment. The drop of blood sugar was such that he couldn't feel it coming on, in order to warn others.

Another factor was that he'd had lunch that day, but his appointment was scheduled at 4pm for 90 minutes. So by the time we finished the session he had a *nutrition deficiency*. Too much time had elapsed since his last food intake.

Conclusions

We know that traditional Thai bodywork is not contra-indicated for diabetes. I searched the internet for information and I spoke to experienced Thai teachers and shiatsu practitioners to see if they had any advice. We found only one incident of a diabetic crisis at the end of a Reiki session on an older woman, and that was mostly related to nutrition factors. Interestingly, there were plenty of reports on successful management of diabetic disorders with Thai massage, shiatsu, acupuncture and even yoga. For Jeff, we didn't have an exception to the rule, but we learned to account for two very important conditions especially in older clients: *stability of medication and the nutrition status of the client*.

So in the future, if a client circles 'diabetes' on the intake form, I will insist on more detailed information about the current condition of the person, for example:

- * how stable is your medication?
- * when was your last incident of a sudden drop of blood sugar and what happened as a result?
- * did you ever suffer from diabetic shock?
- * when did you last eat food?
- * do you carry anything with you in case of emergency?

Only when I know this information will I feel comfortable enough to give a long Thai bodywork session to someone with diabetes.

Revelations

My story would be incomplete if I stopped here. There is much more to it on deeper levels of processing this energy experience. Let me use the image of an enormous iceberg floating innocently in the freezing cold water of limited awareness. Now if you choose to only see the tip of the iceberg - then stop reading here! But if you want to know how it feels when the iceberg hits you and cuts your heart open, continue reading!

Imagine that you are sinking deeper into the truth about the oneness of life and death – dying is no different from living. Asokananda taught his students to always be aware of death sitting on our doorsteps. We connect to the healing energy of the universe through our prayers and through right action. But risk is present anywhere (even on your mat), any time (even during your Thai session) with any one (either you or your client). This can instantly become so true - so close - so real. My experience with Jeff was my time to entirely surrender my ignorant mind to this truth.

I was experiencing an energy flow in the physical body that I'd never felt before, as if a wide door had opened, and the vital energies which we are so familiar with in our work were being drained from my client's body. Realizing I had no control, my powerless mind bombarded me with my worst fears: my client was having a stroke, going into a coma, probably dying. If I have done something wrong, if I have harmed a human being, then face it, I am finished. I could not live with that. I would never be able to touch another human body again.

I felt completely helpless waiting for help to arrive. And Jeff – he was in a raging river, holding on to a weak branch of a tree – resisting a powerful current – in a tug of war. All you can do is put your trust, all you believe in, your love, all your compassion into that little branch – to hold on to his hand and tell him repeatedly: please - Jeff - stay with me - don't go away – not now – not here - stay with me - please stay with me. That was my mantra for an endless moment.

When the paramedics arrived I wanted to move and make space for them. It was difficult to remove my hand from his hand. His grip was so tight. He was holding onto me for his life. His hand felt glued to mine. In our training we learn that we are one with the body that we touch. Now I truly know what that means.

I am grateful that Jeff's soul decided not to depart from my mat and that he remained unharmed. I am even grateful that what happened occurred on my mat and not on his way home, alone, in the car. I am grateful that the universal plan allows me to continue to touch other physical bodies – with the awareness that we are all constantly dying. I am grateful for understanding that honoring the presence of death in life may be the last and ultimate step of self-healing.

Om namo Shivago! I pray to you, you who bring light to everyone, you who have perfect wisdom, you who know everything.

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