

Special Series on Shiatsu – 40 years in Canada

Tetsuro Saito: Taking Shiatsu to New Places

Celebrating Forty Years in Canada

by Cheryl Coull

It is 2011—the 40th anniversary of shiatsu in Canada. Forty years since Tetsuro Saito, age 30, a fresh graduate of the Japan Shiatsu School, speaking no English, with no money, and holding the seed of a strange therapy called shiatsu, stepped from his island-country, and for no reason other than curiosity and the pure and simple spirit of adventure, set up shop in Canada.

Almost everyone who practices shiatsu here today, including many who have shifted their focus to acupuncture and moxibustion, can trace their professional roots back to him.

But his legacy is far greater than this. In these four decades, Saito has transformed shiatsu. He has pushed the boundaries of the field, deepened our understanding of the subtle and profound powers of the body and mind, introduced new techniques, and inspired practitioners around the globe.

Central to all of this: his elaboration of a simple technique called the Finger Test Method and his gift to us of sensing ki. It's like the light bulb going on – suddenly, there it is, energy. Mysterious, intangible, magical but obviously there, and nothing will ever be the same again.

Tetsuro Saito: electrical engineer, shiatsu therapist and teacher, but above all, explorer. His story starts out ordinarily enough.

East Meets West

The young Tetsuro arrived in Canada on June 11, 1971. It was nearly solstice, so the skies were bright and the days long, much longer than in Japan. “Everything just felt right,” he says. The first thing he did was find a bed at the YMCA in downtown Toronto.

Shiatsu was an unknown word in this country. As foreign as acupuncture: diplomatic channels between China and the US were just opening under the Nixon administration, and later that same summer, *New York Times* reporter James Reston would write of his experiences at a Beijing hospital. He'd had an emergency appendectomy and needles were used to ease his post-operative

pain: this would be the first time many North Americans had ever heard of Oriental medicine.

Saito began knocking on doors, introducing himself and the art of shiatsu to Toronto's health practitioners and members of the Japanese community. After a week or so he pulled out the one contact name he carried with him from Tokyo. Theresa Hunter, now in Toronto, had taken a short shiatsu course with his teacher, Tokujiro Namikoshi, in Tokyo. “She had expressed to him an interest in starting a shiatsu business in Toronto if she could find a teacher from Japan to work with her,” Saito says. “Namikoshi Sensei suggested I look her up.”

“My life is so lucky because I always meet the right people at the right time,” Saito says. Hunter spoke fluent Japanese, and she was a skilled business promoter.

Shiatsu a Household Word

When the Shiatsu Centre opened on College Street two years later, TV cameramen and reporters were there, and lots of patients—lining up to experience this new healing phenomenon. Saito's shiatsu was such a success he had to go back to Japan to get more therapists. In time, they would leave his Shiatsu Centre and go on to establish their own clinics and schools; they would in turn invite more therapists from Japan. Ultimately, hundreds of therapists trained in the East and the West would treat thousands of patients.

Shiatsu was on its way to becoming a household word in Canada.

“Those were interesting times,” says Saito. Just out of the Sixties, in a society learning to question the impersonal and mechanistic underpinnings of modern medicine – there was a yearning for alternatives. “This made it easy for us to introduce our new therapy.”

And Tetsuro Saito (by now, Ted Saito) was also the right person at the right time.

Born in the small city of Noda in 1941, just four months before the outbreak of World War Two, Saito was somewhat sheltered from the cataclysmic events that shook the world, and nowhere more than his own country. His father had worked his way up the ranks to become a manager in the Kikkoman soy sauce corporation: the job had taken the family to northern China for the first years of the war. Tetsuro, the second child of three, was still a toddler when the family was evacuated back to Japan. His first childhood memories were of hunger. “There were food shortages all over Japan.”



Ted Saito, founder of shiatsu in Canada and director of Shin So Shiatsu International.

Saito loved nature and to play along the banks of the Edo River. He excelled in school and was fascinated with how things – radios and other gadgets – worked. When he attended university to study electrical engineering, he discovered another passion. Scaling the 3,000-metre walls of the snow-clad Japanese Alps that form the heartland of Japan's main island, Honshu. “One step could be the difference between life and death.”

For Saito, it was all about “the challenge of going that one step higher.”

As an electrical engineer for a major construction company, the young Saito quickly felt something was missing. The drudgery of working with blueprints day in and day out also aggravated an existing eye problem. His doctor told him to get another job.

“I was very lucky to have developed this problem,” says Saito.

Japan at the time was on a seesaw between tradition and modernization. With the American occupation at the end of the war, the practice of Oriental medicine had been discouraged in favour of Western medicine. Now, it was undergoing something of a renaissance. The charismatic Tokujiro Namikoshi, the founder of modern-day shiatsu, had been in the news. “It was my father who suggested I might want to explore this. He had a friend who had been greatly helped by shiatsu.”

“Studying the human body sounded far more interesting than electrical circuits.” Saito enrolled in The Japan Shiatsu School in 1966 and from the outset was profoundly influenced by both Namikoshi and another teacher there, Shizuto Masunaga. Namikoshi had opened the school 10 years earlier: Masunaga was a student in that first class.

His Teachers – Yin and Yang

Most shiatsu practitioners are familiar with the story of these two influential teachers and the division between them: Namikoshi (1905-2000),



Ted Saito with his teacher, Shizuto Masunaga, and colleague Kaz Kamiya, in 1977

who based his system and view of the human body on Western anatomy and physiology. And Masunaga (1925-1981), a student of psychology, impassioned by the classics of Oriental medicine, the anatomy of meridians, and the language of ki. Masunaga would go on to develop his own approach, popularized in the West as Zen Shiatsu, and his own meridian charts presenting quite a different view than the TCM charts.

But, says Saito: “When I started at the school, the two teachers were not so strongly separated. Namikoshi talked a lot about meridians; one of his closest colleagues was researching meridians. Their differences became stronger after I graduated. Namikoshi gradually increased his emphasis on Western science until he never talked about Eastern medicine anymore.”

“Masunaga was a quiet researcher, always learning.” Says Saito, “He possessed what we call *meijin-gei* in Japanese, ‘master’s skill’ – he could sense ki as it flows through the meridians and was able to diagnose the condition of the whole body from the hara. Not anybody could do this.” Saito was among a number of students who participated in his study group outside of school hours.

Tokujiro Namikoshi was extraordinary in very different ways. “He had a unique appreciation for humanity,” says Saito. “Masunaga himself recognized this. This is why, before he died, he said Namikoshi was a true master. He was so accepting of people whoever they were. And, happy, always laughing. When I first met him, he was in his early 60s, and 95 when he died. He had such a healthy energy.”

“Namikoshi became my model of what a shiatsu therapist can be as a human being,” says Saito. “Treating the patient is the outer level of our work in shiatsu. You see, through the patient, the therapist is treating himself: identifying and treating his own weaknesses. This is why Namikoshi said shiatsu is a religion. It is not about accumulating knowledge or techniques,” says Saito. “It is about our inner development.”

So rich and dynamic was the environment at the Japan Shiatsu School that it produced not only skilled therapists, but outstanding teachers in their own right, who would carry shiatsu to distant lands: among them, Akinobu Kishi (Seiki Soho), Ryokyu Endo (Tao Shiatsu), and Tetsuro Saito (Shin So Shaitso).

Shu Ha Ri

Now ten thousand kilometres away, establishing his own shiatsu centre, Saito maintained ties with his teachers. Masunaga visited Toronto annually between 1975 and 1980, the year before he died. “We had little to offer him in payment for his visits, or even his travel expenses,” Saito recalls. “But he continued to travel halfway around the globe to support his students and share what he knew.” Tokujiro’s eldest son, Toru Namikoshi, visited the Shiatsu Centre in 1989. “Although our approaches were totally different, the heart connection was very strong.”

Saito’s approach was meridian-based shiatsu, following Masunaga. But, like Namikoshi, he was a people person and strong shiatsu advocate. He treated patients six and seven days a week, taught night classes and weekend workshops, organized intensive summer camps and served as a mentor figure at other shiatsu schools – all while supporting a young family at home. After everybody went to bed, he burned the midnight oil pursuing his own studies in Oriental medicine.

Ironically, when demonstrating the art of shiatsu to his students, Saito’s motto was “Just relax, enjoy.” He envisaged a happy, fun-loving community of therapists. But he was very serious about shiatsu. When asked why he did not take up acupuncture as many of his contemporaries would, Saito replies: “Shiatsu is enough for me.” A simple statement, but implicit in it, an understanding of shiatsu that few besides Saito possessed. Shiatsu at its fullest potential. Shiatsu as it could be if we all had Namikoshi’s heart and Masunaga’s ability to sense and influence the meridians.

Masunaga’s death in 1981 at the young age of 56 was a tragedy for Saito and his colleagues worldwide. “Masunaga was so sensitive. With his palpation method he could feel disturbances that other people could not. No one could prove or disprove his meridian charts as published in the 1960s. I couldn’t explain his findings. I was teaching, but how could I give answers to my students? I had to pick up where he left off. I had to research.”

Saito’s first hurdle: sensing energy.

The Key to Ki

“After a few years, finally, I found the Finger Test Method.” This curious technique – in which the practitioner rubs together their index finger and thumb to obtain either a sticky or a smooth sensation – was developed in Japan by the acupuncturist Dr. Tadashi Irie. “He was looking for alternatives to the pulse diagnosis, which takes years to master.” It is similar to Applied Kinesiology commonly practiced by chiropractors and the Bi-digital O-ring test (BDORT) developed by Dr. Yoshiaki Omura in that energetic reactions of the practitioner’s body provide information about the energetic/functional status of the patient’s body. “I owe this, my luckiest finding, to Dr. Irie,” says Saito.

Saito’s first successful experiments in the early 1980s spurred him on. His training as an electrical engineer provided him with a language and theory to at least partially explain how it worked. “I tell my students it’s something like television – an antenna that can pick up so many different messages, the vibrations, energy that is out there.” His scientific background also gave him a methodology for research; the curiosity and determination was his own.



Ted Saito diagnosing the hara using the Finger Test Method.

Saito finger tested himself when he woke up in the morning, throughout the day, and last thing at night. He finger tested what he ate for breakfast. He diagnosed his patients, students, family members, and even the family dog. He finger tested up close, and from a distance: his long subway rides to and from the Shiatsu Centre became field trips. So were his visits to art galleries (he finger-tested paintings and sculptures), parks, pharmacies, grocery stores. Day after day, year after year, he tested ki and jiki in every shape and form.

In effect, he was “building” his *tanden*. “This is the main focus of the finger test,” says Saito, “the development of the hara, our second brain, from which comes our sensitivity to ki for diagnosis and our capacity to give powerful treatments.”

“I could sense the meridians, Masunaga’s diagnostic zones, and I could prove they existed. And then, finally, the deeper meridian systems

that Masunaga couldn't get into before he died. Some three or four thousand years ago, Chinese medicine discovered a system of energy meridians in the body that had seven different layers. We still have the names of those layers but over the last thousand years we've lost much of the ancient knowledge behind those names."

"Whatever I researched I sent to Dr. Irie as my direct master. One paper in particular – on the meridian belt zones – he was very impressed with, and gave me a lot of feedback. He said this was revolutionary in Oriental medicine." Their mutual regard and friendship culminated with Dr. Irie's visit to Canada in 1995, and his conferment to Saito of the legal right to use and teach his patented Finger Test Method.

Dr. Irie had been following Dr. Yoshio Manaka's innovative work with magnets and diodes. Saito the electrical engineer saw nothing incongruous about their use in diagnosing and treating anomalies in human circuitry. He too began experimenting with protocols that combined these tools with the Finger Test Method – catapulting shiatsu to a new level, and taking his students with him.

In Berlin, Matthias Wiek – a *heilpraktiker* who taught shiatsu – had been looking for a teacher to guide him and his own students "beyond theory and technique." Like Saito, he had a background in Western sciences and an intense curiosity about energy in the human body. "In my own practice of shiatsu, I didn't feel anything. I thought, I'm just pressing. I have to learn more." He heard about Ted Saito from an American teacher, Pamela Ferguson, and wrote him a letter.

Saito made the first of many visits to Germany in 1995. "At first I was disappointed," says Wiek. "I expected the shiatsu we knew. I felt responsible to my students, and at first had a great deal of resistance to the Finger Test method. But what he taught us changed everything."

The right students seemed to step forward, working with Saito to establish what were in effect satellite "shiatsu centers" in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, as well as Canada (Ontario and British Columbia).

In Italy, Saito was among several of Shizuto Masunaga's protégés invited to address a major congress of shiatsu therapists in 2002. "Ted picked me out of the audience to demonstrate the Finger Test," recalls Pietro Roat. "He told me I had a problem with my right knee. It was true, I had an old skiing injury and tore a ligament. I talked to him later and he said diodes would fix it. He was running out the door to catch a plane, and asked for my address. I never expected to hear from him."

"Fifteen days later, I received a long letter: 'Dear Pietro, how are you...?' It included some diodes and how to use them. I said, I must meet this man again, at least see who he is. So, in 2003, I went to Germany for his workshop there. It was wonderful, incredible. I said yes, it is very clear. I had an idea of the depth of shiatsu – that was confirmed. I understood that I needed a master like this to believe in miracles."

By now Saito had named his approach Shin So or "deeper level" Shiatsu, reflecting his exploration of not just the Regular meridians, but also the Extra, Divergent, Ocean, and Taikyoku meridian/energetic systems. Saito's regular intensive workshops were followed by a strict regimen of refresher courses led by senior students. The minimum requirements for a Shin So Shiatsu diploma were graduation in basic shiatsu training, plus two years of work with Saito and the Finger Test Method.

In 2006, Saito published a two-volume compendium of his new paradigm: *Shin So Shiatsu – Healing the Deeper Meridian Systems* and *Shin So Shiatsu – Practitioner's Reference Manual*. A long-awaited step forward from Masunaga's *Zen Shiatsu*, published a full three decades earlier, it was immediately republished in Italian and German. Meanwhile, Saito's colleague, acupuncturist Dr. Hideo Yoshimoto, set to translating it into Japanese.

The world of shiatsu was evolving, but not all of it for the better. Since the late 1990s, Saito had been quietly observing declining enrollments in shiatsu schools across the Canada. Thanks to Shin So Shiatsu, there were more students practicing at a higher level, but overall there was a diminishing pool of recent graduates to draw from, and fewer full-time shiatsu practitioners in general.

The Future is Now

The "Father of Shiatsu in Canada" is paying close attention. "The schooling system is good, the theory is good, but then students have no opportunity to continue their education in a clinical environment. This is the most important way to learn a system like shiatsu," says Saito. "Oriental medicine is all about practical training, developing a higher sensitivity to subtle changes in the human body. It's the most important part, and yet few schools strongly emphasize how to sense properly, how to diagnose."

In recent visits to Japan, Saito has observed a similar phenomenon. "Enrollments are dropping. Graduates can continue to work with their favorite teachers in seminar situations, but unfortunately, styles of shiatsu in Japan do not focus on diagnosis.

Masunaga said, we have to study diagnosis or we can't call it therapy. This is what our patients need."

The current climate in Europe is much better for shiatsu. "The practical aspect of education – in any profession – is so important there. It's a characteristic of the culture. So Europeans can more easily follow our training," says Saito. Plus, he adds, more than 90 percent practice meridian-style shiatsu. In Italy alone, there are at least 10,000 shiatsu therapists.

"I think it is the huge responsibility of instructors to pay attention to what's missing. What must we give our students so that shiatsu can continue to grow and develop?"

Saito is more qualified than anyone to address this question. He is one of a rare few in the world today who has devoted his entire life to shiatsu. As he approaches his 70th birthday, he is still treating patients, still researching and teaching, at home and abroad. "I am not a master. I have a long way to go," he says. "But the work is very interesting: that's why I never get tired of shiatsu."

In the end, it is not the number of students that's important. It's the quality. Says Saito, "If even just one student becomes a great therapist, that is enough to lead the way for the next generation."

In Gratitude

"I really want to express my appreciation to all who have helped me so that I could spend my life here with this vocation. It would have been impossible without the support of my family, friends, colleagues, and students. And I am especially indebted to Dr. Tadashi Irie and his Finger Test Method. Without them, I would be at the same level as when I started this work."

Cheryl Coull, B.A., Certified Shiatsu Therapist, graduated in 1991 from the Shiatsu School of Canada (SSC) under the tutelage of Kaz Kamiya (who began his shiatsu career as a patient at Saito's Shiatsu Centre). As a student at SSC, she also received instruction, inspiration, and treatments from Ted Saito and Junji Mizutani (who would go on to found NAJOM). She has been practicing shiatsu in Victoria, British Columbia since then. She is currently an organizer and instructor for Shin So Shiatsu International (British Columbia chapter), and studies acupuncture at Pacific Rim College in Victoria, BC.