

‘True Shiatsu’ or: Which style of Shiatsu should be recognised in a pan-European curriculum?

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The title itself illustrates the complexity of the question. On the one hand, it is about the definition of Shiatsu and thus (also) about the historical development that gives or could give a certain Shiatsu definition its legitimacy. On the other hand, there are the professional policy requirements for a pan-European curriculum that should include all national associations and the Shiatsu styles they represent.

Is there a ‘true’ (authentic) Shiatsu?

First of all, there is the fundamental question of whether there can be a generally binding definition of Shiatsu at all – in other words, whether there is such a thing as ‘true’ Shiatsu (at all). If we look at Japan, which is considered to be the home of Shiatsu, Namikoshi-Shiatsu would probably be the definitive standard. This is reflected in the words of Katsusuke Serizawa, the founder of Tsubo Therapy (‘Acupressure Shiatsu’), who, on the occasion of Tokujiro Namikoshi’s 80th birthday (1985), stated: ‘Japanese Shiatsu is Namikoshi Shiatsu, Namikoshi Shiatsu is Japanese Shiatsu.’

In fact, only Namikoshi-Shiatsu is officially recognised in Japan, and all developments based on it are considered variations or derivatives (‘Derivative Shiatsu’) there.

In Europe, on the other hand, the style developed by Masunaga – which differs significantly from Namikoshi-Shiatsu – together with numerous further developments based on it, significantly shapes the Shiatsu landscape. In our countries, Shiatsu is not a protected term, not a brand name as in Japan, but rather an umbrella term for different styles. A historically based claim to a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ Shiatsu as a basis for a generally valid definition is therefore hardly tenable.

The challenge of a unified definition

The question of a generally valid definition of Shiatsu has been discussed several times by the Shiatsu community, for example at the European Shiatsu Congress organised by Wilfried Rappenecker. However, a unified definition has not yet been reached, and it is unlikely that this will change in the future. The reason for this lies in the fundamental differences between the Shiatsu practitioners. This is particularly evident in the contrast between the Namikoshi and Masunaga styles, but also in the choice of the underlying meridian system – if one is used at all – the diagnostic methods applied and many other aspects.

What constitutes a Shiatsu definition at the association level?

At the level of a national or European association, the question is not about the 'true' Shiatsu, but rather about a definition that encompasses different approaches, captures their 'essence' and at the same time allows for a distinction to be made between Shiatsu and other methods such as Swedish massage, acupressure or osteopathy.

The definition of an association – and the associated curriculum, which essentially determines the professional qualification – thus creates a kind of 'brand'. The aim of the European Shiatsu Federation is not to favour one tradition over another, but to create a framework that unites different methods that share certain basic principles. This ensures a high-quality education – regardless of whether classical meridians and Tsubos, alternative meridian systems or only anatomically defined lines, as in the Namikoshi tradition, are taught.

Such a curriculum must reflect the 'big picture' of Shiatsu by combining the greatest common denominator and the smallest common multiple. The focus is not on the differences between the styles, but on what is shared and serves as the basis for all traditions. Differentiation is only necessary with regard to neighbouring methods.

Example: The curriculum of the Austrian Shiatsu Association (ÖDS)

When the ÖDS was founded in 1993, there were seven Shiatsu schools, each with a different focus. To give a few examples of the many differences: some schools taught only classical meridians and tsubos, while others concentrated on the Masunaga meridians or combined both approaches. There were also significant differences in diagnostic methods, ranging from five-element diagnostics to hara and back diagnostics to tongue and pulse diagnostics of traditional Chinese medicine. And while macrobiotic nutrition was a central component of Shiatsu for one school, other schools followed TCM nutrition or were only marginally interested in this topic.

Ultimately, all schools agreed on a common curriculum – a compromise that left room for their respective specialisations, but at the same time presented a unified image to the outside world. Each school had to adapt their curriculum slightly. For example, one school that had not previously taught classical meridians and tsubos included them in their programme.

In addition to the different Shiatsu approaches, legal and social requirements were also incorporated into the curriculum. For example, 50 hours of communication training were integrated to meet the needs of Western clients. Topics such as hygiene, first aid, and Western anatomy, physiology, and pathology were also included to meet the legal requirements in Austria.

Integration of different Shiatsu styles

If, for example, a Namikoshi school were to seek membership of the ÖDS, it could continue to teach its style and its students could use this treatment technique in their practice without any problems. However, the Namikoshi school would have to ensure that all the content prescribed in the ÖDS curriculum is taught and that students demonstrate their knowledge in the final exam. This applies equally to all forms and traditions of Shiatsu.

In summary, it can be seen that a standardised definition of Shiatsu only makes sense at the association level – as a pragmatic, integrative solution that takes into account a wide range of styles without declaring a particular tradition as the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ one.