

Floating Inward: Watsu® and Waterdance Therapy

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consulting adventures and good fortune recently rewarded me with a meeting with Gary Jaeger, co-founder of Stillpoint Health Associates, an alternative health center on Stone Way. A massage therapist for over 15 years, Gary had pioneered the practice in Seattle of Watsu, a form of Shiatsu massage done in water, and was going to be interviewed for King 5 News's HealthLink about this groundbreaking and immensely enjoyable health therapy.

Listening to the great results

Gary has gotten with Watsu, I get excited. I want to give people a broader look at this lesser-known form of massage than they can get from a one-and-a-half-minute segment on the news. I decide to do at least 3 Watsu® sessions in the 97-degree pool (located at a wooded retreat site just outside Redmond). I also agree to try Waterdance, which will involve going underwater for brief periods while Gary guides my body's movements—a therapy that originated in Germany in 1987 by Brunschwiler and Schroter under the name Wassertanzen.

But

first I have questions. I learn that Gary Jaeger trained with Harold Dull (who created Watsu® while working with his Zen Shiatsu students at Harbin Hot Springs in California in 1980) and with some of Dull's earliest teachers as well. When choosing a good Watsu® therapist, Gary says, I should be comfortable with them at the outset. He recommends that I experience a therapist's work once or twice to get a feel for their style and approach.

I learn that Watsu, developed by

Harold Dull, not only effectively relieves musculoskeletal pain and overall stress, but often results in a profound inner state of well-being. Gary's clients have described their experience of Watsu® massage as meditative, transcendent, even blissful.

Like

Watsu, Gary says, Waterdance begins with the client being cradled, stretched, and relaxed above the water surface. In Waterdance, the client is then given nose clips and, gradually and gently, is taken entirely under the water. "Once freed from the bounds of head support and gravity," he continues, "the client's body can be moved, stretched, and worked in literally unlimited ways." Waterdance is said to incorporate elements of massage, Aikido, dolphin and snake movements,

rolls, somersaults, inversions, dance, and much more. The effects of this work, I am told, include physical release as well as deep relaxation, meditation, and sometimes even visions. And some clients find that, after Watsu, their entire way of meeting and greeting the world is altered for the better.

One woman came to Gary for Watsu® primarily to remedy her low back pain. Later she reported that, just as Gary had forewarned, the back pain from bulging disks was little improved, but her fibromyalgia had disappeared for 3 days and she was feeling better overall. The reason she gave for booking another appointment, though, was that she had recently gathered the courage to confront her boss on an important issue, and that she had greatly improved her boundaries with another close friend. This woman had not been able to stand up for herself before, but after the Watsu® session she felt grounded and in touch with her personal power.

Another of Gary's Watsu® clients shares that her children, usually demanding of her time, seemed pleased as she headed out the door to her Watsu® appointment. Surprised, she asked them about it. The children said they were glad because "things were always so much happier" when she returned home from Watsu.

Another woman felt nervous at first during Watsu, thinking she might lose control over her personal boundaries in a pool, as opposed to lying on a table during traditional massage. Gradually "as [Gary] moved and stretched my body, I started to let go … and after a while," she says, I "forgot that I had a body" and "started to feel as if I were a fetus in the womb. I was filled with a motherly love and felt very safe, as if I had never experienced fear before." At the same time, the woman felt deep gratitude to her parents for giving her life. Rather than disempowering her as she had feared, Watsu® helped her feel stronger and "reconnect with the essence of myself … something beautiful and precious in me that I had never seen."

It is hearing these stories of transcendental, transformative states that most intrigues me. If this is real, I think, then Watsu® constitutes the true cutting edge of holistic care, supporting not only the mind/body connection, but the entire constellation of mind/body/spirit.

The day of my appointment, I turn down the gravel road leading into the spiritual retreat center and Gary Jaeger's Watsu® pool. Following stepping stones into a long, narrow building, I'm clearly entering a place where solitude is revered. Both inner and outer peace descend as I step into the poolroom, its high multi-paned windows opened out, and a clear sky showing through. Walls and ceiling are rust-red cedar. Still in city clothes, I'm immediately drawn to the water. Silky wisps

of steam swirl playfully upward and disappear into the cedar beams overhead. Sunlight gestures on the surface of the pool.

As

a longtime meditator, I'm eager to experience the higher states of awareness that Gary's Watsu® clients report. I quickly shower and change to a swimsuit. Gary is already waist-high in the water, gently wading to the center. "Jump right in," he says. A creature of habit, I take the corner steps anyway, honoring years of habitual avoidance of chilly surface-shock. Just as promised, I glide into a lagoon upwards of 97 degrees — body-tepid — a placid, watery womb. We talk for a while, sharing stories, balancing half-afloat, idly stretching our arms and legs while we talk and grow comfortable sharing personal pool space. Gary makes it easy: turning our talk to the matter at hand, he asks if I'm ready to begin. I join his confident and relaxed mood.

My

only responsibility is "to relax. And then," says Gary, "when you think you're as relaxed as you can get, see if you can relax even a bit more…." I lean into gentle, assured arms and begin my part of the "work." Even for a go-getter like me, this assignment is easier than expected. The warmth of the water, and the slow, Tai Chi-like movements of my body through it, create currents that soothe taut places open and allow my breath to settle.

Soon I'm stirred around like a noodle in a bowl of soup, noticing the innate tenderness of my body's ways. Gary has vanished, and only a slight pressure remains, firmly guiding the sweep and flow of my limbs. I am curled up like a roly-poly, then released with arms and legs happily asplay. Then a stillness. Warm peace. The heart chakra pulsates in the center of my chest — it's a kind of compassionate ache. Soon I have vanished, too. There's only a ragbody that dances around its lulled inhabitant. At last even these dissolve into a faint swishing sound that mingles imperceptibly with the breath's ebb and flow. In the arc of a wave, this glide and swirl and sway. The movement stops and the breath subsides.

Then, only the water. Light flickers. Silence.

After

a long golden while, something broad and solid touches my back. It's the wall of the pool. I have feet again; gradually they are made firm under me. The head rights itself, and I have a thought: "I am here." I keep my eyes closed. There is nothing I want "out there." There is nothing I want, period. But then a prayer surfaces: "May all beings know peace." Now it's time to go. At the edge of the pool my body heaves itself up and out, forgiving and trusting everything — its weight, the touch of air, the field that holds it steady on its way.

As I leave, Gary and I trade a silent nod and a smile. "Thank you," I manage, then float toward the car. I sit for a moment to reassemble my driving skills. Watsu? I think, as the gravel road skritch beneath the tires. This isn't just massage therapy: it's high art. It's the soul being called front and center, standing peacefully, as it did before agendas formed around it and crawled onto the shores of karma, dragging it along. Once more in concert with the body's rhythms, I appreciate the one who lives and breathes and moves inside it.

Yes, the kinks — the pain and tension — are gone. But what stays with me is this sense of being, a big open space, the flickering light, the feeling that I'm more than a noodle or a ragdoll, or even a soul: I've looked all the way through the "I."

In the next two sessions I have headaches, and Gary adjusts his approach to something more like "underwater bodywork" — more physical focus, more problem-solving moves, but with the same Watsu® elements I enjoyed before. I notice the familiar sense of spreading and loosening in my joints and limbs, but not until the following session — when Gary directs me to focus on breathing deeply and fully — do I return to the blissful sea of the Inner Self.

I know we'll try Waterdance this time, that I'll be submerged for a time. When Gary hands me the noseclips, he explains, I will put them on; before taking me under, he'll squeeze my arm twice. A great system, and all goes as planned. On immersion, I turn fish, swinging out in concentric gyrations. My head and tail swoop and dive, tunneling through the water. Then suddenly I'm suspended in stillness, inverted like a bat. In a moment my face pushes up, breaks the surface like buried treasure popping aloft after centuries. Inexplicably euphoric, I explode in laughter. The sound expands, glittering in all directions. I swirl into the muted depths and rise up again, meeting the solid air. I'm swimming the story of the conscious and the subconscious, acting out archetypal origins too subtle to name. At length my feet reassert themselves, then my head and middle and the rest. Again the Being that floats in the body guides it forward from moment to moment… the shower, nod and goodbye, the stone path, the car, the road.

Later I tell Gary how safe I felt, how I loved going underwater, losing all sense of "up" or "down," plumbing the inner silence. I set another appointment — not just for a massage. It's a date with my Inner Self.

If
you are interested in experiencing Watsu® and/or Waterdance, contact
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<WatsuNorthwest.com>.

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