

## HOW TO TOUCH

Noa Granot

### 1. UNCOVERING CHI

Silicon Valley in late summer. The sun looming over us as we walk back from breakfast. I catch up with my uncle - an inventive computer scientist and talented mathematician - after my mom and I finish peering into a gallery of woven-felted pots. We stride silently on the spotless sidewalks of Palo Alto.

"So, what *is* Shiatsu exactly?" my uncle prompts. "I mean, I love massages. Thailand was amazing!"

"Well, Shiatsu isn't exactly massage," I venture, curling my finger around the strap of my orange fabric bag. "It combines physical and energetic work along the meridian pathways. It's based on Chinese Medicine."

"*What meridians?*" He teases.

I grow quiet, looking down at my pale, worn out dress. Then at the perfect, cream-colored sidewalk. We continue to walk in silence. I change the subject.

Jerusalem in late fall. The pines smell sweet after the rain. It will be dark soon. I dry off and walk into a big, white hall. My new class in the padded "dojo" is a novel experience. Mattresses covered in mix-and-match bedding from home. Warm lighting. A sanctuary of peace and quiet. In class we learn to crawl. Half of us lying cozily on our stomachs. The other half on all fours, navigating around the room. Placing one hand slowly in front of the other, I explore the sensations under my hand as they meet the soft floor - as though for the first time. Palms descend into a dense, spongy mattress. Then onto a friend's back. The only evidence of chi is the dreaming, relaxing, and sleeping people beneath my hands.

It is fall again in the dojo. Outside, tension persists between sun and clouds. But in the dojo, I am engrossed in delightful sensations: I am drawn in by a delicate, yet powerful presence beyond the mere skin beneath my palms. It is called chi. It is gentle. It asks to be regarded that way.

Energetic pathways along the skin's surface come to life. Each week we explore a new trailhead and walk the path. I relax my ambitions to immerse myself more deeply in the terrain of each separate meridian. I get to know the flora and fauna along the trail, their shapes and textures - the way they rustle in the wind. Months go by. Now we know all the crevices and curves of each pathway, the creeks and valleys of the human national park, stretching out across all bodies, waiting to be touched, moved and felt.

Raise an eyebrow at me when I say "meridians" - I will not defend something more fiercely. I've made it through the dense thicket of flesh and peered into the subtle, more hidden realities of chi. I have felt volcanoes and burning explosions beneath the earth's surface. I have seen a spectacular view of the sun setting above the sea. I've sunk into the ocean deep. I've marveled at the rising moon, illuminating ocean currents. I have known the power and intensity of my

subjective inner landscape. What is the obvious presence of flesh and skin compared to the mysterious world of chi - subtle, yet vibrant and powerful - waiting to be discovered and unleashed?

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## 2. THE LONESOME QUEST FOR RELIEF

Time and again, skin and flesh have proven a gate to hidden truths and promising freedoms. The choice to go deeper and explore what is inside comes to fruition. The undying student in me elects to study the arts of skin, flesh, and contents thereof. But the protective mass of flesh keeps the gates to the hidden treasures sealed shut. Only one thing is certain. Something in me - unknown - feels neglected. Disconnected from its core. Its more obvious counterpart, I know all too well: a nagging chronic pain in my lower back.

The hopeful skeptic who grew quiet in Silicon Valley is willing to accept the reality of physical pain. For years now, it doesn't seem to listen to me. It refuses to give itself up to even the most talented of pilates teachers and physiotherapists.

"Now it's your turn," I say to my aching back.

"Tell me what you'd like me to do, and I'll try my best to follow your lead."

It whispers in my ear:

"Stop dancing. Move more slowly.

Now just stand. Feel.

Stop standing, and sit. Focus.

Please, lie down! And listen with ease."

Arms outspread, smiling at the sun. An inward motion begins, like autumn leaves floating to the ground, one by one: I cocoon into total darkness.

In the darkness, the whispers in my ear persist:

"Don't react to me. Don't collapse into me.

Look for anything else that moves and changes.

Thoughts, emotions, sensations."

A vague inner presence deep inside begins to make itself known: refined as a single grain of sugar but heavy as the whole universe. A quiet rustle in the wind, a restlessness, an anxiety, a lump in my throat. Pain swells. Pain subsides. A sigh is released.

The gates begin to open.

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### 3. THE UNTOUCHABLE PAIN

Friday morning. Broad daylight spills through the many windows of the dojo. The slightest breeze hardly makes its way inside. We practice the treatment sequences - "katas". We arrange into pairs. My turn comes to lie down and receive. I lay on my stomach, feeling its ebb and flow against the soft mattress. My cheek rests on laundered sheets, taking in their aroma as I breathe. A new pair of palms meets my back. I want to disappear as I feel them pressing in further, as if crushing my inner landscape to pieces. Something is not right. I wish it would stop. I am utterly at a loss of what to do or say. I space out in horror, waiting for it to end.

Meanwhile, deep inside, an insatiable thirst to break free from the tense inner terrain - if only for a moment - clashes with an emerging guardedness in the face of anyone who tries to break it with force. Lightning crashes. I am vicious with desire to attentively cradle and hold and defend the fragile inner wound that leaves its mark on my back - which only I can fully know and perceive - like a lioness defending her precious cubs from evil threats. And yet I yearn to let go.

I get up when it's all over, fake a smile, and run.

A heap of frustration, a rock-hard loneliness and a dash of craziness bundled tightly in my arms like dirty laundry.

But why?

I try to reflect.

*What could I have said to make it better? "Too fast"? "too hard"? No. I know that wasn't exactly it. But what was it?*

Confusion subsides as the day goes on. Yet one question persists, leaving me shuddering with uncertainty: can I negotiate my desire for touch and my untouchable pain?

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### 4. ALL TOO TOUCHABLE

A dry summer day concludes my first two years in the dojo. I spend a long weekend with a healing arts teacher from Sweden - Chris McAlister. We convene in the spacious hall overlooking fields of yellow-green grass, to give and receive shiatsu and acupuncture treatments. Four days, twelve treatments. The hall is enveloped by an outer layer of mud and straw, protecting us from the intense summer heat of July. In the safety of these earthen walls, dozens of unfamiliar hands touch the lives of dozens of unfamiliar bodies. Again and again. Circuits form, responses ensue. The hidden life of each individual becomes a little more palpable at the touch of a finger. Each response to each treatment reverberates in the sunlit hall and fuses into a single, collective experience. A mosaic of stormy visions. Surges of heat and cold. Deep sleeps. Uncontrollable bouts of tears. They all culminate into something that fills the room. A quality. A mood. I am hurled from one place to another in the inner landscape - shaken by the ocean waves.

## 5. BEING SEEN

On the last day, Chris is called through the crowd of needling partners. He crosses the shiny parquet floor and approaches the young lady searching for an acupuncture point on my arm. "Chris, Will you help me find the point!?" She cries in frustration.

I lie on the glossy mattress, several needles quivering in my belly. Chris kneels down over us on the parquet floor and explains to my partner how to treat Highly Sensitive individuals - how to listen to them. How not to overwhelm them. How overwhelmed by life they are to begin with. How intensely they feel. How not to press too hard into their skin. He demonstrates - placing his finger on the missing point on my arm - Pericardium 2. "If you just sit and listen," he says, "they'll speak volumes. If you press hard – they'll never want to talk to you."

Tears of relief run down my face.

Chinese medicine terms like "Chong Mai" and "Yang Ming" take residence in my mind as vague remnants of those four days, but the phrase "High Sensitivity" makes an everlasting impression on me.

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## 6. BUILDING TRUST

If I am nearsighted and look at someone with my glasses off, I can only make out a mess of light, color, and movement. But when I put them back on, I can discern their contours and their exact shape. The lights, colors and movements are integrated into a distinct personality.

What happens when I feel fundamentally unsafe? What happens when life makes me dizzy with overstimulation - and I see nothing but lights and colors - hardly recognizing myself?

I sit alone and protectively observe the tensions in my body, for fear of the unpredictable storms entering and violating my fragile existence. As if one external word or touch slightly out of place can shatter it all. I am guarding something precious - I am guarding an evolving sense of self. Its new skin, its proper shape and size, have yet to fully develop. The only thing that is more precious than this process is the possibility of being truly touched by another life. Whether I am shedding a skin, growing a new one, or trying on a new "outfit". Where there is understanding - all conflicts dissolve.

It takes very little to dissolve the tension between the impulse to react to pain and the impulse to collapse into it; between the impulse to receive touch and the impulse to reject touch; between the desire for integrity and the desire to surrender - not much more than an attitude adjustment.

Where will the right change in attitude emerge? For me, it emerged through acts of grace - encounters with the very individuals who truly understood me. Some of them came in the form of books, like the wise, forgiving voice of Elaine Aron in her book "The Highly Sensitive Person", which I devoured as soon as I was home from the workshop.

What is the place of trust in all of this? Trust is the ability to recognize myself in something outside of me, and allow myself to organically grow into it. To let it in. To allow it to nourish and change me.

*~Noa Granot*

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