

Hiroko Urakawa

by Sandra Dexter

The Urakawa sisters — Michiyo and Hiroko — were pioneers of shiatsu in the 70s in Australia. They came here from Japan with little English, but with a strong desire to heal and help people.

One of the sparks that ignited their decision to study shiatsu came from their mother. She had a very bad frozen shoulder and she went to many doctors but they were unable to help her. A neighbour suggested shiatsu. When 10-year-old Hiroko came home from school, her mother was cured and smiling and that night over dinner she said to her girls 'Why don't you study shiatsu?'

Their father was another key influence. He was a ship's engineer who was often overseas while the girls were growing up. His travels convinced him that computers would take over many occupations and he told his children that if they wanted to be independent professionals they should seek a job that machines could not do.

In the 60s Michiyo and Hiroko went to college in Tokyo. Michiyo graduated in journalism and Hiroko in literature. Luckily for shiatsu, journalism and teaching proved not to be the careers the sisters were looking for. They wanted to learn a profession that embodied Japanese culture and history and that they could take overseas.

'If you go to Japan and you don't have any career people will not respect you, but if you come from somewhere, doesn't matter where you come from, if you have your own culture to show what you can do, people respect you. That's your culture, that's your history, so people know where you come from. We were looking for nearly

10 years for the kind of thing we could do,' recalls Hiroko.

In 1971 the sisters began studying shiatsu at the Namikoshi Shiatsu College in Tokyo. Studying in Japan is strict and disciplined. To get into the College they had to pass an exam, then study for three years, pass a government exam to gain a licence and then they practised for nearly one year at the Namikoshi school.

Hiroko and her sister had many lectures with Grand Master Tokujiro Namikoshi.

'He had a gift. He's a very good therapist...but people who are very good therapists are not necessarily good teachers. I think he could see what's going wrong from the outside. He looks and he can sense already. But sometimes if I asked him 'Why you do this spot?' he cannot give me the answer.

'They know they can't teach that much. Some things you have to learn yourself with practise and of course study.'

In 1974 Hawaii, Canada and Australia were offering sponsorships for shiatsu therapists. Michiyo and Hiroko discussed the options with their father. He had been to Sydney many times and felt that there was less discrimination in Australia and advised the girls to go there.

At that time, they didn't know much about Australia. More in tune with the mountainous Japan, Hiroko's first impression of Melbourne was that it was 'too flat'.

'We could not speak much English, but the people didn't discriminate. But it was very hard to make people understand what

our treatment could achieve,' says Hiroko.

The sisters began working in a clinic in an arcade near the Southern Cross Hotel in Melbourne's CBD. Some clients were rude or did not pay because they did not understand why the sisters would work on different areas of the body to where their pain was. It was a totally different type of therapy.

Their healing skills spoke the message that their words could not convey and gradually word spread about the Japanese sisters. Articles appeared in the newspapers and they opened their own clinic in McKillop Street. They never used advertising but relied on word of mouth referrals.

In the 90s the Urakawa sisters received many accolades. Michiyo and Hiroko became honorary life members of the Shiatsu Therapy Association of Australia in recognition of their pioneering achievement, and they were awarded masters of shiatsu by the Nippon Shiatsu Association of Japan by Grand Master Tokujiro Namikoshi. They were also awarded honorary membership with the Massage Association of Australia. In 2003 the Shiatsu Therapeutic Association of America awarded them honorary membership.

After giving thousands of treatments, the sisters established a school in 1998 hoping to share their knowledge and experience. They persisted for several years but in the end decided to stop teaching because of the gap they perceived between Australian and Japanese attitudes towards study and the profession.

‘People who came to my course, their aim and my aim were totally not matching,’ explains Hiroko. ‘Different attitude, no discipline. They don’t understand it. People just come for a certificate, just for a piece of paper and the next day they want to make a business card saying they are shiatsu therapists. I wanted to give them some understanding of what we can achieve with our hands. Those people who came in for piece of paper, what can I say?’

‘After five or so years, we realised that there’s no point...very disappointing.’

Despite her disappointment, Hiroko still continues educating people about shiatsu at her clinic and at various events. And she still continues her own studies.

‘I still study. You may have a question and three years later you might get the answer, maybe 30 years later. In my case it took 20 years and I have roughly an idea of what shiatsu is about. I think that’s not just me. Last year I talked to my friend who is one year older than me and he said “Now I am starting to understand what shiatsu is about”. I understand exactly what he is trying to tell me, because I have the same experience. He said to me “Before 30 years I thought I knew something about shiatsu but now it’s still not enough”. Until we die we never finish our study.’

‘The body is so mysterious. Our body is tuned to universal law. Some people cannot tune in their body and mind, and we do not always know what’s going on.’

Hiroko is bewildered by people who claim to be proficient at many different modalities.

‘In Australia some people have a business card that says they can do shiatsu, they can do sports massage, they can do this and that, you know 3 or 4 things. If they saw that in Japan no one would believe it, because one technique can take

30, 40 years — they know that. So how can you do this and that — you cannot achieve anything. If you want to achieve something it takes a long time sticking to one technique.’

Hiroko believes that if you want to be an expert in anything whether you want to be a cook, teacher, gardener or shiatsu practitioner, there is one golden rule — never slacken, keep on going.

‘Many people can’t decide what they want to do. Application form, go to school, 3 months later they give up or maybe finish just to get some certificate, but they cannot keep going on. Whatever you want to be expert in, don’t slacken, keep going on until you die. Keep your focus. Continue. That’s what most people cannot do. Too much shifting.’

Hiroko says that just researching one technique after another is not enough that you must also know yourself and be in tune with universal law.

‘When you do something you must not just focus on it, but on it and yourself together. I practise harder to do shiatsu, and I practise harder not to lose myself. All time I talk to myself and overcome my desires. Otherwise you cannot be expert.’

Sadly, Michiyo passed away in 2004 but Hiroko continues on at their practice in Balaclava.

‘Until I pass away I want to give as much as possible to people who need my treatment, so they can go back to their normal lives. That is my mission.’

Even though she still has family in Japan, Hiroko does call Australia home.

‘I prefer to live here because many people need me. In Japan it would be easier to do business more than here because of the background shiatsu has. As long as I have sign there they know straight away, so it’s very easy to make business. But here many people need me.’



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Principles of health

by Hiroko Urakawa

Last year at a Japanese exhibition at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Hiroko Urakawa gave the following presentation in which she challenged the audience to reconsider their definition of health.

Health is a condition. Many people believe that health or a healthy body means to be more physically active, to have greater physical strength and abilities. But fitness and health are not the same.

The three physical aspects of health are:

1. *It is important to enjoy everything that you eat.* The hallmark of a healthy person is that they can enjoy anything that they eat.
2. *It is important to sleep well; to experience deep sleep.* Deep sleep means that one's automatic nervous system is very balanced and is functioning normally. Due to this healthy condition, a person is able to experience deep sleep and relaxation while asleep.
3. *It is important never to get tired; to not be fatigued.* The body requires to sustain equilibrium and balance at all times which helps the body gravitate upon its horizontal and vertical axis and consequently, it never gets tired or fatigued.

The three mental aspects of health are:

1. *It is important to always feel joyful.* A healthy person is able to experience joy in every moment of their life.
2. *It is important not to forget things in one's life.* A person who forgets things in their life means that they do not stimulate their mind and are mentally inactive. Such a person manifests low levels of self-control and self-awareness. But a healthy mind is stimulated regularly through the processes of life and is more in control of one's self.
3. *It is important to be willing to help others in life.* A healthy person is able to reveal their inner beauty and gifts to others freely because they have the ability to judge correctly. Due to their healthy state of being they are more sensitive to the needs of others and have greater perceptual abilities.

Through sharing these principles of health, I hope to broaden your understanding of the concept and meaning of health in your lives.