

Sotai

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Sotai or Sotai-hō (操体法, Sōtai-hō) is a Japanese form of muscular or movement therapy invented by Keizo Hashimoto (1897–1993), a Japanese medical doctor from Sendai. The term So-tai (操体) is actually the opposite of the Japanese word for exercise: Tai-so (体操). Dr. Hashimoto conceived Sotai as an antidote to the forceful and regimented exercises of Japan, that anyone could practice easily to restore balance and health. Sotai is different from regular exercise because it distinguishes between balanced movements that are natural and beneficial and those that are unnatural and cause strains and physical distortions. The aim of Sotai is to help the body restore and maintain its natural balance. Dr. Hashimoto developed a model of treatment based on restoring structural balance that is claimed to work with the breath and movements toward comfort (or away from pain). He developed Sotai Therapy from traditional East Asian medicine (acupuncture, moxibustion, bone setting (Sekkotsu), Seitai Jutsu) in concert with his knowledge of modern medicine. Sotai Therapy is intended to be a method of neuromuscular reeducation and unwinding muscular holding patterns. According to practitioners, Sotai Therapy balances the nervous and muscular systems. Its central principle is backtracking movement or "reverse-motion" treatment. The idea is that structural distortions can be returned to a more normal condition by moving the body in the comfortable direction. Using the effects of an isometric contraction followed by a sudden relaxation (post-isometric relaxation) can normalise the strained condition.

Keywords: structural balance ; isometric contraction ; relaxation

1. Philosophy

Dr. Hashimoto held that Sotai was not just a system of exercises or a method of therapy, but that it was part of a deeper broader principle that embraced all of life. Health is the natural result of right living, and its improvement and maintenance is the responsibility of each individual. Most human beings go through life without much awareness of the essential processes of life until there is some dysfunction or disease. These essential functions are breathing, eating/drinking, moving, and thinking. These four functions are interrelated and help keep our body in balance or otherwise cause imbalance and disease.

Most imbalances begin small and barely perceptible but gradually increase to eventually produce pain, physical distortion, and organic disease. People in this modern age need to re-connect with the natural principles of life, (the interrelationship of breath, ingestion, movement, and thought) that is a unique combination for each person. Sotai is intended as a system to help re-establish a natural and effortless relationship with our environment and engender balance, health, and wellbeing.

The Sotai theory follows the guideline that stiffness or pain should be regarded as a sort of stop light: if a movement hurts, the patient should stop doing it. According to the theory, Sotai(-hō) is a guide to determine which movements are harmful and which are helpful (therapeutic).^[1]

2. Four Functions of Life

Most human beings go through life without much awareness of the essential processes of life until there is some dysfunction or disease. These essential functions are breathing, eating/drinking, moving, and thinking. These four functions are interrelated and help keep our body in balance or otherwise cause imbalance and disease. Most imbalances begin small and barely perceptible but gradually increase to eventually produce pain, physical distortion, and organic disease. People in this modern age need to re-connect with the natural principles of life, (the interrelationship of breath, ingestion, movement, and thought) that is unique combination for each person. Sotai is a system that helps re-establish a natural and effortless relationship with our environment and engender balance, health, and wellbeing.

As to the first function breathing, essential to life, Dr. Hashimoto advised abdominal breathing. Breathing is the most vital function in our life, which cannot be interrupted for more than a few minutes. It follows that the healthier one is, the deeper one's breathing. To this end, Dr. Hashimoto advocated abdominal massage and abdominal breathing every night before going to sleep. About the second function of eating/drinking, or diet, Dr. Hashimoto advocated a simple macrobiotic diet. Nevertheless, he cautioned against being too strict about one's diet. He suggested learning which foods were most nourishing and what was best for one's own health. The most important thing in diet, Dr. Hashimoto maintained, was not what or how much food was eaten, but how well the food that was eaten was chewed and digested.

Regarding the function of movement, Sotai advocates natural movement or aiming for ease and effortlessness as much as possible. The aim of Sotai is to release abnormal tension, which can eventually lead to functional and structural problems. All interventions, be they small or large, are aimed at facilitating the body's recovery of functional and structural integrity. This is accomplished not by force, but by inviting the body to relax, breathe, and move in the direction of ease. As to the last function of thinking, unique to human beings, Dr. Hashimoto regarded positive thinking to be no less essential to health than breathing. This is achieved by preeminently directing our thoughts towards those things that are pleasant, beautiful, and delightful. One need not pay any attention to depressing things and events that cannot be changed. Dr. Hashimoto said, "Our thoughts are the steering wheel of our destiny."

3. Basic Principles of Natural Movement

Among the abovementioned four functions of life, Sotai works specifically with movement and breathing. In respect to movement Dr. Hashimoto set out some basic principles of natural movement, which support balance and health (in contrast to those movements that cause strain and injury and compromise health). These basic principles of natural movement have broad implications on all types of movement.

3.1. The Movement Chain

According to Hashimoto the law of the reciprocal effect has not only validity within the model of the four health factors: it refers to every kind of movement. A movement never (!) takes place in one segment only.^[2] It is not detached from the remaining body! It spreads out as a kind of a chain starting from one link going to the adjoining and finally over the whole body.

In Sotai it is said that the whole organism is always involved in performance. Following this idea, one could regard the birth of a local hardening as the result of a process which works in the whole organism (see: Philosophy). According to this vision, one could regard a prolapsed disc as an appearance at those places within the chain which are not permeable, where the forces are held, leading to a collapse.

3.2. Doshin (Self-Detection)

According to Hayashi, Sotaiho is not a curation treatment in the usual sense. Sotaiho requires the co-operation of the affected person.^[3] This is meant as a sort "listening to yourself" during the treatment. Hashimoto claims that therapists, doctors and medications cannot heal. He states that this can only be done by nature. So it is an essential part of Sotai therapy to hunt up independently false positions of the several joints and to understand them as a cause of the problem.

While Dr. Hashimoto's work has concentrated in essence upon the partner's work, it was Dr. Sato who had strongly developed the Self-Sotai.^[4] From his point of view it belongs to an extensive therapy to train an affected person in self-exercises.

Practitioners claim that if the affected person has understood the Sotai idea once, he can extend it to all areas. They say that this understanding also includes the idea that there is an optimal degree of the pleasant. Too much of it is again harmful: e.g., a piece of cake may be probably tasty, however, a whole cake causes certainly stomachaches.

4. Meridian Tendons

In the traditional eastern medicine (TEAM) one knows about muscular leading roads which are very similar to the course of the associated meridians. They are named 'meridian tendons'.

For didactic reasons, the 'tendon' of the gallbladder meridian is chosen: this meridian tendon runs down the outside of the body and connects the temples with the outer area of the foot. In between there are several interfaces:

- on height of the fibula's head
- at the level of the sacrum

- on height of the waist-line
- in the shoulder
- in the area of the temple.

Practitioners frequently have to work on problems within this tendon.^[5] They claim that many loins complaints stand in connection with a disturbance of this chain.

According to Dr. Masunaga (founder of Zen Shiatsu), who has assigned psychological functions to the Functional Circles, the meridian of the gallbladder stands on behalf for the function of short-time decisions: "Do I go to the right or to the left?"

In the bioenergetic concept of Alexander Lowen, it is said that emotional habits are incorporated in postural patterns. Probably Dr. Hashimoto's approach transfers this theory to the level of the movement chains: all kind of (movement) habits will be reflected within the meridian tendons. E.g., everybody knows the situation in which one could not make a proper decision, to do something somehow and, nevertheless, also again not. According to Masunaga the appropriate movement would be a kind of twist, an unclear movement which leads to one side, but also to the other side. According to Masunaga's idea, such samples will establish as strained conditions in the gallbladder's meridian tendon.

According to Kawakami^[1] one could state a change of the muscle proteins at microscopic level, called "strain". Via neuronal feedback mechanisms the vegetative nervous system is affected, which has an influence on the metabolism of the internal organs. It is possible that through this way disturbances in the organ system could be caused.

To speak to Manakas^[6] words, a correction in the software - in this case the muscle apparatus - could cause changes in the somatic condition of the related segment.^[7]

5. Therapy

According to Hashimoto the pelvis is the centre of all movements. Goal of therapy is to synchronize movements of hands and feet with those of the pelvic girdle.

5.1. Facilitate the Lower Abdomen

According to Hayashi^[8] with this technique an exercise is presented with which all basic treatments are started practically. Palpating the popliteal fossa one can feel hardenings of the local tendons by moving one's fingers. The technique will be executed on the more reactive side. Here the affected person should raise his forefoot and shift his weight gently towards the heel. If both sides are reactive the technique will be done on both sides. The practitioner puts on his hand lightly to strengthen the tension within the movement chain positively. After three to five seconds the affected person should relax suddenly, afterwards the exercise will be repeated three to four times. Applying this technique facilitates the connection of the center of the foot with the lower abdomen.

5.2. Right or Left?

The following technique probably adjusts the tension in the diaphragm^[9] and in the gall-bladder's meridian tendon^[10] as well. If for example, the trunk rotation is unpleasant to the left, the affected person turns to the right, to the painless side. Starting from the place at which the movement is still pleasant the practitioner initiates the movement. Close to the end of the movement the practitioner will build up a light resistance which ends in an isometric contraction. The final point of the exercise is where the segment can be adjusted on an optimal degree. Mostly it lies exactly opposite facing the starting point. After three to five seconds the affected person should relax suddenly, afterwards the exercise will be repeated three to four times.

References

1. Hashimoto & Kawakami, 1983
2. Hayashi in his Reader, 2nd ed., pg. 4, 2003
3. Hayashi in his Reader, 2nd ed., pg. 30, 2003
4. Hayashi, 2006
5. Meridian tendons http://www.balanceheilpraxis.de/Newsletter/News06.htm#_Toc236536157
6. see Manakas book: Chasing the dragon's tail

7. Kawakami claims that orthosympathical dystension is generated via muscular hypertonus (Hashimoto & Kawakami, pg. 182, German edition of Balance and health through natural movements, ch. "Die tägliche Gesundheitspflege" (daily health hygiene))
 8. Hayashi in his Reader, 3rd ed., pg. 35ff, 2009
 9. Alice Schaarschuch developed in the 1920s a therapy to integrate postural and respirative patterns. Her method was further developed by her student Hedi Haase in the 1970s, called 'Lösungstherapie nach Schaarschuch-Haase'. In their method there is a description of a supine rotation stretch to release tension of the diafragm. This position seems to be quite similar to the here described Sotai exercise
 10. According to Schulze this exercise releases tension of the gall-bladder's meridian tendon
([http://www.physiotherapeuten.de/index.html?](http://www.physiotherapeuten.de/index.html?http://www.physiotherapeuten.de/pt/archiv/2010/pt04/a_pt_10_04_lehre03_fort-weiterbildung.html)
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