

Watsu as a Path of Meditation, Connection, Exploration and Flow

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 I started Watsu, the world's first form of Aquatic Bodywork, by applying the stretches and moves of Zen Shiatsu while floating my students in warm water. In the years since, with the help of countless others in classes, clinics and spas around the world, Watsu has evolved into what many consider the most profound development in bodywork in our time. While other modalities are based on touch, the holding that working in water necessitates, brings both the giver and the receiver to new levels of connection and trust. This, combined with the therapeutic benefits of warm water and the greater freedom of movement it encourages, creates a modality that can affect every level of our being.

In thirty years Watsu has spread to every corner of the world. Those we have authorized to teach Watsu have added to our Worldwide Registry the transcripts of students from more than sixty countries. Many enter onto the Watsu Practitioner Path to start a practice, many to share with family and friends, many to add Watsu to existing practices in spas or clinics where the number of conditions that Watsu has been found to alleviate continues to grow.

This book presents Watsu as a Path on which we explore and deepen the creative engagement of our life force. Rather than a form, a sequence that must be memorized, this book introduces a format, the steps to be followed when any three meet to explore together in a pool. It maps twenty stations on the path, each with a theme, a move or position, to bring to a Team Round. On arrival all the variations and possibilities in the theme that each brings are explored by the team. Then in a round each receives a complete session that begins with a continuum in which Watsu's basic breath connected moves build up to stillness. It continues as each of the other two explore how movement out of that stillness draws into its spontaneous flow variations of the theme they brought to the team and other moves. The session concludes with being floated between the two as they explore how they can integrate their moves into a single flow and return to the emptiness at the bottom of the breath where the three become one.

Emptiness and Stillness

A powerful meditation in which we coordinate our breathing to the changing buoyancy of someone floating on our arms opens every Watsu. In the Water Breath Dance we wait to breathe in when their weight lightens on our arm and the water lifts us together toward the surface. Without waiting for them to breathe out we drop back down into the emptiness at the bottom of the breath. Doing nothing we follow the breath up again and again until we find ourselves even deeper in that emptiness where even the doing of waiting escapes our mind. Finally empty we are drawn up out of the Void again and again. This is where the path begins.

In the Path laid out in this book, when this vertical non-doing has become absolute our movement connects to the breath in other dimensions, from side to side, and then an opening and closing and then a spiraling that brings us close enough to chaos to suddenly stop in stillness.

Stillness is not emptiness. Stillness is the surface of a great sea that our heart floats on and our arms reach out into to float the one in front of us. There is movement and like any movement on a sea, once started, it continues. The more spontaneous that movement is, the less we can identify it as coming from us or the one we float. The more it draws our whole bodies into its own dance, the more it is the Stillness itself moving.

Just as the Path opened in an emptiness out of which movement connected to the breath became a continuum, the rest of the Path continues from a stillness in which our exploration of movement from our heart flows into a continuum that rides over and at times joins the underlying continuum of the breath.

Explore Flow

In Explore Flow we explore the ways the movement coming across the Stillness through our heart and out our arms enters into a flow with the person floating on them: when our arms are in the same position as at the opening, when one hand pushes the hip, when an arm reaches over the hara (abdomen) to the back, and when we have floated their head into our hand. As you continue through these four stages you will find the movement you just explored in the previous stage continues to flow more and more into the next stage. The more you practice on this path, the more whatever follows these four stages will spontaneously enter into the flow.

This transformation from exploration to flow characterizes this path. It appears on many levels starting with your solo dance as you enter the pool. In the Team Rounds, each of the three brings a theme, a move or position, for the team to explore in all its variations and applications. Then in the Round, whichever one of those variations first comes to mind is incorporated into the flow, as is whatever crossing from those previously explored, and whatever spontaneously comes to mind when you get to the other side. When two float one at the end of each session in a round, depending on the theme, one may support while the other explores and/or coordinate their moves to explore together as one. Every session concludes by dropping into the bottom of the breath together as three become one in their return to where the session started, the emptiness everything rises out of.

The continuum of the flow throughout a session is the ideal but in actual practice you will encounter moments when you are drawn back to an exploratory mode and restart the continuum. In a sense each session is itself an exploration of this process and you may find the surrender to the flow that you explore on this path and its engagement of your heart continues into your daily life and enriches your relations with others.

Beginning the Path

Before starting down this path you need instruction in how to protect someone's neck and spine from discomfort or injury while floating them, and how to work with your own body in water and preserve its alignment. Trained instructors provide this in our Basic Watsu which is the entry point for both the practitioner and explorer paths. A Basic Tantsu will help you help you connect to others with a heart open to the movement within. Either of the above weekend workshops can be taken first. The two can be followed by our Basic Explorer Path Watsu workshop that trains you in the format for meeting others on the path. The instruction in all three is also incorporated in a 50 hour intensive: Watsu Tantsu Basic Paths. Advanced stations on the path are included in a fourth weekend: Watsu Explore Flow. For those who have already studied Watsu all of the above except the Basic Watsu are included in our Watsu Tantsu Explore Flow intensive.

Once you've taken an Explorer Path course you can choose to list yourself and have access to others who want to join in Team Rounds. If no course is available and you have a pool and others who want to start down this path, you can invite someone from our list of qualified instructors on www.waba.edu.

In either course you will learn to share a Basic Tantsu with anybody. What you learn with it about engaging your whole core (heart and hara) in holds that contain someone's whole core, will help you in whatever path you are on in the water . . . or on land.

The Stations on the Path

Twenty stations are presented in the chapters that follow this Introduction.

- The first three introduce the breath connected moves of the opening, the base.
- The fourth introduces a Tantsu hold on land that helps us access the movement in stillness.
- The fifth introduces the four stage Explore Flow.
- The sixth introduces Follow Movement. Its stillness completes the continuum that the stillness of Explore Flow initiated. Stillness is the container.
- The seventh introduces a crossing, going from one side to the other. This completes all the steps of the Format that is used in every Round.
- The eighth introduces another Tantsu hold on land that deepens our containment.
- The next twelve stations each introduce a new theme, a position or move that can be brought to a Team to explore. No complicated transitions or combinations that require specific steps are introduced, only what can be done in more than one way with variations that can be spontaneously integrated into a flow in a Round.

The Team Round

On first entry into the pool, before waiting for or greeting the others, each participant starts a solo exploration, exploring how completely they can surrender into the water and move into a flow. Some stations will assign an additional exploration related to their theme. At ten minutes past the hour set for the meeting each participant backs up towards the center of the pool and leans back against each other, supporting each other in a couple minutes of silence. Then they turn around and greet each other and, if it's the first time they've met, introduce themselves.

If it is during a class the Explorer Team explores the theme assigned by the instructor. Outside a class each brings the theme from the station in this book they are at on their own path. The team explores all the possible ways the theme can be applied with each other with copious feedback as to what pressure and depth, etc., is most comfortable to each.

The Explorer Team phase is followed a Round that has the following format:

First Floater:

1. Opening Moves: Waterbreath Dance, the three Offerings, Accordion, Rotating (spiraling) Accordion as a continuum that leads to deep stillness.
2. Stillness- Four phase Explore Flow
3. Theme done in whatever one way the above Flow leads into.
4. A crossing to the other side in whatever way the last variation of the Theme leads into.
5. Spontaneous movement (Each crossing should be made without any idea of what will follow. The spontaneous can be a move previously learned or something new in the moment)
6. A new variation of the Theme done in whatever way the Spontaneous leads into.
7. A crossing back to the first side (usually done in some way different than the first crossing.)
8. Spontaneous movement.
9. Stillness- Follow Movement.

Second Floater: When the First Floater's Follow Movement is complete, the second Floater joins from the second side and, starting with the Stillness- Four phase Explore Flow continues through the above progression. When the second floater completes the Follow Movement on their side, the first floater joins from the first side.

Both floaters: While the second floater still supports the receiver, the first floater returns to explore ways to apply their theme. If the theme is one that can be applied simultaneously from both sides, the second floater mirrors the position and moves of the first. Then with the receiver between them, they explore how they can drop together into the emptiness at the bottom of the breath, how three can become one. Together they take the receiver to the wall.

Giver, Receiver and Witness

The roles of giver, receiver and witness differ in the Team and the Round. In the team all three are involved in active exploration. In the round all that the receivers need to explore is how deeply they can surrender and receive. The only feedback they need to give is what directly relates to maintaining their comfort, which can be given to the witness to relay to the giver. In the team they can be more actively involved in trying out different variations. The giver, too, settles more deeply into his role in the round. The witness who volunteered whatever suggestions came to him in the team, in the round, except when they relay feedback from the receiver moves into the role of a silent container, but a container that is free to move to whatever level of movement he witnesses. It is an opportunity to further develop his ability to sense the movement within another and connect to it even without touching. The witness, when he sees the need for it, can also silently gesture ways to improve the giver's position if he notices the giver is high out of the water or not properly supporting the receiver.

Though receivers accept the responsibility of monitoring their own comfort, adjusting their position and giving feedback whenever there is anything that is not comfortable, both the giver and witness should still be looking for ways to improve and insure the best support possible is provided. The back should be kept from hyper extending and the head supported with the same care as that of a newborn. If the receiver's legs tend to sink in a way that hyper extends and compresses their lower back, they should have flotation cuffs available and wear them when needed.

The comfort being monitored should include the emotional and the psychological. Watsu affects every level of our being. The intimacy of its holds can bring unanticipated issues to the surface. To truly be with someone those floating them must be clear of any intentions. The issues that can come up and the ways to deal with them are discussed later in the book as well as a list of counter indications that should be checked before entering this path.

The Creative

Both exploring with a team and surrendering to a flow in which the spontaneous arises, engages our creativity. If whatever creative principle that was introduced from the beginning in the evolution of the universe, continues in us, then accessing our creativity could be the closest we could expect to come to the divine within. In this sense this path is a spiritual path, a new humanism in which we share the creative engagement of our life force. Because that engagement is initiated by the listening with our whole body and the centers in its core this is a path without any esoteric interpretations or charts.

The above introduction is followed by the Path's 20 Stations which are turned followed by additional articles about the Path such as the following:

The Watsu Path

I watched a lecture that explained the separate functions of our brain's two hemispheres in a way that rounded out my understanding of Watsu and our path. The lecturer was a neuroscientist who had a stroke that gradually disabled the left hemisphere. With the right hemisphere still functioning she experienced a state of being that was totally in the moment, of being one with the energy of the universe with no sense of boundary. It took her several years to relearn language and the full functioning of her left hemisphere. She explained that the right hemisphere is engaged in our immediate sensations which being completely in the moment have no limit. The left is linear and being able to compare current sensations to past is able to build up language and our identity, to reason and plan futures.

I see these as two minds, our being mind and our sequential mind, that, throughout our lives integrate with varying degrees of success with our two other minds, our heart mind (our connecting mind) and our body mind (our survival mind). Each of the four, can at times become dominant in our lives.

Reasoning may dominate some times, but when the sequential mind becomes most dominant is when an irrational idea, or an obsession, or blind faith in a doctrine engages it in continually adjusting reality to support that belief.

The Being mind can become dominant in those who leave the world behind to devote themselves to a practice that shuts off the chatter of their left brain.

The Heart mind, which has its own neurons, its own brain, takes over when we fall madly in love. It is engaged in our emotions with those we connect to. If there is no one to connect to, we are at greater risk of a heart attack.

The Body mind can become dominant in many ways. Most of its work, such as maintaining our breathing and circulation, continues to be performed in the background through our autonomic nervous system. One of our needs for survival, reproduction, can dominate at times. We can become obsessed with the preservation or performance of our body in athletics, fitness, dance or yoga. Though it may seem counterintuitive in the way it steps beyond our concern for survival, the Body mind may be engaged in the killing frenzies documented in epic battles. It may also be involved when unable to decide between what the heart and our rational mind want, we get our answer through a gut feeling.

All four of these minds are engaged in both giving and receiving a Watsu. Their engagement can be clarified by contrasting their roles in Watsu and in the forms of Aquatic Bodywork that were developed after Watsu. The first of these is Waterdance with which the receiver is taken under water. I remember the first couple times I received it worrying about whether I would be brought back up to breathe when I needed to. Then when I got beyond that fear I forgot any need to breathe. I felt completely one with the water. There is a moment when we start giving Watsu, when we are waiting at the bottom of the breath, when we forget we are waiting to be drawn up out of that emptiness. In both those moments we are in our Being mind. But there is one big difference. In Waterdance that moment is in the Receiver. The giver is standing half way out of the water, controlling and timing the movement with his sequential mind. In Watsu it is the giver who sinks up to his chin and waits in the emptiness at the bottom of the breath beyond waiting. This engagement of the giver establishes Watsu as a path.

Unlike the other forms of Aquatic Bodywork that pull or dance someone around a pool, Watsu begins in the emptiness at the bottom of the breath in the giver. The coordination of the movement that follows to our shared breathing helps the receiver surrender control and access their own Being mind. The movement that comes out of emptiness leads to a stillness in which our Heart minds connect as the movement within joins in the flow. Our Being, Sequential, Heart and Body minds are all engaged on this path. The more integrated they are into the flow, the more likely they are to reach greater integration in both of us. To the degree that, as in any form of art, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, their integration can engage a fifth mind, our Wholeness mind. Wholeness is the path.