



What's WATSU?

Imagine being floated in warm water, weightless and safe as you're stretched in a sensuous flow with streams running over muscles like a thousand massaging fingers. Watsu massage is an amazing aquatic therapy with healing effects deeper than the sea.

WORDS / CAROLINE ROBERTSON

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Watsu is an aquatic therapy devised by shiatsu therapist Harold Dull at California's Harbin

Hot Springs. The union of water (*wat*) and shiatsu (*su*) birthed *watsu* in 1980. Interweaving seamless stretches, meridian work and stillness, Dull's therapy is now practised in 40 countries by more than 1000 practitioners.

Watsu is being incorporated in aquatic therapy treatment programs in hospitals, clinics and rehabilitation centres around the world. It is used by body workers, physiotherapists and psychologists for a range of aims: to relax, rehabilitate and regenerate. It eases stress, back pain, orthopaedic problems, arthritis, sleep disorders and fibromyalgia, plus many more conditions. Watsu is enjoyed in a chest-deep warm pool at 35°C. To make watsu more accessible, Harold Dull also developed a spa-bath style.

A WATSU SESSION

Throughout the session, the therapist gently cradles, rocks and stretches the receiver who relaxes in the water's womb-like embrace. Sometimes floatation devices are used to support the legs and head. A typical watsu lasts an hour and may incorporate other therapies. As watsu expert Kevin English says, "Water does all the work. Surrender and the body tells you what to do. The water is so gentle, forgiving and loving it allows easy release."

Without gravity bearing on joints, increased flexibility and freedom allow more mobility. With water supporting the spine, the body is aligned in a unique and gentle way. The water sequence induces a state of serenity, lightness and connection that carries on outside the pool. As M.R.A., a 32-year-old biologist participating in a 10-week Brazilian watsu study, said, "Watsu gives me a sensation of lightness both during and after a session, helping me to face life with more lightness, to face problems with more ease and keep them in perspective. I also find a strong sense of security and of being nurtured."

Watsu movements are synchronised with the breath, sinking down on exhalation, drifting up on inhalation. This creates a meditative connection with one's body and the practitioner who mirrors the breath. Mind-body harmony ensues, as Harold Dull explains: "When someone feels the kind of feelings often felt during a watsu — care, appreciation and love — the variability in the heart's rhythms show up as regularly recurring

waves. The same waves show up in the brain, respiration and other systems. This coherence allows the heart to fulfil its role as the manager of our emotions. Our overall creativity is enhanced."

Renowned watsu teacher Alexander Georgeakopoulos explains this mind-body cohesion. "The world no longer has the dry, sharp angles of the intellect, rather the fluid, yielding roundness of the whole self: body, feelings and soul." Watsu induces a relaxed alpha brainwave state, as therapist Andrew Yavelow at Harbin Hot Springs says. "Virtually everyone who receives a watsu opens their eyes at the end of a session and describes it as 'the most relaxing experience of my life' with many people reporting a profound feeling of oneness." After hearing these testimonials, I can't wait to test the waters myself.

A FLUID MEDITATION

Kevin English, the owner of Aquadulgent clinic, is a colourful Cairns character full of fascinating stories. Originally a professional dancer, English branched into many forms of bodywork, including craniosacral therapy, remedial massage and aromatherapy. In 2008, he plunged into aquatic therapies, watsu, Aquatherics and healing dance. I arrive just as his previous client — a man with brain injury from a car crash — finishes. "When he came to me he walked with a dead leg and a lean. His mother had tried everything with no improvement. Now, after regular aquatic therapy, Brian's posture and motor function have vastly improved," English relays.

English's interest in aquatic therapies arose when his mother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. "We could really tell the difference in mobility, mood and motor skills after she was in the water. She could also exercise more easily, so her muscles didn't atrophy," he explains. Then his 92-year-old father had a fall and with spinal stenosis was confined to a wheelchair. With water therapy, he began walking again.

English shares his experience: "It's not uncommon for someone to come to the pool on crutches and need to use the bathroom and forget to get the crutches." He's seen phenomenal improvements with joint replacements. "In weightless water you lose the effect of gravity on the joint, so it can move freely again. Freshly oxygenated blood repairs previously stagnant areas. With effortless motion, biofeedback tells them they can move painlessly, giving people fresh hope and confidence."

I am excited to see how my stiff neck will respond. After completing the client form and answering English's questions, I change into swimmers and meet him at the custom-built pool. My inner mermaid instantly relaxes as I submerge myself in the body-temperature water. English attaches strappy floats above my knees and eases me onto my back, resting my head on a floating pillow. I let go, sinking into a sublime state. With eyes closed and ears underwater, I happily go within.

As English gently tractions my feet then neck, I am aware of tension slowly dissolving. The water caresses me like a magic elixir, melting my muscles. As Lao Tzu said, "Water fluid, soft and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard." English swishes and sways me in a blissful ballet. I am a light waterlily on a pond, layers of stress floating away like petals. My meridians are stretched as a sea of qi pours into stagnant areas.

This divine dance is enhanced by still moments of sinking and rising with the breath, holding tight areas patiently while I drift in a watery dream. As English holds me in the crook of his arm, I regress to an infant in my mother's arms — safe, nurtured and bonded like a beloved baby. Emotions arise and ebb away. I experience that "to receive watsu is very often a spontaneous meditation on the self", as aquatic therapist Alexander Georgeakopoulos said.

Floating in the timeless flow, I don't want it to end. But, once it does, the effects are immediate and enduring. My neck feels freer, my mind clearer, my body lighter, my heart loved up. Soaking up the session heals and seals cracks from within. Finally, I've filled up my own well enough to give to others.

The sensation of overflowing energy stays with me for a week. Of all the therapies I've tried over decades, this has had the most profound healing effect, emotionally and physically. The wonders of watsu have to be experienced to be appreciated. With my worries washed away, I open my eyes to a new world. Just as in the movie *Cocoon* when the elderly enter a pool and emerge renewed, I feel reborn from the blissful baptism. I will definitely return for more.

JUST ADD WATER

"Water is the driving force of all nature," said Leonardo da Vinci and, for some, simply resting in a soothing pool offers mental and physical relief. Healthy people find watsu an excellent way to relax, stretch and reconnect with their essence. Clinical studies have



BODY

WATSU WATER MASSAGE

documented the benefits of watsu in many conditions. It improves neural rewiring and motor skills in stroke, brain injury and Parkinson's. It alleviates aches and restores movement in arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, back pain, joint replacements and post-operative pain. A 2005 study found that, after 18 months of regular watsu, retirement home participants reported reduced stress and aches, and greater flexibility.

Watsu boosts cognition and co-ordination while reducing contractures and hypertonicity in cerebral palsy and autism. It has a profound effect on relieving tremors, tension and spasms in quadriplegia and multiple sclerosis. Marian, a 59-year-old female with multiple sclerosis, said, "Since starting watsu sessions I've found that I'm able to increase the amount of physical activity. I have less pain, less stiffness in my legs and overall a better mental outlook."

Balance is also improved in the buoyant water. Others who benefit greatly from watsu are pregnant women, athletes and those suffering from headaches, sore muscles and joints. As watsu is incredibly sedating and centring, it benefits psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder. A 40-year-old executive taking part in the Brazil study stated, "Watsu diminishes the tension in both body and mind; it increases my body awareness, balances my energy and leads to a calm, a tranquillity that persists for days afterwards and helps me sleep."

WONDERS OF WATSU

Watsu's healing effects are apparent and immediate. Bobbing like a jelly blubber in water slows your heart and respiration rates. You switch off the stressful sympathetic system and move into passive parasympathetic mode. This relaxes muscles, promotes digestion, deepens breathing, improves circulation and increases immunity. As stress releases, the body moves more freely, allowing flexibility and reducing spasm and pain. The mind quiets and in this calm you can release emotional pain locked in your cellular memory.

Since you began life in amniotic fluid, you connect with very early feelings; as Albert Szent-Gyorgyi said, "Water is life's mater and matrix, mother and medium." Insights flood in as you tune out the outside and tune in to intuition. A fountain of energy starts to flow as blockages are released. Gentle movements and water's



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hydrostatic pressure massage the body, enhancing circulation and lymph flow. Tissue tension unfurls, allowing flowing movement and soothing any inflammation. Gentle traction elongates and aligns the spine and limbs.

The zen shiatsu origins of watsu are apt as it empties the mind, sailing one to the magical moment. On this voyage you actualise Bruce Lee's advice: "Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water." Watsu helps you release the past and be present so stress, traumas and limiting beliefs drift off. The sensual experience increases body awareness and appreciation that carry through to everyday life.

LEARNING WATSU

Both getting and giving watsu are transformative spiritual practices. Therapists consider watsu as compassion and unconditional love in action. Floating someone at your heart centre, surrendered in your arms like a sleeping child, forms a beautiful bond; dancing and breathing as one creates a heart coherence called "entrainment" where bodily rhythms synchronise. This "heart wrap" is nurturing and calming in the same way a mother's embrace settles her baby. It creates a unity consciousness where both the therapist and the client feel one with the world. Harbin Hot Springs therapist Andrew Yavelow says, "Practitioners learn to love their clients unconditionally and one of the most powerful steps in that process is learning to love themselves."

Practitioners are taught a zen approach to observing what is without interpretation or interference. Alexander Georgeakopoulos says a therapist should "enter the pool with gratitude and humility, with a quiet mind in tune with the energies of

Heaven and Earth. Our space is a deep silence of receptivity that the wounded subconscious senses as safe. It is warm and inviting, holding out acceptance."

Mastering watsu takes hundreds of hours of training along with personal growth to attune to a client's needs. Watsu courses are accredited by the Worldwide Aquatic Bodywork Association (watsu.com). Training is a blend of theory and practice with three levels of certification. Students without a pool can apply watsu principles on land with tantsu bodywork. Watsu practitioners use a variety of techniques and approaches according to the client's requirements. First-level watsu outlines a strict sequence of moves and positions much like a tai chi series. Advanced practitioners abandon a set regime for "free flow", which is guided by the client's cues.

WATSU WARNINGS

American naturopath and doctor Andrew Weil advocates and regularly enjoys receiving watsu. Yet, he advises caution in some disorders: "Any condition that might be compromised due to floating for a period of time in warm water should be evaluated by both patient and practitioner. Typically, those patients with medical appliances such as intravenous lines, catheters or colostomies can enter the pool as long as certain protective measures are taken."

Avoid watsu if you have a fever, perforated eardrums, absent cough reflex, blood clots or active skin infections. Epileptics can wear dark goggles to prevent seizures from dappled light. If watsu is practised in a chlorine pool, be aware of allergies. 🌊

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