

The Vocabulary of Touch

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRITZ FREDERICK SMITH

Meridians: Fritz, you've said that if people were aware of the different ways they use their energy, they could have better relationships, communicate better, be better healers . . .

Fritz Smith: Yes, the more we learn about the movement of energy, the more choices we have when we interact with others.

I like to describe the special characteristics of energy movement in terms of touch—I call them the “vocabulary of touch.” This “vocabulary” is used in Zero Balancing [a method developed by Dr. Smith for aligning body energy with body structure], and we can also use this vocabulary more broadly—to reflect on the ways we habitually interact with others. When people see their personal patterns, they're often surprised.

When you say “touch,” are you referring to physical touch?

Not necessarily. We can touch a person physically or energetically. Touch does not have to be physical. If you and I look at each other across the room, for example, and we “connect” through our eyes, we experi-

ence each other in ways beyond simply “seeing.” In a sense, we touch each other. Our vibrations, our energy, connect (or touch)—we have an energetic experience without a physical connection.

Would psychotherapy be another example of touching the energy without touching the body?

It could—although I think of classical psychotherapy as more of an analytical, left-brain system rather than one involving energy connection. Not every interchange between people is necessarily “energetic” in the sense I'm using it here. Talking *about* something with a therapist is different than when you *feel* something in yourself—or, in relation to another person, when you *feel* a movement between the two of you, feel something actually happening between you—that would be an energy movement. This is more likely to happen in any therapy when the therapist and/or the client intends to create that connection.

So we can touch energy without touching structure. Does it work the other way?

Can we touch people's structure without touching their energy?

Theoretically, when you touch structure you are also touching the energy. But, experientially, there's no question that you can touch people's structure without contacting their energy. When you shake hands with somebody, for instance, sometimes you feel like you're shaking a wooden hand. The handshake gives you no sense of who the other person is—nothing of “him” or “her” is there. Or, in relation to massage, sometimes you come away from an hour-long session and feel that the massage missed what's essential about you, as though you have never been touched. Or in acupuncture, how many times have we put a needle into the structure but have missed the energy?

Could people do better body work or acupuncture—be better therapists—if they understood how energies connect?

There is no question. We can affect both ourselves and others in ways that aren't possible without this understanding.

In what I'm calling the “vocabulary of touch” there are

four possible ways of connecting with others energetically: *interfacing, blending, streaming, and channeling*. As we talk about these different ways of interaction, or ways of being with one another, you'll notice we are speaking of boundaries—and the boundaries are different in each case.

With *interface*, the boundaries between two people are very clear. There's no sense that the boundaries are merging. With *interface*, you know where your space ends and my space begins—where your body ends and my body begins. We're clear about who is responsible for what. You'll often see *interface* in healthy work relationships: People are respectful of each other's boundaries; they give each other clear requests and clear answers.

With *blending*, some of our boundaries have merged and there's an area of overlap. In the area where we've blended, neither person is sure who is who. And we aren't clear where responsibility or authorship lies for what happens within that blended experience. Sometimes that blending is appropriate and natural—maybe we'll sing songs together, put

Physician-acupuncturist Fritz Smith shows how to use this vocabulary—principles of energy movement—in our everyday interactions.

an arm around each other, share something inspirational, just hang out—we blend our energy in a shared experience. And, at other times, it may not be appropriate. We may get blended into another person's project or issues without realizing it—or they get taken into ours. We've lost our boundaries; and we may begin to feel uncomfortable or used or depleted, and not understand why.

But if we understand we're blending, we could change the energy?

Exactly. If you realize that you are blending and decide it isn't appropriate, you can reestablish your boundaries and contain your energy—*interface* rather than *blend*.

The third possibility is *streaming*, in which energy passes from one person to another—one person is the giver, the other the receiver. Some people go through life habitually giving of themselves to other people, energetically and in every other way. Mothers may do this to children; husbands may give this way to wives, or wives to husbands—it can go either way. One person is giving all the time.

At times, streaming has an advantage. But people who go through life continually and unknowingly streaming tend to burn out; and their constant streaming may actually not be good for the receiver, may be a burden. At the end of the day, a mother who only streams to her kids is exhausted, and the kids may all be on overload because of it.

This is very different from *interfacing* with the children. When you interface, it doesn't mean that you're less attentive, or love them less—you just have very clear boundaries. So you're in a better position to see what's good for the children, what's good for you.

Are there times when streaming energy is appropriate and helpful?

Yes. One time to stream energy might be when the other person is in a state of depletion. People who have just had an accident, or fainted, or somehow responded to a situation with a sudden depletion of energy may benefit from having energy streamed into them, in a momentary way. It's almost like a jump-start. In acupuncture, you can give a temporary lift to someone who's



Fritz Frederick Smith, M.D.

depleted by streaming through the needle. However—and this is my bias—streaming as a common strategy usually is disadvantageous, and *unconscious* streaming often leads to depression and chronic depletion. It's important to know what streaming feels like, so if you find yourself streaming inappropriately, you can identify it and stop.

There's yet another way of

connecting in addition to streaming, blending, and interfacing, and that is...

Channeling?

Yes. With channeling, energy also passes from one person to another. But here, the energy is passing *through* the giver rather than coming *from* the giver, as with streaming. In streaming, the source is our own "energy bank." In chan-

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neling, by contrast, we are the conduit from some other source. One problem inherent to channeling is that if the channeler is not energetically clear in his or her own body, the conducted energy may pick up distortions of the channeler and pass them on to the receiver. The energy that leaves the person may not be as clear as that which entered. To channel reliably, one usually needs to have done a lot of inner work to clear personal fields. Distortion can be a difficulty.

Do people sometimes confuse the feelings of energy movement with emotions—say, confuse streaming or blending with the emotion of love?

There are many types of love. A person with little understanding of the movement of energy may equate or confuse the feeling of energetic movement with "love" or "being in love." They both feel good. A characteristic of "unconditional" love is nonattachment. When we stream or blend, we overlap the other person's boundaries. With this overlap may come a sense of attachment: We've become part of the other person's process. If people use

blending as a basic strategy of relationship, they run the risk of codependency, of losing their own perspective.

Let's look at acupuncture for another example of energy movement in relation to emotions. Acupuncture makes a distinction between the emotions of compassion and sympathy. Compassion would be closer to unconditional love and to interface—the energetic position where one person is relating to another, yet is not necessarily involved in that person's process. With sympathy, on the other hand, one pours emotion or energy into the other person. Appropriate sympathy is fine; but from the acupuncture viewpoint, excess sympathy is seen as a dysfunction.

Can interfacing be carried too far—as in the case of people who never seem to blend with others or stream, who seem never to give of themselves?

I think it's incorrect to say that those who seldom blend or stream are people who don't give of themselves, or are distant and removed. It's fun to blend; yet one can be as friendly and warm through interface—

can be as soft and approachable—as through blending or streaming. And interface has the advantage of being clear about responsibility within the interaction.

When doing acupuncture, bodywork, or other types of therapy, it's my view that interface is the ideal way to relate to the client, because with interface, the intentions and boundaries between the client and practitioner are clear. And in terms of our social activity, I think these same principles apply.

To me, the prime example of unconditional love and the practice of interface is His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He is the most open, nonjudgmental, compassionate public figure I know—he is deeply concerned, yet he seems to have a very clear sense of boundaries. From what I know of him, I would say he is not prone to blend or stream with others.

Let's say we could achieve the state of unconditional love. Would we use different modes of energy as we interacted with people, depending on the circumstances?

It's my personal view that the closer we come to uncondi-

tional love, the heart chakra, the more we will act without attachment, without comparing or judging ourselves or others. Unconditional love is free from emotional strings, conditions, rewards, manipulations, or hidden agendas—conditions that develop when our boundaries are not clear. According to one tradition from India, enlightenment is to "love all, serve all"—no strings attached. To me that represents a path of unconditional love.

Can we, or "should" we, always act from this perspective? I think in the living of everyday life we need to utilize most forms of energy movement, at one time or another—they all have their strengths. Yet these are worlds within a wider world. Cultivating the widest perspective of unconditional love would serve us well—ourselves and all of humanity.

Going back to working with energy, does it help if the receiver knows about, and accepts, these concepts of energy?

To work with energy, the therapist—the body worker, the acupuncturist—needs to accept its existence and know how to



Photo by Giovanni Pescetto

use it; to *benefit* from energy, we do not need knowledge of energy theory. In fact, knowing too much may actually interfere if it leads a person to stay in his or her left brain. Trying to figure out what is being done and tracking the energy, while receiving a session, may block or alter the natural movement and balance of the energy. And certainly the chances of the person *experiencing* the energy movement are greatly reduced.

In my own work of Zero Balancing, I rarely discuss theory as part of a session. Not

only does discussion put people in their left brain, but also it may come up against different belief systems, which further engages the cognitive process. I've long been guided by a sign at the Esalen mineral baths: "Let the warm water flow through an empty mind."

What implications does the vocabulary of touch have for acupuncture?

The reason this model is important for the acupuncture world is that all this works through the needle. You put the needle in the point, and

when you've entered the energy you can *interface* with it, *blend* with it, *stream* into it, or *channel* into it—depending on your bias, your skill and training, and the needs of the patient. What happens through the needle is much more clear if the acupuncturist has determined, for example, "Through the needle, I want to interface with this person. I want him or her to have the experience of really being in touch with humanity without losing identity. And I'll give that experience by interfacing with his or her energy system for a moment."

That can give the patient the experience of really being recognized as well as connected. The next patient will have a different need, of course, and therefore a different scenario.

If you know this vocabulary, you can refine the quality of your acupuncture, because through your needle you can do much more than tonify, sedate, or transfer the energy. You can fine-tune your needling. You can tonify, for example, from interface or blending or streaming. You have additional ways—and more precise ways—of working

Learning the Vocabulary of Touch

through the needle. It's a matter of your style and skill, and the patient's need.

I have a question about streaming. Isn't it draining for practitioners to stream their energy through the needle? Would it be better to think of channeling energy to another person instead of streaming? When people are trained in therapeutic touch, they're often told to think of channeling energy from a source beyond themselves rather than streaming it from their own "energy bank."

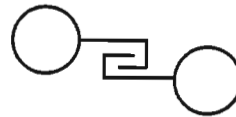
I think there's a real possibility of acupuncturists being drained when they stream through the needle, as anyone can be drained who streams too much. I would say that channeling has some advantages here over streaming. However, as I indicated earlier, it's not quite that simple. First is the issue, *what* are you going to channel. Second, according to my understanding of the physics of energy, *when* we channel energy, a siphon effect occurs—as the energy passes through a body, it may pick up the vibration of unresolved or chaotic issues within the tissues. So the energy that leaves us may be

To develop skill in using the various energy movements:

■ Observe how you move your energy as you interact with others:

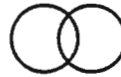
INTERFACE

Maintains clear boundaries in the interaction.



BLENDING

Merges with another's energy, overlapping boundaries.



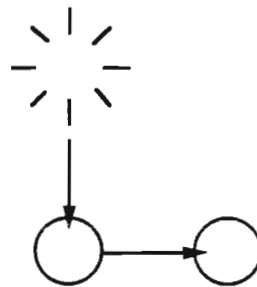
STREAMING

Passes energy to another from one's own store of energy.



CHANNELING

Transmits energy from an outside source to another.



■ In each interaction, determine what kind of energy movement—interface, blending, streaming, channeling—will bring the greatest benefit. Then practice using that energy.

different from the energy that entered us. If the practitioner or "channeler" is not clear—has many unresolved energy vortices, has not cleared personal history, or has a lot of internal prejudice—this unresolved material may come out in the channeled energy or the channeled information.

Therefore, in the therapeutic context, I would still rather come from interface, thinking in terms of stimulating the person's own energy or engaging their own internal world, rather than adding to it from an outside source.

Sometimes it feels as if people are pulling energy from you—forcing you to stream. What's a good way to respond in this situation?

In my practice I've developed a number of ways to work in such circumstances, the most important being interface. I may also be a bit more formal in my persona, more the "doctor" than the friend, and take more responsibility for the subject matter of the conversation, so it doesn't needlessly drift into areas of emotion inherently prone to streaming—areas such as deep sympathy or grief. In more extreme cases, I di-

People who go through life continually and unknowingly “streaming” tend to burn out—and their constant streaming may not be good for the receiver.

rectly shield myself with a buffer of vibration.

How can we help people in everyday situations, using this model? For instance, how could we use the vocabulary of touch in relating to somebody who's very sad or grieving? Or to my teenager who's really mad at me?

I'd like to summarize the distinctions before answering the question. First, we're assuming that energy exists, that vibration is one characteristic of energy, and that any emotion—anger, sadness, fear, and so on—has a unique vibratory pattern that is archetypal for that emotion. Secondly, this model assumes that emotions and thoughts, as vibration, can be held within our tissue. These held vibrations are like vortices of energy in the ocean; and like an ocean vortex, these vibrations stay in form in our tissues for long periods of time. The third assumption is that elements of the vocabulary of touch—interface, blending, streaming and channeling—are ways of interacting with energy.

Now to the question. Let's assume that a person is agi-

tated, hyperactive, or borderline hysterical, meaning that the vibration in the body is in excess. It is too rapid, too fast, too amplified. In this case, the therapist—or friend or parent—would want to quiet the vibration in the person's body.

If you were to quiet hyperactive energy with touch, you could do it through blending, streaming, or interface. Again, I would choose to work from interface. I would make quieting movements on the person—pressing down, containing, holding, comforting. I'd make any type of physical motion in my hands that would help quiet the vibration.

If someone is chronically depressed, however, the energetic movement would be to increase the vibration, to stimulate, to enliven that person. Again, this can be done through any of the modes.

How one approaches the emotional body of another person is a matter of style and experience. I know very excellent therapists who work through blending and do very good work and get very good results. My personal experience leads me to interface because it has fewer built-in problems for me than does

blending. But for someone else, that may not be true. In understanding the vocabulary of touch, each person can find what works best for him or her in various situations. Just knowing possibilities is the beginning of the exploration.

Would you say more about a layperson using this “vocabulary” in their relationships with others?

We've already talked about some of the guidelines for this “vocabulary”—how relating through interface keeps boundaries clear, yet can be warm and supportive. How a brief period of streaming can give a depleted person a “jump-start.” How blending can bring a sense of community and sharing on a deep level. How channeling can bring a “breath of fresh air.”

So people who know these possibilities can observe how they're interacting with others, and then choose how they use their energy in relationships.

I teach a lot, and often I see two light bulbs go on in people—one, when they understand *they have a choice* of interfacing, blending, streaming, or channeling; and two, when they realize *they have*

unconscious habitual patterns. They suddenly see themselves: “Why, I've been streaming into my children all this time!” Once they see the possibilities, they begin to change.

When people find they have a choice and use it consciously, they're often amazed at what follows.

Resources

Inner Bridges: A Guide to Energy Movement and Body Structure, by Fritz Frederick Smith, (Atlanta, Georgia: Humanics Press. ©1986).

“What is Zero Balancing?” by David Lauterstein. *Massage Therapy Journal*, Winter 1994. Published by the American Massage Therapy Association, (708) 861-0123.

For information about Zero Balancing and other energy therapy workshops, contact the Zero Balancing Association, P.O. Box 1727, Capitola, CA 95010, (408) 476-0665.

Dr. Frederick “Fritz” Smith received his Doctor of Osteopathy degree in 1955 and his M.D. in 1961. In pursuit of a deeper understanding of illness and health, he studied Eastern as well as Western therapies, becoming both a licensed acupuncturist and a certified Rolfer. His studies coalesced into Zero Balancing, a therapy that aligns body structure and energy. Recently retired from his medical practice, Dr. Smith now devotes himself full time to developing and teaching Zero Balancing, and conducting other energy therapy workshops.