In March 2012, Tomas Nelissen’s International Academy for Hara Shiatsu started a practical treatment & training programme (‘burnout practical training’) for Hara Shiatsu practitioners to work with ‘burnout’ clients. Teams were set up, each led by an experienced practitioner working as a coach with a group of students, and the project has produced some remarkable results…

An average of 18 clients received a weekly Hara Shiatsu treatment for 10 consecutive weeks. From March 2012 to the end of 2013 the practitioners gave 900 treatments to 90 clients. Some of these clients were referred by their physicians or psychotherapists, while others came on their own behalf. The treatments were focused on burnout issues, a commonly used term for a broad variety of imbalances manifesting in stress-related symptoms ranging from sleeping disorders, headaches and massive muscular tension, through to many years of being unfit to work due to severe exhaustion-related depression.

The variety of clients was just as multi-sided as the challenges the practitioners had to deal with. There is no such thing as a typical burnout client. So what then is burnout? It is often referred to as the end result of a pattern of complete exhaustion, shown on the physical as well as the emotional level, and developing over a longer period of time. At the end of the day the result is a dead end - no more choices left! There is a loss of wellbeing and control over everyday life and in many cases a number of related disorders.

Due to the variety of possible manifestations and patterns associated with burnout, it can be considered a collective term or description of a combination of issues and patterns rather than a clear diagnosis. In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10) burnout is defined as “a factor influencing health that demands action on the part of the health system (Z73.0)”. Burnout is not a well-defined disorder with a diagnosis that clearly suggests a set of treatment options, like depression for example. So, there is no common definition of the burnout syndrome as yet, only a set of different approaches to define it and distinguish it from similar disorders.

One fact, however, seems to be agreed upon: that the condition of being “tired of working” is tremendously expensive. The European Agency for Workplace Safety and Health estimates that the economic follow-on costs caused by burnout within the EU are about €20 billion per year.

The energetic dynamics of the Burnout Syndrome
Seeking an access route for Shiatsu to deal with this very variable issue, we chose to use the twelve-step model of psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger, author of ‘Staff Burnout’ (1974), who played a major role in establishing the term. He defines it as a "state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one's professional life". We tried to evaluate the characteristics of Freudenberger’s twelve steps to burnout from an energetic point of view by adapting and translating them into terms of Yin and Yang, as well as the Five Phases.
Like many psychosomatic patterns, burnout is fostered in personal identity, behaviour and values. The perfect soil for burnout comes from a yearning for perfection and a lack of self-confidence that tries to buy affection with performance. The desire to grow and be successful is something positive, but as soon as this desire turns into a compulsion we have entered the first phase of burnout.

1) The compulsion to prove ones capabilities
The Kidneys are the home of will power. The Liver creates an accompanying vision. The Gallbladder manifests this vision with determination. The American educational scientist Howard Earl Gardner gives us a very insightful starting point in addressing burnout. Put simply: we are the captain of our ship, but do we always have hold of the steering wheel? Do we set the course? Do we cruise at the speed we like to? It is all about conscious self-control.

Gardner asks the following three questions: “Who am I? What do I want? How can I efficiently accomplish my goals?” The first two questions are about aspects of the Water element, while the third question mirrors the Wood element. The first two questions form the foundation of our identity. The more insecure we are about the first two aspects, the more vulnerable we are to acting in a way that does not express our strengths, abilities and longings, but increasingly focuses on getting someone else’s attention. An insecure identity needs one thing above all else: approval. In this ongoing quest, the Water element cannot express its essence freely, since it is focused more on the environment than on the core of things. Out of the seed of our potential grows a tree that is not rooted in itself. In challenging situations the Water element is no longer a source of self-confidence, self-worthiness and clear unbroken will power. In turn we try to build these aspects by showing increased activity. We want to prove ourselves, because just ‘being’ is not enough - we need to ‘do’. Our natural desire to unfold turns into a need to be acknowledged. Want turns into must. The consequences are:

2) Increased efforts
The roots of our vulnerability to burnout can often be found in our personal development, our history. Within the cycle of the Five Phases, in cases of a weak Water element, the Metal element takes over – mainly the Large Intestine, with its quality of holding on to things. It tries to make up for the missing role of the guiding mother, by looking to provide structure, rituals, order and control to support the insecure child. We often witness this dynamic development when parents split up and children become unsettled. These kids benefit from structures, rituals and clarity, both mental and emotional, because they all give direction and generate security. This direction and support (Metal element) helps build a feeling of security (Water element). If this initial pattern is not addressed and let go of, then this kind of ‘protection strategy’ will be taken into adulthood, where any kind of weakening of the Water element can lead to the corresponding response pattern. This goes for ‘attacks’ on the Water element that we face in our adult life, like the fear of losing our job for example, or being anxious when facing new challenges. The effects then are the same: our mental aspects increasingly control our actions and activities, no matter if the actions being taken are congruent with our self, our own desires and goals, as long as they serve the purpose of getting attention and a certain amount of security in life. The Metal-Wood-dynamic within the Five Phases ‘overrules’ the
Water element and these individuals cling to their pattern of “increased efforts” while relaxation and regeneration are neglected.

Which leads to:

3) Subtle negligence of ones own needs
Overruuling the Water element’s quality of focusing on what they really want in life, individuals tend towards an increasing negligence of their own needs. The need to pursue a certain assignment has completely taken hold of them - minor everyday tasks and pleasures feel increasingly annoying, taking a break is deemed useless, the body is neglected. The Yang energy of the Wood and Fire elements gets dense, contact with the Yin is lost and the Water element becomes a mere energy reservoir to be exhausted.

Pursuing this path leads to:

4) Suppression of conflicts and personal needs
The deranged dynamic between Metal and Wood element has become so strong that personal needs are not only neglected, but completely suppressed. The continuous exhaustion of the Water element causes an inner emptiness that leads to withdrawal and secret behaviour. No one shall know what is really going on, how the person truly feels. However sometimes, in this phase of the disorder compensating mechanisms may develop, such as excessive or addictive behaviour, to make up for the feeling of emptiness.

5) Re-evaluation of priorities and values
Studying the Small Intestine meridian, we see its strong affinity to the Yin aspects of the Water element. Be it the Hara and back diagnostic areas or the Mu and Shu points, all these are located in regions strongly associated with the Water element. Small Intestine needs Water. The main energetic aspects of the Small Intestine are based on a functioning connection of the Fire-Water-axis. To be able to distinguish what is important and what is not we need clarity. Clarity comes from consciousness (Fire element) connected to calmness (Water). Stamina comes from combining passion (Fire) and a strong will (Water). Because of the rising Yang of the prior phases and the resulting exhaustion of the Yin, the Water-Fire-axis starts to dissolve in phase 5. Individuals start to lose clarity and consciousness of the factors in their lives that define who they truly are - they lose contact with their values and beliefs. And they also lose stamina and the ability to push through. They may start to stay away from their job, more and more often...

6) Increasing denial of arising problems
Losing touch with our personal values means we also lose contact with our personal needs. The Yang on the outside becomes hard and brittle while the Yin becomes increasingly exhausted, in both the Wood and Fire elements. The Liver’s flexibility is lost and the happiness of the Heart vanishes. Physical symptoms related to this energetic pattern often increase.

7) Withdrawal
Feelings of hopelessness and loss of direction become overwhelming. Affected individuals start to withdraw from themselves and the whole world. The Metal element collapses. The elemental spirit of the Lungs becomes weak. The controlling energy of the Large Intestine is exhausted. Energetic cohesion within the system dissolves and all the suppressed
disharmonious tendencies surface more strongly: in the Water element, anxieties arise; the Wood element causes mood swings, tension and headaches; the Fire element gives us palpitations or a tight feeling or pressure in the chest; the Earth element shows chaotic and disharmonic digestion.

8) Observable behavioural changes
Withdrawal increases. The energetic imbalance manifests as obvious changes in behaviour.

9 & 10) Depersonalisation & Inner emptiness
The Water-Fire-axis breaking apart causes a loss of sense of ones own personality and therefore the last bit of recognising ones own needs is completely lost as well. That leads to overall self-denial regarding the body as well as the personality. In this phase the exhaustion of the Kidneys often leads to severe phobias and panic attacks. The individual feels useless, worn out and devastated. Using up the Yin like this, on every level, increases the feeling of inner emptiness. This may once again lead to compensatory addictive behaviour. Thorough separation between Fire and Water, and the resulting loss of sense of ones own personality, may lead to self-negation. The exhaustion of the Yin causes inner emptiness, often compensated for by the use of drugs of any kind.

11 & 12) Depression & Thorough Burnout
The whole system is completely polarised. Initiative and motivation are down to zero. A prevailing symptom at this point is the longing to sleep all the time, which mirrors the total exhaustion of any Yin resources. The loose Yang can cause destructive tendencies. There is no ‘I’ or ‘me’ anymore, earlier compulsions have dissolved, and along with them any purpose in life. Suicidal thoughts arise. At this point the immune system often breaks down.

These 12 stages suggested by Freudenberger do not necessarily follow the same chronological order. They reflect certain steps on the way to burnout that can be more or less severe, depending on each individual. Most of the clients in our practical training however, were clearly shown to be in one of these phases, with a strong tendency to phases 3 to 7. There were also a number of clients with many years of exhaustion-related depression and its accompanying inability to work, meaning phases 10, 11 or 12.

This approach was derived solely from practical experience and continuous re-checking of already acquired data and results. When I started working more with burnout clients in 2008, just the term “burnout” created an image of complete emptiness and accordingly the approach that formed in my mind was all about tonifying and nurturing the body energetically. However in the subsequent practical work I was often surprised - and I learned that burnout is really a condition of polarised energy. In extreme conditions Yin and Yang are separated from each other - with a huge lack of energy on one side and massive tension on the other. That really caught my attention and was the kick-start for setting up the burnout practical training.

Of course we also wanted to know how our clients perceived the changes and outcomes of our treatments. So in our practical training at the International Academy for Hara Shiatsu we used written questionnaires to get feedback from our clients. They consisted of two parts - part one to be completed after the first treatment and part two after the last of the ten
treatments. The questions dealt with the general health and wellbeing of the clients at the beginning of the treatment series as well as at the end of it. Clients were free to decide if they wished to take part and to put the questionnaire in a box, if they preferred. The questionnaire was completely anonymous to avoid any influence from the relationship between practitioner and client. The rate of returned questionnaires was 73% and from these we found:

- 58% - the energy level improved remarkably, meaning that symptoms like fatigue, sleeping disorders, overload, etc. decreased
- 51% - remarkable improvement with emotional issues, including anxiety, insecurity, being unsatisfied or angry
- 92% - were happy with the treatments
- 62% - were very pleased with the appearance and competence of the practitioners

**The true nature**

It became clear during the practical training that working with the energetic aspects of the burnout cluster made the individual energetic patterns surface all the more clearly, while the imbalance of the burnout condition decreased. It is for a reason that in times of extreme stress, we use terms like “I feel completely beside myself”, “I am drowning in work” etc. This reveals that behind the burnout waits the real issue, the energetic pattern - the individual as such. Behind the noise lies peace and quiet. Behind the stress and the compulsion ‘to do’ waits the chance ‘to be’. Dealing with the symptoms at hand is a mere stepping stone on the way to dealing with the true nature of the individual.

Howard Earl Gardner’s three questions were: “Who am I? What am I? How do I efficiently accomplish my goals?” Finding an honest answer to these deep questions is probably the best burnout preventive measure. The first question directly guides us to our true nature, our innermost core, and it is this core we want to touch, that is the heart of Shiatsu.