

Barry Kapke

## Spirituality Comes From Within

Program Director of Asian Bodyworks at San Francisco School of Massage, Barry Kapke describes spirituality and bodywork as two topics close to his heart. The following is a brief discussion on the topic from his unique perspective in the field.

**Massage & Bodywork:** Tell me briefly about the incorporation of spirituality in your own bodywork.

**Barry Kapke:** My approach to bodywork is definitely influenced by Eastern views. My practice and teaching of forms such as Shiatsu, nuad bo rarn (traditional Thai massage), Breema bodywork, and Swedish massage, and incorporating aspects of other approaches such as ortho-bionomy®, Trager®, Dzub-Nyin (Tibetan ayurvedic massage), yoga and Theravada Buddhism, have led to my rather eclectic formulation of a way of working I call Insight Bodywork®.

I see the work I do – personally and professionally – as working to end suffering. In part, this involves seeing clearly that I am not an autonomous entity, distinct from the rest of the phenomenal world, and that I am very much affected by and have an affect on that world. Choices, then, become a crucial concern as does learning how to be conscious, rather than reactive. Seeing patterns that do not serve me well, I endeavor to replace them with more supportive and beneficial choices. I try to examine and reflect upon experience and views, to discern what is really true for me. I try to minimize my tendencies toward greed, aversion, self-importance, and self-interest, and try to cultivate operating from a motivation of *metta*, or unconditional love. I work with acceptance, forgiveness, supportiveness. Practice is about simplifying, moving toward harmony and integration. These are focal concerns in how I try to live my life and in how I attempt to do my work as a bodyworker and teacher. The most accurate way I'd describe what I do is that it is spiritual practice. That is really the crux of it all.

When I began teaching Shiatsu more than a decade ago, I felt that meditation was a key element in learning and practicing this work and yet I felt uneasy introducing meditation to my students. After all, I was teaching a bodywork class, not

a meditation class. I followed my instinct though in introducing this as a part of the work and students over the years have repeatedly told me that learning to meditate was one of the things that profoundly affected them. I should be clear though in pointing out that I taught meditation as a practical tool, independent of a belief system. The ability to be clear, focused, and still are vital ingredients for a good bodyworker.

**M&B:** Was spirituality always an important part of your life? Was there a seminal event that caused a “transformation” in you?

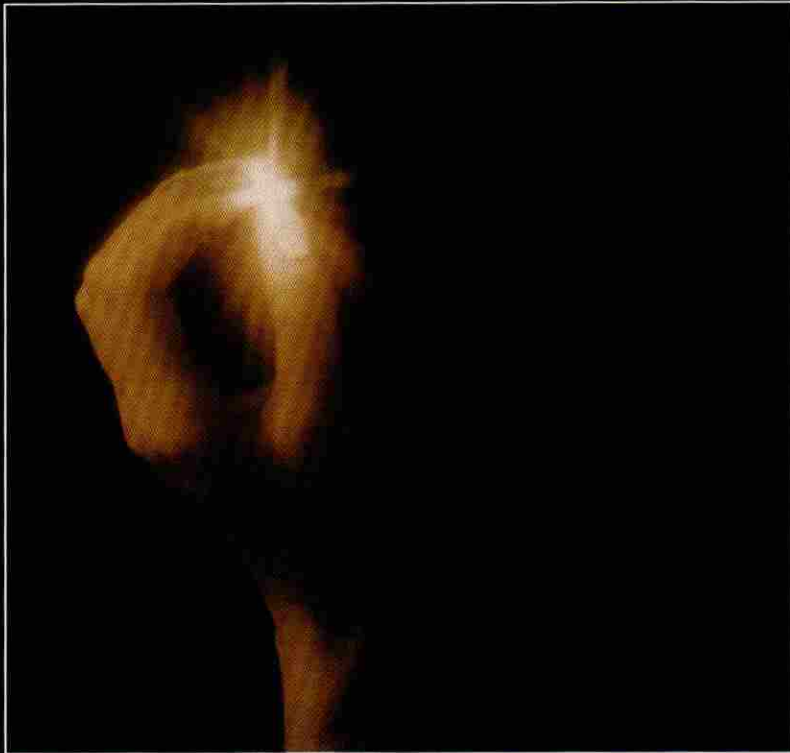
**Kapke:** I am a Theravadin Buddhist, in the Northern Thai lineage of Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, however, I grew up totally devoid of religious influence and have been somewhat surprised to discover how deeply spiritual practice has touched me.

Perhaps a turning point for me was the Loma Prieta earthquake in October of 1989. I was completing a master's degree in film theory, and decided that massage might be a good way to earn an income while finishing my studies. Seeing the impermanence of things in the aftermath of the earthquake, and the overriding helpful nature of people in a crisis, I was touched deeply and found it quite difficult to return to my academic studies. Somehow, teaching Russian formalist film theory didn't seem so important to me then. My, then, still formative experiences with massage were showing me that what happens in the moment is what is most important. My meditation practice and my bodywork practice both took a deepening turn around the upheaval of that event.

**M&B:** Why even integrate spirituality and bodywork? Why can't they be separated like church and state? Should they?

**Kapke:** I don't think healing work and spiritual work can be separated any more than mind and body can be separated. It really is from the same





According to Barry Kapke, regardless of a practitioner's religious practice and beliefs, there is an underlying personal spirituality inherent in bodywork.

fabric. Given a choice between a bodyworker with a simple approach, whose spiritual dedication is apparent, and a technician who has command of an impressive array of techniques, I would choose the former every time.

**M&B:** Is it contradictory to the religious backgrounds of many modalities to practice several different techniques, say, such as Shiatsu, Thai massage and Ayurveda?

**Kapke:** I don't think that a particular spirituality is part and parcel of a given modality. It is true that the view of a modality is likely to predispose to practices supportive of that view. What I do see, though, is that irregardless of a practitioner's religious practice and beliefs, or lack of religious practice and beliefs, there is an underlying personal spirituality. The work we do as bodyworkers inclines us to look deeply, to try to understand what is going on, to learn how to find peace and freedom from suffering – that is spiritual practice.

**M&B:** Is there a fine line between healing with touch and proselytizing?

**Kapke:** Healing arises from the self-organizing, self-correcting principle present in the body's systems. Touch very powerfully gives needed information to the system and the system uses that information, or not. I don't heal anyone. I can share tools with them that may make the task of healing themselves easier, but healing comes from within.

Proselytizing doesn't enter the picture because it really has nothing to do with belief. The studies done with the effect of prayer found that the less specific the prayer was – praying for the optimal good for the individual rather than for a specific result – the more effective it was. I believe a good bodyworker, a good doctor, a good priest, shares information, empowers with tools, offers support, and stays out of the way of the individual's process.

I think it is also important to not

be overly concerned with results. Just do your utmost best and let things resolve themselves as they will. We really don't, and can't, know how things should be. Sometimes recovery and healing and growth is the outcome; sometimes things stay as they are or worsen. I think it is important not to color these unfoldings as personal failures or personal triumphs. Just do your best. Support life unfolding.

**M&B:** How does religion play into a profession striving for acceptance in the medical community? Are the two antithetical?

**Kapke:** I don't mean to be cynical but I think the medical establishment could certainly benefit from a little infusion of spirituality.

I think it is important to differentiate between religion and spirituality. Spirituality is the essence of who we are, how things are. It isn't a club one joins or a hat one puts on. By turning our focus inward, by contemplating, we discover this clearly and see that we are all interconnected in a very real and quite profound way. This realization in itself is quite healing. Healing and spiritual practice both are concerned with finding an end to suffering. I see them as partners. I see no conflict.

Spirituality is the lived experience; religion is the commodity, the packaging. The packaging attracts different people, or turns them off. But what's important is the experience. You can find that experience through religion, or completely outside of religion. Spirituality is our sense of how things truly are, not as we want them to be.

**M&B:** If massage therapists pull from a higher power, why are atheist therapists successful?

**Kapke:** In my opinion, any higher power comes from within, not from without. Regardless of what you choose to call it, or what you may believe about it, we all have access to that. P&B