

## Working with the Hara Paula Derry

Working with the Hara is a central idea in Shiatsu. Hara is a Japanese word that physically refers to the abdomen. However, it means more than the physical. In Western thought the lower abdomen is important, called the “core” and the center of gravity of the physical body. Here, Hara is an important core and center of a person’s entire being. In part, this does mean physical integration. If movement originates in the Hara, it will be integrated and powerful. If you look at a martial arts master or a tennis player hitting a ball, they use their whole bodies, their arm movements integrated with and starting from their torsos. Hara is also an indicator of psychological centeredness and well-being, or its absence. Feeling psychologically centered or grounded, we are at home in our bodies, aware of our Hara, our feet palpably on the ground. Relaxed, our abdomens move slowly in and out as we breathe, increasing the efficiency of respiration. The Hara is also a center for more subtle energies involved in health, and balancing these energies is part of Shiatsu treatment.

Here are some exercises you can do yourself to cultivate the Hara, adapted from Carola Beresford-Cooke’s book “Shiatsu, Theory and Practice”:

1. Sit or lay comfortably. Observe your breathing pattern just as it is. Then, expand your abdomen slightly as you breathe in and contract it slightly as you breathe out. Do you feel your lower body moving slightly back as you inhale, and forward as you exhale? Lay a hand a few inches below your navel, and imagine your breath gathering below your hand when you inhale.
2. Standing, unlock your knees, keeping them slightly flexed, to increase awareness of your relationship with the ground and encourage your abdomen to relax and move while you breathe.
3. How do you think of your belly when it relaxes and protrudes? Do you feel like you need to hold your stomach in? Beresford-Cooke suggests imagining your Hara as a powerhouse rather than a jelly-bag.

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