

Healing Experiences in Japanese Rope Bondage Practice: A Phenomenological Study

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The regular practice of Shibari, also referred to as Kinbaku, a Japanese rope bondage practice, appears to have an overall positive impact on people's lives and their personal development by providing practitioners an explorative space to bring subconscious patterns into conscious awareness where healing is possible. The aim of this phenomenological study was to find common healing experiences among practitioners of Shibari. Within a framework of 10 semi-structured interviews, the study explored phenomenological experiences of individual practitioners. The following transpersonal topics surfaced dominantly throughout the interviews in reference to potential healing experiences: transformation and catharsis, embodiment and empowerment, communication and community; elucidating healing and transformative potential of Shibari practice. The study contributes to a growing field currently being explored by transpersonal psychologists and BDSM enthusiasts and promotes a more expansive way to look at these experiences as a path towards human wholeness and awareness within the practice and beyond.

Keywords: Shibari, Japanese rope bondage, healing, transformation, phenomenology

This study looked at healing experiences in the practice of Shibari, also referred to as Kinbaku, an ancient Japanese bondage and erotic art form (Barkas, 2016). Today, Shibari is found as a sub-culture in modern BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Submission, Masochism) communities all over the world. In its theoretical essence, Shibari is the art

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Recommended citation: Harris, E. (2023). Healing experiences in Japanese rope bondage practice: A phenomenological study. *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology*, 4, 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.53074/cstp.2023.46>

of tying knot patterns on the human body to restrain and give sensation in multiple layers of physical and emotional stimuli, which can be painful or pleasant (Nawataneke, 2020). Bondage practice is based on an interpersonal power dynamic principle, using ropes to tie with the intention to limit movement and create a state of discomfort, depending on the agreement between the practitioners (Galati, 2017).

Shibari is an opportunity for people to explore their edges. Consent is key and helps to establish a safe container and habitual approach for all participants (Harrington, 2016). In a typical Shibari *scene* or session, two people or a whole group of people will meet in a dedicated space and create a safe container for the duration of the tying sessions. People may participate as observers, or active participants in a scene, as the person being tied, or the person tying. Each scene is begun with an interview of setting boundaries, followed by the tying experience, and closed by a follow-up interview or discussion to conclude the session. Communication and power dynamics are an important part of Shibari practice and yet, the practice goes beyond and into a more personal level of experience in which healing is possible for the conscious participants (Galati, 2017). Medically therapeutic healing properties of the practice have not been proven by empirical studies. However, my personal experience with complex trauma transformation through Shibari, as well as the experiences and research of other scholars such as Galati (2017) and Blomqvist Almbring (2022) show that there are elements of healing to be explored in this practice. For example, in her phenomenological dissertation research, Galati (2017) explored the therapeutic impact of rope bondage with the key issues of embodiment, self-other relations, and consent negotiation, and concluded that rope bondage can certainly create a healing path for its practitioners.

However, there appears to be a general lack of consensus about the meaning of holistic *healing* in modern medicine, narrowing the term healing down to merely describing physiological processes of curing disease (Egnew, 2005). According to Egnew (2005), true *healing* involves the process of achieving *wholeness* as a person. Raswewe et al. (2021) define holistic health and healing as an approach that considers healing the person as a multidimensional whole, physically, spiritually, emotionally, socially, and psychosocially. They also emphasise the power of self-healing in holistic care. Therefore, this study goes beyond the most common perception of healing as a physical wound to be closed, proposing instead that healing needs to be understood as an emotional process of transformation towards human wholeness unlocking healing powers from within.

In her review paper, Greenberg (2019) looks at BDSM practices as enabling spiritual or transcendent altered states of consciousness without chemicals and suggests that these practices hold meaning and transformative potential. Easton and Hardy (2011) describe the fully achieved BDSM sub-space or bottom space (the submissive person being tied in bondage) as a kind of an altered state of consciousness where the relation of one's own mind and of others is somewhat different.

Transformation means to become more deeply aligned with the highest human potential and to consciously change previous patterns through increased inner guidance (Gawain, 2010). Transformation is profound and fundamental, altering the very nature of something radical and sustainable in one's life, a pattern of action or thinking (Gass, 2011). *Wholeness* involves the ability to approach life with a certain depth and requires the ability to live with and understand the human space of complexities and paradoxes (Niemiec et al., 2020). If Shibari can support these processes as a BDSM practice, then it is certainly noteworthy to consider and relate these experiences back to any form of healing experience for the individuals or entire groups.

Blomqvist Almbring (2022), a psychotherapist and rope enthusiast herself, describes the space between client and therapist in a therapy session as one with many layers of experiencing, conscious and unconscious. Shibari offers a similar experience to its practitioners. It can playfully bring out what is present on the conscious surface or hidden within the subconscious mind using ropes as a tool for communication between the practitioners and bring about forms of healing in that way.

With rising questions of individual purpose, spiritual growth, gender issues, and lack of touch and intimacy in an industrialised world (Hertz, 2021), bondage practice has the potential to fill some of these gaps. It connects practitioners in a profound yet lively interactive artistic activity. The journey of Shibari can certainly be an interpersonal co-creation of participatory spirituality diving into a dynamic interaction between human beings on a level beyond the obvious (Ferrer, 2017). As the topic of healing experiences in bondage is lacking broader research, this study was exploratory and open to learning about different points of views by the participants in regard to their personal healing experiences throughout their rope bondage journey.

Method

The qualitative research was conducted utilising the phenomenological approach of Creswell and Poth (2018). A phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to gather “a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80). True to the characteristics of a phenomenological study, a set of participants described their individual and personal experiences. The detailed look at what an experience is like for a particular person and what sense the person is making of it, is essential to a phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon to be researched (Smith et al., 2009). The individual experience was most relevant to the data collection and the research process flowed from philosophical assumptions into an interpretative lens.

Participants

Ten participants were sampled from various Shibari practice groups and others who joined the study by referral through acquaintances. Some participants were friends, others were strangers. Inclusion criteria for recruitment of participants required that they were regular

Shibari practitioners over the age of 18. The age-range was between 22 to 42 years old. There were five males and five females, all of whom had previously practiced Japanese rope bondage to various degrees of expertise and varied preferences toward being tied or tying. The pool of participants was open to all ethnicities and genders. Shibari practice has no ethnical limitations or biases towards any group or ethnicity and is practiced by people of all colours and genders across the world. However, the participant pool ended up representing only Caucasians from Europe, America, Australia, and New Zealand.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews via Zoom meetings, approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length. Each interview started with a brief meditation exercise to proceed with the interview on relaxed grounds. Due to the nature of the semi-structured questions, the interviews would often flow from one topic to the next in an organic way, which allowed for the interviewee to fully participate and be able to share their deeper experiences.

The main points of the interview questions included the following points of interest:

- How the participant came to the practice of rope bondage;
- Sharing of particular or memorable bondage experiences;
- Elaborating on any felt healing effects of the experience.

The interest in this study was to see if healing experiences would naturally surface within the interview by giving detailed description of their entire Shibari journey. The questions were tailored to explore outstanding experiences, positive as well as negative, and evaluate the findings from there towards the essence of the topic of healing in Shibari practice. While participants were informed of the title of the study, the individual experience in reference to any experienced healing was only revealed in the interview process, which generally flowed from philosophical assumptions into an interpretative lens.

Data Analysis

I set out to analyse the data to find commonalities in all subjective and objective experiences of the phenomenon. The collected data was then composed into an exploration of the universal essence of the common healing experiences by diving into the respective whys and hows (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the data analysis of the interviews, I followed a six-step process (Spickard, 2017). The process started with transcribing the interviews and then organizing the data. Once the storylines were developed, the coding process supported the finding of patterns in individual emotions, adjectives, and experiences within the transcripts. Following the coding, categories and ideas were linked together by identifying common themes. The process included keeping a reflective journal that helped me to clearly distinguish between my own experiences and those of the interviewees whenever parallels occurred. During the preparation and duration of the study I was not active as a participant in any Shibari practice to be entirely focused on the felt experience of the participants with as little bias as possible.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) Psychology Research Ethics Panel. As the nature of the exploration of psychological or somatic healing suggests emotional content, the major ethical implication was to be aware of the possibility of research participants being triggered emotionally by sharing their respective experiences. At any point in time, any participant was able to refuse to answer a question and was encouraged to voice any discomfort that they might have with anything that emerged. Due to the adult nature of the topic, only participants aged 18 and above were considered for participation. Only participants who felt emotionally stable enough to conduct an interview on this topic were considered. Emotional stability concerning the study topic was established in preliminary contact with the participant, via email, messaging, or video chat. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all names were changed. All processes of data collection, study purpose, confidentiality, and data storage were communicated and agreed with participants via email notifications and signed forms prior to the interviews.

Results

The overarching themes that transpired during the research were: transformation and catharsis, embodiment and empowerment, communication and community. The words healing, shifting, growth, altered states, and catharsis were often used within the same context. Some described their altered states as mystical or exceptional experiences, flow state, sub-space, top space, meditation, or samadhi. Other prominent words that frequently came to the surface were: holding space, trust, surrender, boundaries, presence, permission to feel, feeling held, somatic experiencing, pain, exploring, edges, heart opening, connection, patterns, vulnerability, moving energy.

To some participants, Shibari offered a portal into spirituality, taking them to mystical places beyond their imagination, making it possible to process deeply rooted trauma and experience healing that way. To others, Shibari was a welcomed tool to express or discover themselves in a playful way within a like-minded community. I chose to pair up the six prominent themes and present them in three sections because these pairs almost always surfaced together within the same context of the healing experience by the interviewed practitioners:

- *Transformation and catharsis* describing the individual exceptional experiences that brought about change and healing of processing past trauma.
- *Embodiment and empowerment* to describe experiences leading towards spiritual growth into authenticity and experience healing by increasing self-awareness and self-confidence and control.
- *Communication and community* to draw attention to gender role issues and community importance, experiencing healing in the areas of personal growth and gender roles.

Transformation and Catharsis

Participants had experiences in or by using ropes that would vividly change a point of view, an emotion, perception of their inner landscape, or better understanding of what was going on within their environment in relation to their self-perception. In one bondage session, participant Nina was tied by her bondage master. In the interview, she described moments when her “repressed emotions came through and some kind of cathartic release happened”, providing the space to process these emotions in rope. Bodgan, a Shibari master, described one of his most cathartic experiences of being encompassed by rope when he, “exploded into a million pieces”, experiencing what he would later identify as Samadhi, a spiritual experience of his mind being completely absorbed into pure awareness. In turn, a female client of Bodgan’s experienced a moment of catharsis while being tied by Bodgan. The submissive sub-space allowed for stuck emotions to move through her body, lifting the weight of the world off her shoulders by reclaiming her “power of vulnerability”, following a personal crisis.

Looking back at struggles around her own sexuality, participant Porsha claimed that the practice resets her sexual, primal, instinctual chemistry with such awareness that it forces her to “stay in full alignment and self-respect to her own boundaries”. She had a profound cathartic moment when she temporarily lost consciousness in bondage suspension and vividly felt a form of a near death experience that shifted her fear of death completely, turning the rather negative experience into a very positive life transformation of living with more awareness and less fear. For Erika, the process of expanding her knowledge and practice of Shibari is closely intertwined to transforming her own sexual trauma. She said that there is always a cathartic moment for her in ropes when she is “deep in the experience” and “wants fullness of what it has to offer”, feeling a mystical surrendering to the divine that gives her permission to feel and to be her human self at the same time.

Embodiment and Empowerment

Participants experience embodiment and empowerment together or in a consequential way through the experience of rope bondage within their respective interpretation of it. For Nina, Shibari became an embodied non-verbal experience where she could connect with someone beyond words. In rope scenes, she felt “empowered, creative, and playful” to co-create a scenario with her partner. Rope master Bodgan stated that, “embodiment practice gives people a direct access to the intuitive self that knows the truth” and thus believed that Shibari as an embodiment practice is indeed a healing one, one that he himself has experienced vividly many times over in his Shibari journey.

Filipe, an experienced Shibari top or tyer, mentioned in the interview that interpersonal Shibari practice has empowered him “to be present with other people in a broad range of emotion” and thus created more empowered confidence in him around other people and in different environments. Research participant Rose felt that Shibari has been giving her the opportunity of creating awareness of her own needs while she is in the safe container of a Shibari scene. She felt “a sense of empowerment” in that way. For her, Shibari had “created an awareness of which you can advocate for your needs”. For experienced rope practitioner

Claude, Shibari has changed his life and empowered him to get in touch with his inner child, “acknowledging his presence and to allow it to speak”. Being able to do this kind of inner child work through Shibari has proven necessary for him to evolve as a human being.

Communication and Community

The importance of interpersonal communication and a better understanding of their partners played a prominent role, as well as the community aspect of being part of a group that provided understanding and space to be authentic. For Peter, the practice of Shibari was the entry point to explore himself and the world by finding deeper and meaningful connections with community members and show up in his authentic self and “grow as a man”. Anna referred to rope sessions as community action: “It brings like-minded people together with creative curiosities and mindsets... it’s a community action”. For Rose, the Shibari community was an entry point into the broader BDSM community and introduced her to explore a new relationship with herself and the opposite sex. She said, “it’s been like some portal opened”. Similarly, for Claude, erotic rope bondage was “mostly a non-verbal form of communication between two consenting adults based on a power exchange in a safe container”.

Nina mentioned that she experiences the communication and co-creation in Shibari as deeply healing, finding a mystical connection with herself and her partner by using rope as a tool for non-verbal communication creating greater intimacy and trust in her romantic relationship, “working through things that are misunderstood or miscommunicated, or ways that are distracted or hidden through words”. Participant Teo, Nina’s partner, validated the extraordinary experience of co-creation through communication in Shibari scenes, learning how to better listen to his partner and thus understanding her on a more connective level. He says, “there is this established non-verbal communication and what matters is that your heart is able to receive”.

Discussion

The results of the research findings showed a diversity of experiences within the practice of Shibari bondage in reference to the different interpretations of healing as part of the process towards *wholeness*. Some labelled their experience explicitly as a healing experience, others preferred to use the words of transformation, catharsis, or growth. However, almost all participants saw a great value in their Shibari experiences using the themes of transformation and catharsis, embodiment and empowerment, communication and community in intertwined ways to describe their respective experiences as profound and producing long-lasting results for personal development. Some processed deeply rooted trauma and experienced spiritual transformations while others became more self-aware, feeling more seen and heard in their authenticity. Nearly every participant vulnerably shared a *transformative* moment with ropes comparable to an altered state of consciousness.

Harrington (2016) notes that the reason so many are attracted to altered states is because they give opportunities to use the neural network in new and different ways. It is important to keep in mind that all forms of altered states involve playing with the chemicals, hormones, and neurotransmitters that are produced in our body and mind. It is the conscious intention of introducing different tools and stimuli to create this altered state of mind for the use of transformation, including bondage. Raven Kaldera's (2006) exploration of bondage states that its nature uses intense psychological theatre to travel to dark places and to be transformed by the process of endurance, for example, by being tied in bondage in a restrictive and potentially rather uncomfortable way. This was often mentioned by the participants of the study, and this kind of state of discomfort seems to frequently lead towards deeper embodiment and becoming more aware of themselves. There is an element of sensory deprivation in Shibari that makes it possible to re-direct the senses inward for a new way of feeling and seeing things from a different perspective to emerge. By restraining the body, the mind becomes free to engage (Harrington, 2016).

The themes of *embodiment*, “giving of human form to a spirit – to make manifest or comprehensible an idea or concept through a physical presentation” (Albu, 2018, section 4.1, para. 1) also described as the co-evolution of body and behaviour, culture, environment, and perceptual systems by Glenberg (2010), seemed relevant to many participants in their Shibari experience, making them feel a sensation of *empowerment* by becoming more confident and having more control over their lives. Finding personal freedom in full expression while being in the restriction of bondage is understood by the conscious Shibari practitioner as a connection between the practice itself and life's mysteries.

Ferrer (2017) suggested that the body is often regarded as being a source of bondage in religious and spiritual practices, finding embodiment through disembodiment by extreme practices that can be considered an ordeal or painful path with the attempt to achieve a state of higher or altered consciousness. Such practices, including meditation and modern asceticism are nothing new to humans. However, they are given a modern spin through practices such as Shibari which bridges a gap between a dark and ancient practice transformed into something new and applicable for the conscious modern human being seeking personal evolution. The fact that every participant in the research study touched on the importance of the role of *communication* and *community* in their personal Shibari journey demonstrates how much transformative power lies in learning new ways of communication with self and others. Listening to self and others more fully, with open heart and open mind and to collaboratively constructing desires is the key element in fostering successful relationship and brings about a form of healing in its own way (Harrington, 2016).

According to Ferrer (2017), innovative spiritual developments and practices cultivate the embodied dimensions of spiritual co-creation. If interpersonal cocreation emerges from cooperative relationships among human beings growing as peers in mutual respect and constructive confrontation, it becomes clear that conscious verbal and non-verbal communication within a like-minded community are an integral part of the transformational healing Shibari experience, as stated by many of the practitioners in their rope experiences.

Limitations and Further Research

The initial idea for the study was to bring awareness to the transformative healing potential that Shibari holds and pave the way for further research and more conclusive studies on the topic. A small study group of 10 participants can obviously not provide any generalizability on the topic, and studies that provide a more focused approach could help diversify deeper findings. Other studies could perhaps explore the evolution of practitioner experiences over a specific length of time from beginner to more advanced practice, and in bigger groups or more cohesive sampling. Studying the distinctive gender role experiences in Shibari and how it translates into solving real life gender problems, such as communication and balancing masculine/feminine energies, can be another interesting study angle. Perhaps a study focusing on Shibari as a form of couple's therapy, improving communication and authentic relating, could support some of the observations made by other scholars mentioned in this article, that Shibari can indeed function as a form of therapy.

More research is needed to further bridge the gap between a purely scientific and transpersonal understanding of the biological aspects of any kind of healing experiences in Shibari practice looking at long-term effects. The difference of healing that is understood in a purely medical sense as well as in a spiritually self-healing sense could be further explored in studies. This could bring evidence for human transformative capacities and explore alternative mind-body medicine approaches that reach beyond what is commonly measured by modern medicine. Further neurophenomenological research would also greatly contribute to a better understanding of how bondage practice can create an explorative space for altered states of consciousness, an opportunity to evolve and grow beyond the limitations of the own mind. The field of Shibari bondage in relation to the transpersonal is a creative one to be explored, offering a plethora of opportunities to understand the human psyche and experience from a different point of view.

Conclusion

If Shibari can indeed pave the way towards greater self-awareness, the healing element of rope bondage would be to bring conscious practitioners one step closer to human wholeness. In the profound as well as subtle interactive bondage experiences of the study participants, therapeutic elements were found in the liminal top and bottom flow space by letting half-conscious thoughts, images, patterns, and memories float to the surface. The practitioners became aware of them and were thus given the opportunity to make sense of the Shibari experience, relate them into their daily perception, and transform them into a more wholesome outlook on their personal evolution and life itself. For some practitioners in this study, the discomfort and riding the edges of their mental and physical limitations ignited the desired shifts that created space to heal and transform what had been hiding below their veil of consciousness. If healing means to transcend any kind of suffering and close wounds with accessible tools, then the essence of experiencing healing through Japanese rope bondage practice might just be to shine a light on the inner landscape with all its patterns and conditions that can keep us from or aid us in transforming into our fullest potential.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on the final dissertation research project undertaken by the author and supervised by Dr. Kendra Ford. It was submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc programme in Consciousness, Spirituality, and Transpersonal Psychology. The programme was delivered by Alef Trust in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University, UK. The author wants to thank all participants who have vulnerably shared their experiences to further the awareness of Japanese rope bondage practice.

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