Origins
Aquatic bodywork began in California in the 1980’s. Harold Dull, Shiatsu teacher and founding father of Watsu, was experimenting with Shiatsu stretches, movement, and massage in the warm pools of Harbin Hotsprings. Aquatic bodywork was born. He called his approach “Watsu”, a playful name, \textit{water+shiatsu}.

In the years that followed, many learned and collaborated with Harold, creating a number of aquatic bodywork modalities that have sprung from Watsu. Most notable are Healing Dance, WaterDance, Jahara, Aquatic Integration, to name a few. Each comes from Watsu and uses the principles of aquatic bodywork to achieve a unique end.

The Worldwide Aquatic Bodywork Association (WABA) is the umbrella organization that represents all of these various aquatic bodywork modalities. (www.waba.edu)

Pool Considerations
Watsu requires a warm water environment. An ideal pool would be:
- Quiet
- 33 degrees Celsius
- At least 2.5 meters diameter
- With depth ranging between 1-1.4 meters. This will give any height therapist an appropriate depth to work within. And as some depths are better for specific moves, a range of depth allows for greater ease with some techniques.
You may often have to make due with a pool which may be less than ideal. Good luck!

Principles of Aquatic Bodywork

\textit{Buoyancy}
- Reduces the effects of gravity
- Supports our clients during the session
- Creates ease of handling for the therapist
- Decreases joint compression
**Hydrostatic pressure**
- Creates compression
- Helps to offset the tendency of blood to pool in the lower extremities
- Helps to build muscles of inspiration and assists with more complete exhalation

**Viscosity**
- Provides resistance to movements, allowing passive stretch.

**Effects of immersion in warm water**
- Buoyancy and hydrostatic pressure cause the compression of soft tissues. Blood supply to the muscles improves.
- Improved blood supply increases muscle relaxation. Sympathetic nervous system activity decreases.

**Contraindications**
- Fever
- Significant open wounds or small open wounds on a person very susceptible to infection
- Epilepsy, especially if uncontrolled. Light reflecting off water can increase seizure probability.
- Contagious water air-borne infection/disease.
- Sensitivity to chemicals in pool (chlorine, bromine, etc)
- Uncontrolled diabetes (Keep glucose or juice available poolside.)
- Perforated eardrums
- Tendency towards ear infections (Use earplugs.)
- Motion sickness (Avoid in severe cases. In mild cases, ask receiver to communicate any feeling of sickness. Minimize sudden movements and movement of the head.)

**General guidelines while giving a session**

**Feedback**
Before beginning, ask your receiver to communicate any discomfort immediately. (Neck, back, motion sickness, etc.)
(You can also encourage a receiver to communicate what they DO like!)

**Neck Care**
Support head at occiput, rather than holding neck. Avoid hyperextension. Ask receiver for immediate feedback if neck becomes uncomfortable at any point.

**Lumber Care**
Avoid lifting at the lumbar spine. Again this is likely to cause hyperextension.

**Lengthen Spine**
Aquatic bodywork provides an opportunity to relieve normal pressure on joints and especially the spine. Always remember to encourage length in spine through traction by using your body or the resistance of the water. Avoid compressing or squashing the spine.
Avoid Lifting
Avoid lifting the receiver out of the water. Allow the water to do the work. You do not need to lift them --- using adequate flotation, you could support and lead with your little finger if you wanted to.

Breathing
Learn to connect with the breathing of your receiver, as well as your own breathing. Synchronize your breathing with client where appropriate. Synchronize movement with their breathing where appropriate. Encourage breathing where possible. (Occasional active immersion of ribcage will create greater compression, which encourages more complete exhalation and more active inhalation.) Through the breath we establish a harmony and connection with the receiver. This may or may not be consciously known by the receiver, but it will be felt. It communicates a deep listening and care. If you were to simply support someone comfortably and safely and follow their breathing, this alone is enough for very therapeutic session.

Movement
Alternate movement with stillness. This creates interest and adds to the depth of the receiver's engagement in the experience. Experiment with direction and tempo. A technical Watsu session is performed essentially standing in place, “still base”. Other modalities, particularly Healing Dance, utilize the movement of the water to create whirlpools and wakes to dance the receiver in the water, with a “moving base”. Currents massage the body and create resistance allowing for passive stretch, traction, and turbulence.

Stay low
Stay low in the water and let the water do the work. In general, the lower you are in the water, the more you can allow the receiver’s own buoyancy to do the work of floating them. The lower you stay in the water, the less you are inclined to lift them, and the more they can relax.

Invite movement
Invite rather than force movement. Consider each move as an invitation, that the receiver’s body is either ready to accept… or not! One thing is sure, the more relaxed you are, the softer you are, the more likely your receiver is likely to let go. By trying to force a let go (!) you are working against your aim.

Use your lower body
Take advantage of your legs to help propel your client, rather than trying to use your upper body strength.

Transitions
Make transitions as seamless as possible. Avoid jarring movements to the head, especially in changing from one hold to another.
Basic holding positions

*First Position* –
Receiver’s arm behind your back. Your elbow supports their head at the occiput. Your forearm or back of the hand makes contact with at their sacrum.

![Image of First Position](image1.png)

*Seaweed* –
Keeping the receivers head in the water, rest their occiput on your shoulder. Your hands are free to hold hips, ribcage, arms, massage back, etc.

![Image of Seaweed](image2.png)