

# The Channels and Vessels of Acupuncture

This series of four weekend seminars introduces the five systems of channels and vessels at the core of *Neijing (Inner Classic)* style acupuncture. Learning to work with those channel systems offers practitioners treatment options, which are particularly valuable for addressing the roots of many diseases. *Neijing* style medicine (including acupuncture) focuses on stimulating radical transformation in “patients” to probe the reversion of progressive and/or degenerative diseases, rather than simply managing their expression.

According to *Neijing* theory, individuals accumulate unresolved (external and internal) pathogenic factors, which they suspend by displacing them into physical humors. Each embodied spirit is equipped with three different types of “storage reservoir,” where it stores unresolved pathogenic process:

1. The channel divergences store unresolved (often pre-cognitive) spiritual conflicts, and/or external pathogenic factors (EPF's).
2. The (longitudinal) *luo* vessels store unresolved emotional conflicts, and/or EPF's.
3. The *daimai*, as one of the eight extraordinary vessels, provides the constitutional basis for the embodied spirit to suspend unresolved pathogenic factors.

While this capacity to store unresolved issues allows individuals to “move on” and live, it also provides the basis for most of the progressive and degenerative diseases they eventually develop. The channel systems provide practitioners with a framework for understanding how to stimulate the embodied spirit's intrinsic ability to heal, and thus engage the “*Daoist* magic” of **reversing** progressive or degenerative diseases within their patients.

Each weekend of this series will include basic instruction in both the theory of one or two channel systems and appropriate clinical skills related to the systems we study. During this series we will discuss the meaning, developmental physiology, and distinctive pathologies of each channel system, and ways to evaluate and treat them, including practical workshops.

Participating in the entire series will provide practitioners sufficient working knowledge of the channel systems to allow them to continue exploring them in clinical practice.

During the weeks following each weekend of this series, participants will be encouraged to apply the ideas and methods presented in that weekend with at least a portion of their patients. Those practical applications of channel theory will allow participants to begin grounding *Neijing* theory into their experience. Subsequent seminars will build upon both the theory and practical skills introduced during previous weekends, so the period between seminars will be as important pedagogically as the seminars themselves. The goal of this series is to facilitate participants in *using* the channel systems in practice, rather than simply learning a considerable amount of information about them and contemplating their roles in individual life. While this series is rich in theory, it is all aimed at practice!

Series participants will be invited to participate in an ongoing discussion of key topics of *Neijing* style acupuncture theory, which will be held on my website (CCMforHealing.com). That

discussion will facilitate my ongoing communication with interested participants, and give them a chance to learn from each other. The journey into *Neijing* style acupuncture may initially seem a bit like *Alice in Wonderland* wandering *Through the Looking Glass*, yet it grows entirely cogent, increasingly reasonable, and sublimely scientific, as one learns to decode its central principles. Enjoy the journey exploring the mysteries of life, and learning to stimulate its intrinsic ability to heal.

## Weekend I

### Sinew Channels -- Saturday

This seminar provides both a conceptual and practical introduction to the sinew channels. We will discuss the six divisions of *yin-yang* (*taiyang*, *shaoyang*, *yangming*, *taiyin shaoyin*, *jueyin*) as the canonical movements of post-natal *qi*. Unblocking the sinews facilitates the flow of *wei qi*, which naturally profuses up & out -- to release or expel any stagnations that have begun to accumulate within the embodied spirit. Participants will learn and practice a procedure for precisely identifying *a-shi* points, which are not simply *any* tender point, but the key points blocking the smooth articulation of *wei qi* through the sinews. **Workshop:** Sinew releases and classical sinew needling techniques.

### Primary Channels I -- Sunday

The primary channels are responsible for generating and managing post-natal *qi*, which is a process without end (*Lingshu*, chapter 16). The continuous flow of cycles supports individual life, and this central idea is represented in the familiar “meridian time-clock” sequence of the primary channels (Lung to Liver). This well known sequence of external pathways provides rich theories of human life, including how individuals understand their experience (epistemology). We will discuss little-known energetics and the physiological process of this continuous sequence, including how it introduces the inherent challenges of individual life that eventually lead to pathology. **Workshop:** Locating, palpating, and treating command points.

## Weekend II

### Primary Channels II -- Saturday

This seminar explores other aspects of the primary channels. While the familiar time-clock provides a continuous circuit of the **external pathways** of these channels, there is another sequence (originally suggested by Zhang Jingyue during the 17<sup>th</sup> century) that presents life as a progressive dissemination of *jing*-essence, which presents a continuous circuit including key **internal pathways**. This seminar will also discuss the important “roots and nodes” theory (*Lingshu*, chapter 5), which suggests a way of pairing the channels other than the familiar “husband-wife” (*yin-yang*) pairs. The theory of roots and nodes plays a central role in understanding the opportunities and challenges of individual life process and how pathology develops. **Workshop:** Introduction to the “pulse-feedback” method.

## Luo Vessels -- Sunday

The embodied spirit “handles” unresolved emotional and spiritual conflict, by displacing and embedding these **internal pathogenic factors** (IPF’s) into physical humors, and storing them in the *luo* vessels as “storage reservoirs.” The *luo* can also contain external pathogenic factors that the embodied spirit has successfully kept in the external anatomy, but failed to release or expel. Indeed, the entire system of *luo* vessels expresses *shaoyang*, as they all contain the product of the embodied spirit’s indecisiveness (unfinished process) between the interior and the exterior, until that accumulation overwhelms the individual’s containment to overflow back into the interior. While this common strategy allows the embodied spirit to “move on” to other experiences in the short-term, it does not eliminate the eventual need to address the individual’s unfinished (and thus unresolved) process. **Workshop:** Evaluating and plum-blossom needling *luo* vessels.

### Weekend III

## Channel Distinctions and Divergences -- Saturday & Sunday

While the channel distinctions and divergences (*jingbie*) are not an important part of modern acupuncture theory -- since the early Song Dynasty (circa 980 C.E.), they were central in the classical acupuncture theory of *Neijing*. Indeed, there are several reference in both that venerated text and the *Jiayijing* (Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion) of Huang Fumi (215-282 C.E.) that characterized the channel divergences the **most** important system of channels. This weekend seminar will introduce the important roles filled by these *jingbie*, and how individuals use them to support their lives.

The channel distinctions facilitate the primary channels in processing each individual’s large number of physical and experiential interactions. They contain each individual’s disposition or temperament, and project his or her core (unconscious) interpretations onto experience. While those habituated interpretations facilitate the individual in processing current experience, they also leave the embodied spirit with the unresolved *qi* and blood stagnations that arise, because circumstances and events often don’t flow as individuals wish.

The channel divergences absorb those *qi* and blood stagnations from the primary channels, thus allowing individuals to sustain "normal" life by putting their unresolved conflicts and struggles “into the closet” (dormancy). However, the capacity to suspend unresolved experience is limited, and accumulated stagnations eventually overflow back into the primary channels. There they are expressed as the overt symptoms and signs of disease.

Our brief exploration of the philosophical basis of the channel distinctions and divergences leads naturally into our discussion of their physiological functions, both as a group and individually. We will discuss the distinctive symptoms and clinical signs they express when in distress, and how these channels lead to a wide range of progressive and degenerative pathologies. After the workshop practicum, we will further discuss how to devise a treatment strategy for these important vessels. **Workshop:** Gua-sha of divergent zones, and refinements of the pulse-feedback method.

## Weekend IV

### **Eight Extraordinary Vessels -- Saturday**

The Eight Extraordinary Vessels provide the constitutional foundation for individual life. While they were mentioned in the *Neijing (Inner Classic)*, during the classical period they were generally considered beyond the reach of therapies other than acceptance. Fifteen centuries later, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), practitioners began to explore clinical interventions for these fundamental vessels. We will discuss the meanings and functions of the pre-Heaven and post-Heaven vessels (the latter group can be further divided into 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> ancestries), and how each supports an individual's (post-natal) life. That apparently philosophical theory leads directly to the discussion of pathologies characteristic of the Eight Extraordinary Vessels and developing treatment strategies. **Workshop:** Needling methods for the Eight Extraordinary Vessels.

### **Clinical Application of the Channel Systems -- Sunday**

This seminar is designed to help participants use the material presented during this series. The *Neijing (Inner Classic)* approach to acupuncture, focused on the five systems of channels and vessels, offers contemporary acupuncturists opportunities beyond modern acupuncture. We will review and refine the key principles of *Neijing* style acupuncture, based on treating channels rather than collections of points, and respond to questions that participants have developed during the program. Where local laws and regulations allow, Steven will evaluate and treat 2 or 3 sample patients. While those demonstrations may involve any of the five systems of channels, participants will likely be interested in focusing on the creative “story telling” process Steven uses in designing treatment strategies for the channel divergences or eight extraordinary vessels.

### **Series Goals and Aspirations**

While this four weekend series can only be a primer into the rich and subtle theory of human life presented in *Neijing*, we aim to provide a **practical introduction** to that theory. The series focuses on the five systems of channels and vessels as the conceptual framework for exploring the nature of the embodied spirit, in part because they provide the medium for therapeutic interaction. The functions of the channels that we'll study exhibit the key features of human life that lead to most progressive and degenerative diseases, so our investigation of human life leads directly to treatment strategies using those channels and vessels.

We hope this series will allow participants to travel further along the wondrous journey into the vast potential of acupuncture. We shall explore strategies presented in *Neijing* for devising individuated treatments that stimulate the intrinsic movements of *wei qi*. Facilitating that natural flow within our “patients,” by stimulating their releasing habituated attachments, can encourage their making the profound transformations that allow healing. Healing is intrinsic; the embodied spirit is always *trying* to do it, though it's process may be impeded by various blockages. The central focus of *Neijing*-style acupuncture is learning to locate and probe release of blocks to smooth flow, which allows the embodied spirit to realize its considerable potential to heal.