

## Liberating the Embodied Spirit to Heal: A Brief Introduction to the Five Systems of Channels and Vessels

This seminar introduces the theory and clinical application of the five sets of channels and vessels, which provides the conceptual foundation for *Neijing (Inner Classic)* style acupuncture. These channel systems offer a rich conceptual framework for clinicians to use in understanding both physiological and pathological processes. The acupuncture theory of *Neijing* is particularly focused on the development and evolution of pathology, rather than simply classifying the nature of manifest imbalances. Learning to work with the five systems of channels and vessels of *Neijing* gives clinicians new and powerful ways to treat patients with challenging ailments.

### Introduction (Z'ev's Question): Why study *Neijing*-style acupuncture?

There are SO MANY systems of acupuncture -- most are empirical, so they are generally easier to learn than the philosophically subtle and complex *Neijing*

Protocols appeal to beginners, and provide a "standard of care" -- fulfill the desire of many for an "external" authority

How is *Neijing* qualitatively different? -- not *just* one more system

What is the purpose of treatment, and how do we evaluate its effectiveness?

Who does it serve? -- the personality or the embodied spirit

Managing the expression of pathology? -- serving the personality, and telling the embodied spirit to "sit down and shut up"

What is healing and how does one facilitate it?

Healing work has both yang and yin aspects

...focusing and stimulating transformation

or holding space for the individual's spiritual/emotional process

BRIEF survey of popular acupuncture systems...and a few thoughts on their foundations

- microsystems based on exchange -- hands, feet, nose
  - may have too much yang (exchanging or not) for consistent treatments -- magnets on Korean hand points instead of needling
- microsystems based on physical anatomy/physiology -- scalp, ear
- empirical systems -- Tong, (some) Japanese (e.g. Kiko), other "family" systems
  - most of these have some classical roots -- *Neijing* or *Nanjing*
- modern TCM -- empirical, based on a simplified version of *Zhehjiu Dacheng*
  - heir to the Imperial Academy of Medicine (according to current dogma), which eliminated acupuncture from its departments in 1822!
- simplified versions of the some aspects of the channel systems -- Tan
- Worseley (and many Japanese traditions) -- based on *Nanjing*

So, why study *Neijing* theory and the acupuncture that arises from it?

The question itself may be motivated by a bias toward “progress” in history

What is the purpose, focus, and standard for engaging therapy?

Symptom control or management? -- we need not take our lead from modern (western) medicine

Stimulate the embodied spirit to transform its relationship with life

Exploring the nature of disease and addressing its causes

Rather than managing its expression

### **How/What Does Studying *Neijing* Teach Us About Healing?**

Rich conceptual model of the nature of individual human life in *Neijing*

Life as an embodied spirit -- accumulating experiences

Can one accumulate experiences, while releasing any unfulfilled process?

[see my essay, “Beware the Rampaging Hun”\*]

Psychology, Physiology, Pathology

We are not “black boxes” -- the development of disease is a process!

Our highest work seeks to “sort out” the complexities of an individual’s life, rather than simply managing the expression of distress

Allows practitioners a *reasonable* way to probe reversion of progressive/degenerative disease in patients

## Historical and Conceptual Foundations of *Neijing* (*Inner Classic*)

Life as an Embodied Spirit: The Dance of *Yuan*, *Ying* and *Wei*

Living out the Mandate of Heaven -- historically rooted in the Duke of Zhou

*Jing* contains *Shen*; *Shen* animates *Jing*

The **dissemination of *yuan qi*** (*Lingshu*, chap. 1)

The Nature of Embodiment

Individual life is based on **constant exchange** with the world and continuous flow within -- processing those interactions with the world

When the embodied spirit fails to release (out) its process, the byproducts of that incomplete process accumulates to block smooth flow

When the flow of post-natal *qi* (*qi* and blood) are impeded:

The embodied spirit rebels

Sometimes that rebellion scatters *qi*

Allowing humors to collect and grow into a swelling/tumor

When that rebellion engages blockages, it can

There may be pain -- as a message from the embodied spirit to the individual's conscious awareness, making it overt

Moves them out of the body -- "spontaneous" healing events

Entangle with it, generally adding heat to the original stagnant humor

The embodied spirit attempts to keep entangled struggle with stagnation in the external anatomy

Generally moving it into a "storage reservoir"

channel divergences, *luo* vessels, *daimai* (belt vessel)

Entanglement in (and struggle against) the inertia of stagnation exhausts *qi*

The entangled factors eventually consume the individual's ability to generate and circulate post-natal *qi* (*qi* and blood)

Expressed as *wei*-atrophy syndrome

The embodied spirit continues to struggle to maintain life

Pushing *yang* or *yin* to support the generation of post-natal *qi*

Eventually that effort exhausts the foundation of life

Expressed as *jue*-collapse (or syncope) syndrome

[This progression of the embodied spirit's intrinsic reactions to factors that impede smooth flow is based on ideas from (and the sequence of chapters within) each classic of *Neijing (Inner Classic)*:

*Suwen (Simple Questions)*, chapters 3, 39-45

*Lingshu (Spiritual Axis)*, chapters 34-36, 38-40, 43

While this brief outline is certainly not an exhaustive exegesis of those chapters, it organizes some of their key points into a coherent progression of disease based on the natural efforts, and subsequent exhaustion, of the embodied spirit.]

The ongoing process of embodiment

Transmuting between experiential and physical

Displacing unresolved spiritual/emotional struggle into physical humors

The Sources of Disease -- Blocks to the Flow of Life

Internal, external and miscellaneous causes:

Apparent "deficiencies" as the result of re-deploying post-natal *qi* to maintain the dormancy of previously unresolved pathogenic factors

[see my essay "The Myth of Deficiency"\*)]

## Dormancy and the Development of Progressive and Degenerative Disease

Why (and where) do unresolved pathogenic factors accumulate?

Internal Causes - unresolved emotional conflicts

based on how the individual digests experience

External Causes - perverse wind

The “natural” result of generating post-natal *qi*

...with the distortions of *personal* attachment and projections

Individuals build and fill their specific reservoirs of unfinished process

## Conceptual Framework: The Five Systems of Channels and Vessels

What are the Five Systems of Channels and Vessels and Why are they Important?

The Web (of individual life) **Has** a Weaver

While each person is a microcosm of *Dao*, we are also individually embodied spirits

...subject to the limitations of our personal interpretations and projections

Each individual is his or her own “weaver” -- by projecting (sub-conscious) personal interpretations onto circumstances and events -- **I am not a “black box”**

[This includes “metaphysical” works like the currently popular *The Secret*, and myriad others over the centuries. Individuals create their experience, both internally and externally, by what we project.]

Compulsive attachments of the embodied spirit -- grasping is a survival reflex

One key to *skillful action* in life is learning to differentiate what one can release

Projection of core interpretations is expressed through the **channel distinctions**

Unresolved process is contained in the *luo vessels* and **channel divergences**

The channels are a symbolic representation of ALL vital movements in life

A conceptual model of an individually embodied spirit experiencing vital interactions

Individuals accumulate unresolved pathogenic factors as a direct result of their compulsive attachment

The five systems of channels and vessels provide a conceptual framework for understanding, facilitating, and guiding patients in “radical healing”

On the value of Experiential Learning

Neo-natal *Daoyin* -- understanding the channel distinctions and divergences

Healing Events -- often building a charge to expel a blockage to allow liberation

## The Theory and Practice of Disease Reversion

“Turning a Barge in the Panama Canal” -- the Key is a Transformation of Being

The Profound Transformation to Unload Accumulation

Releasing and resolving

“our minds are like icebergs” -- 90% beneath the surface

Releasing is so important that we are given two ways to do it:

to the outside -- so it is out of one’s life: healing

to the inside -- where it is embedded in a physical humor and stored: somatized

Treatments don’t *cause* healing -- healing is up to the “patient”

Yet, incisive treatments can focus, stimulate, and facilitate healing

Generally through facilitating the “patient’s” embodied spirit expressing itself

Facilitating the intrinsic movement of wei qi

Releasing or Expelling pathogenic factors

*Waiké* -- Expelling the Stagnations of Life

Transforming the embodied spirit’s process for generating post-natal *qi*

“If you grew it, you can ‘ungrow’ it”

The Digestion Specialty and the primary channels

Unloading unresolved PF’s that had been embedded in physical humors and stored

as part of the embodied spirit’s “natural” process of embodiment

building more Earth

in the channel divergences, *luo* vessels, *daimai* and other of the 8EV

[specifics on which of the 8EV depend on whether one follows the *Neijing* or *Nanjing* theory on where (among the potentials of the constitution) the embodied spirit stores unresolved pathogenic factors]

Releasing (thus resolving) the unfulfilled process that is subconsciously projected onto all experience -- disposition or temperament

from the channel distinctions

recapitulated in the channel divergences as accumulated spiritual conflict

Releasing (thus resolving) unresolved emotional struggles that have been suppressed

somatized into blood stagnations, and stored in the *luo* vessels

Teaching is a VITAL part of our work

Helping “patients” to enhance their healing processes

Lifestyle choices that enhance healing process (or don’t shut it down)

Food, *qigong/daoyin*, self-massage, etc.

Teaching about the healing process, so patients may find it easier to persist

Recognizing and honoring healing events

How to enhance healing process

breathing -- focus on the exhale

emotional/spiritual process -- journalling, dreams, etc.

eating (and experiential input -- stress)

keeping it “clean” generally

matching the individual’s differential diagnosis

Sorting Out Symptoms -- Symptoms are NOT a direct expression of pathology

The embodied spirit’s gesture to draw attention to its distress

“Don’t shoot the messenger”

The character *jie* -- translated by Sivin as “sorting out”

an awl-like tool made from an ox horn -- used to patiently and persistently separate factors that appear inexorably bound to each other

combination of pathogenic factors and the embodied spirit’s response

Indicator Symptoms -- learning to appreciate communications from the embodied spirit

Symptoms are my best friend! In expressing them, the embodied spirit is:

Intelligent -- it prioritizes its efforts in responding to pathogenic factors (for instance, the sequence of responses in Shang Han Lun)

Tolerant -- it is frequently able to suspend considerable unresolved material (in order to continue the vital interactions of life)

Expressive -- when unable/unwilling to suspend unfinished process

Discriminating and precise -- each symptom conveys

[for more on this topic, see “Treating Patients with Chronic Disease” and “Sorting Out Symptoms”\*]

## Generating *Qi*: How the Secondary Vessels Support the Primary Channels

The sinews provide yang to the primary channels

The foundation of therapeutic exercises

Habituated patterns of activation are contained in and projected onto the sinews and primary channels by the channel distinctions

Facilitating the processing of experience - channel distinctions

Most people engage far more interactions than they can process in real time

The quest (and challenge!) to wake up -- to engage beginner’s mind

Absorbing unresolved pathogenic factors - *luo* vessels and channel divergences

Provide a place for unresolved stagnations, without compromising flow in the primary channels

Together, the “secondary vessels” allow the individual to project his or her will out onto the world -- acting to support his or her own survival and to find meaning

Our folly is to take that state -- living off the “grace” of the secondary channels -- as *real*

Individuals eventually have to face the product of unfulfilled and accumulated process that has stagnated within the embodied spirit

## The Developmental Physiology of the Channel Systems

The Vital Transformation of Birth

Connecting the individually embodied spirit with Heaven

The ubiquity of breath -- the post-natal source of *yin*

“polarizing” *yuan*-source *qi* to the exterior

opening the senses and expressing through the channels

The primacy of touch -- stimulating the channel distinctions

bringing *wei qi* out to the exterior -- to process experience

begin accumulating habituated (unconscious) interpretations that will be projected onto all subsequent experience

Descending the *gu*-valley and connecting it with Heaven to generate post-natal *qi*

initiating the individual’s **digesting** of both food and experience

the source of post-natal *yang*

“Building” the Individual’s Primary Channels from the Combined Function of the:

Sinews, Channel Distinctions, and the Eight Extraordinary Vessels

How the channel divergences recapitulate the channel distinctions

Creating Demand for Luo Vessels - a place to store blood (emotional) stagnation

## Using the Channels and Vessels in Clinical Practice

The Value of Narrowly Focused Strategy Treatments

Single channel system strategies

The value of well-focused treatment strategies

For primary channels -- treat only three (related) channels: *Neijing* approach

Also, not mixing micro-systems with the channels

Exits and Entrances -- communicating between the exterior and interior

Windows-to-Heaven and Doorways-to-Earth

Channel divergence confluences

*Luo* points

Sinew binding points

Diagnosing the Channels and Vessels

History -- discerning and “telling” a patient’s mythology to determine their specific progression of pathology and how their embodied spirit has attempted to accommodate it

The importance of careful study of the theory of channels and vessels -- to provide a context for understanding each individual’s history

Visual examination - *luo*

Palpation - body and radial pulse

Moving qualities of the pulse -- Feedback Pulse

Discerning the personality’s mythology (which separates it from the *Dao*)

Developing Treatment Strategies

Distinctive acupuncture procedures for treating each channel system

Sinew Channels -- chiseling, hot needle, akabane or bleeding jing-well points

Primary Channels -- as a progression, rather than just distinct connections to their respective zangfu

*Luo* Vessels -- plum-blossom or 3-edged needling

Channel Distinctions and Divergences -- needle three times

Eight Extraordinary Vessels -- shaking, vibrating

\* Essays available in the archive on [CCMforHealing.com](http://CCMforHealing.com)