

Acupuncture Point Function

L.S. Jarret

The Inner Nature of Acupuncture Points

To truly appreciate the function of acupuncture points, it is helpful to understand how the ancient Chinese thought about their world. Their conception of the universe is well reflected in the early Chinese mythology presented earlier in this text. When we understand this mythology (literally, spirit talk, shenhua:), the spirits of the points come alive and talk to us. Just as Emperor Yu traveled throughout China and became familiar with the spirits of the deep structures, so too must the acupuncturist know intimately the nature of the spirit present in each acupuncture point.

The meridians [mai: Ø_] running through the body are the internal rivers of the microcosm, each acupuncture point along a meridian representing and harmonizing a specific aspect of being in the individual's inner kingdom. The acupuncture meridians and points reflect the way in which the Chinese saw the macrocosm of the universe as it is mapped onto the microcosm of the body. This map guides the skilled practitioner to balance the functional relationships that maintain the integrity of the human being.

Just as the Yijing is a tool to guide our intuition to an understanding of the dao's implicit movement in the world, so, too, a knowledge of the imagery of the points may give us access to the ways in which the dao strives to express itself through each individual and the ways in which that effort is blocked, resulting in imbalance and ill health. It is often the practitioner's knowledge of the symbolism of each point that spells the difference between treating patients superficially and reaching them at their depth.

The unique property of acupuncture points is their ability, with stimulation, to restore our memory of original nature. Each point has the capacity to evoke some aspect of functioning that has been lost, buried under the accretions of life's habituating influence. The general characteristics of each of the five elements—water, wood, fire, earth, and metal—are elaborated in the discrete functions of the twelve “officials.” The function of each official is further elaborated in its associated acupuncture points. For example, the general qualities of the wood element are elaborated into their yin and yang aspects as the liver and gallbladder officials, respectively. A function associated with the liver official is “planning.” Thus the fourteen acupuncture points on the meridian of the liver official each address some discrete aspect of the function of planning.

The practitioner's developed knowledge of the individual points then guides her to identify and minister to subtle aspects of being that the patient is failing to access. For example, on the liver meridian, acupuncture point Liver-14, named "gate of hope," may allow the practitioner to empower that quality of being called hope within the patient. Hope can help to ease internally generated constraints on our plans as we project them into the future. Liver-14, by empowering the balanced expression of "hope," may help harmonize unbalanced emotional extremes on a continuum ranging from despair to blind optimism. We could devote a lifetime to writing volumes on Liver-14 and the nature of hope as it presents in humanity. In fact, this job would be endless because the human understanding of the aspect of being we call "hope" continually evolves. Hence the nature of any acupuncture point function evolves as the human understanding of being evolves. The nature of acupuncture points is limitless and cannot be defined as narrowly as they have been in most modern texts.

The images contained in the point names do not define point functions, but serve as foci for discussion about particular aspects of being harmonized by the point. For example, discussing destiny (ming) in the context of the point Governor-4, mingmen, does not mean that Governor-4 is "the point for destiny." Every point, used in the correct context and at precisely the right moment, may restore a lost aspect of self-expression that brings the patient closer to fulfilling his life's potential.

The Nature of Acupuncture Point Function

Each acupuncture point is unique in its ability to touch some aspect of being that has been lost to the individual. By "touching" this aspect of being, the memory of original nature encoded within the point's function may be restored to the patient. Acupuncture points work by harmonizing continuums of unbalanced and extreme expressions into the virtues from which they derive, precisely in the same way that the chongqi is said to harmonize the dualities of heaven and earth into a state of primal unity. An example on a physiological level is the function of Heart-7 ("spirit gate") in its ability to stabilize the pulse. Heart-7 may be used to equal advantage in an individual whose pulse is either excessively fast or excessively slow. In the former case, the function of the point contributes to calming the heart rate, whereas in the latter case, the point helps to raise the heart rate. Hence the function of Heart-7 represents the central point of balance between the extremes of heart function in terms of its rate.

This same principle of harmonizing dualities operates in the realms of psychological, emotional, and spiritual functioning as well. For example, an individual may be excessively belligerent in intimate relationships and at the same time timid in the workplace. These behaviors may be viewed as opposite ends on a continuum representing the unbalanced expression of the wood element. In this instance, the function of Liver-1, "great esteem,"

may serve to empower the virtue of self-esteem by harmonizing the unbalanced expression of both belligerence and timidity.

The general principle of bringing balance by harmonizing dualities is central to understanding the opposing but complementary natures of Western and Chinese medicine. It is exemplified by the difference between “taking a position” in life and “making a stand.” A “position” is always taken relative, and in opposition to, another view. Hence positions often represent “either/or” alternatives to each other and often are taken in habitual and unconscious reaction to a contrary position adopted by another. For example, during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, some African Americans adopted a militant position regarding the bigotry prevalent among white people in America. The two opposing positions of the racist whites and militant blacks were fueled by habitual unconscious motivations on both parts. Rather than adopt a position in opposition to one view or another, Martin Luther King, Jr., made a “stand” between these two unbalanced extremes. Instead of solely advocating for the rights of African Americans, Dr. King advocated for the rights and dignity of all human beings. In this way, he helped harmonize the two extremes of hatred and helped all Americans move closer to the promise and fulfillment of their national destiny.

In a similar fashion, the practitioner must help to continually strengthen the center that harmonizes all forms of unbalanced expression in the patient’s being. This center is defined by the patient’s constitutional type, and the patterns of unbalanced expression he presents are predicated on his constitutional weaknesses and compensations. These imbalances may be addressed directly by the practitioner’s choice of treating acupuncture points and prescribing herbs that speak to the depth of the patient’s being.

Access to the inner nature of acupuncture points is only available in the context of treatment whose overall aim is aiding patients to fulfill their destiny. That is to say, we cannot just throw a few of these points into a treatment plan and expect them to empower the virtues discussed here. In the appropriate context, any point may be useful in harmonizing any imbalance in the patient’s being. But in order to return the patient to his lost spontaneity and true nature, the sage as healer must be so united with variable circumstances that treatment is based on the functional dynamics of the patient at that moment.

For the practitioner, the patient appears as a pointillist painting. During each treatment, the practitioner uses her diagnostic skills to comprehend the functional portrait that emerges from the patient. The practitioner, in choosing a treatment, is concerned with where in the portrait to place a dot (acupuncture point) and what color to make it (quality of qi) so that the picture is complete in the moment. Between therapeutic sessions, the patient’s functional dynamic will shift and, on each presentation, manifest a new picture that will have to be reassessed each session anew. The practitioner must herself respond

spontaneously to each new presentation and not treat the same points repeatedly. Repeating points in an attempt to “cause” something to happen may be analogous to the practitioner forcing her will on the patient. Continually receiving the same points will cause the patient to stagnate as he becomes habituated to their effects. This is counterproductive because the goal of the highest medicine is to support the patient’s evolution. Ideally, the practitioner is able to respond to each new presentation in a way that is unencumbered by her past experience with the patient. Even if a point is effective, avoid the inclination to use it repeatedly—hence Sunzi’s warning not to repeat tactics that have worked successfully in the past but to let one’s methods correspond to the unique merits of each new situation.

Selecting the appropriate points involves the following process: (1) identify the patient’s constitutional type because all treatment is performed in relation to this element and official; (2) identify the functional dynamic of imbalance that exists between the patient’s constitutional type and the other elements and officials; (3) identify the discrete aspects of the given functions that the patient is habitually failing to express; and (4) identify the individual points on the relevant meridians most likely to empower the expression of these virtues.

The process of point selection may be informed by input from many sources extant in the life of each practitioner. She must be able to hold her long-term vision of the patient’s path of healing while simultaneously responding to the unique circumstances of the therapeutic moment. This process often recedes into the realm of intuition when the practitioner is doing her best work. As in a brilliant musical improvisation, her selection of points expresses truth spontaneously as the rewards of practice mount and the constraints of theory fall away. Of course, we may always go back after the fact and analyze the performance or point selection. In truth, though, the note played or point selected emerges spontaneously out of the harmony of the moment. The practitioner literally has no other choice but to be a vessel for the creative flow of dao as expressed through the selection of points.

For the practitioner attuned to the functional relationships represented by the officials, the five-element system offers a method of discovering the deep inner functions of the acupuncture points. Over many thousands of sessions, with proper intention, the practitioner may become increasingly aware of the way each point addresses discrete aspects of human function on all levels of being. Of course, this is a highly individual process as clinical experience reveals to each practitioner truths about the points consistent with her own path, awareness, and belief system. The functions of the points I present here represent truths that are self-evident to me. They are offered only as insights into my own process of discovery and not as ultimate definitions of point function. Hence the information provided here is not meant to contradict any understanding of point functions as they are presented in other texts. It is my personal belief that the practice of Chinese medicine as a path means being able to embrace simultaneously apparent opposites and to

hold contradictory principles as reflecting complementary truths. To others who list the functions of points differently, I would just say, “and that, too.”