

A Meridian – what is it?

(Wilfried Rappenecker)

Below the surface of the body there is a layer, which makes communication with other areas of the body and the whole person easier. I would like to call this the communicating layer. In different parts of the body this layer can be found at different depths e.g. on the inside of the hand joint it is usually in or just below the skin. In the area of Conception Vessel 17 it is usually in the breastbone or in the connective tissue just in front of it so that simply touching the area establishes contact. However, in areas such as the back of the thigh the layer is to be found at a much deeper level. In order to reach it is necessary to go in a few centimetres

The communicating layer is a physical as well as an energetic phenomenon. For the former it needs a very definite physical contact with a recognisable physical structure i.e. a muscle or layer of muscles. The latter - like all energetic phenomena - is about space, which can only be entered if the practitioner can create such a space in him/herself and get in touch beyond the physical contact.



The main Shiatsu-meridians are part of this communicating layer. Like the veins of a leaf they represent the connecting paths and communication lines in this layer. As the practitioner becomes more experienced (instruction by a teacher is very helpful) he/she can localise these “thick” meridian branches precisely at many places in that

layer. The precise flow of a meridian is indicated by differences in the body tissues that lie within the communicating level, i.e. the density or tension of muscles, bones or connecting tissue. Such differences are caused by state of energetic activity of the meridian.



**Berührung ist Begegnung
Shiatsu-Ausbildungen Austria
Dr. Eduard Tripp**

A-1120 Wien, Schönbrunner-Schloss-Str. 21/8
Tel: +43 (676) 61 74 970
tripp@shiatsu-austria.at, www.shiatsu-austria.at

The meridian itself appears to be a purely energetic phenomenon. It is only possible to come into real contact with it by "touching with awareness of space". That means that the practitioner feels light and wide when touching. With more and more practice this state can develop almost by itself or be helped along by specific exercises. Relaxing of the shoulders and letting go of blockages in the body - at least partly - is part of that process. Peripheral efforts, mental and physical tension becomes unimportant when touching in this way.

Touching itself and energetic perception come from the whole body, above all the inner body, from the Hara and from the heart. One place in Hara seems particularly important, the area of the solar plexus, the centre of encounter in the human body.

From a physical point of view touching and perceiving with the awareness of space seems to give rather fuzzy information. However, it is remarkable that this relative fuzziness in the end helps to see things a lot clearer. What is perceived and touched in this way are the main branches of the meridians. According to far eastern medicine meridians are manifestations of an energetic organ. Starting from the main meridians they branch out over the whole body until they finally reach every cell.

In order to understand meridians it is important to understand the concept of energetic organs. Apart from one exception (the "triple heater") they are named after anatomical-physiological organs with which they are particularly linked i.e. stomach, heart or kidney. However their job goes far beyond the physiological functions of the physical organs. Ultimately they represent something like different levels of vibrations. They penetrate, connect, and regulate all life manifestations i.e. the physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual "bodies" of man.

Meridians are not identical with the energetic organ whose information they carry. They are merely areas in the body where there is increased vibrational quality and information related to that organ that can be more easily recognised and touched. We must assume that ultimately every cell contains the information of all 12 levels of vibrations and that the same applies to even the smallest area in the psychological, intellectual or spiritual body of man.

The main meridians are information highways leading from the whole to parts of the human being and the other way round. For the practitioner they are a kind of interface which he/she can access by relaxed touch and by which he/she can influence the quality of the energetic organ's vibration. It is also possible to reach the energetic organ in different parts of the body through other energetic patterns or systems than that of the meridians, even on levels, which may not be found within the physical body. This fact is one of the foundations of a meridianfree shiatsu.

On a physical level the organs are housed in the three burning spaces. This means that they show most clearly and are most easily recognised on the trunk. Although the organs are also present at other levels of human existence their manifestation in the body is particularly important for shiatsu because shiatsu is bodywork.



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For me meridian-shiatsu is first and foremost work with the energetic organ, work with vibration levels. Direct physical contact and a clear mind establish the contact. To work with the meridian is a technique, which facilitates contact with the particular level of vibration linked to the related organ. Meridian work is a technical means in shiatsu among others albeit an important one.

It is an important tool because meridians carry the information of the energetic organ. This includes blockages and deformation in the functional pattern of the organ. What we in our work perceive as blockages and deformation is essential information from the whole to the parts aiming to maintain the homeostasis (equilibrium in the face of changing conditions) of the whole. Modifying or interrupting the flow in parts of a meridian is the expression of such essential information. This occurs when the whole can see no other more economic solution to a problem than this (high energy) restriction of the vibration of Ki. By improving the flow in parts of the meridian and by influencing the vibrational quality better solutions offer themselves to the whole.

That is why meridian shiatsu and therapeutic shiatsu in general are so important. Similar results can be achieved in a meridian free shiatsu as well. However, meridian shiatsu offers a simple and elegant way to work continuously with a vibration quality and to connect distant areas of the body at this level.

The Depth and Width of the Meridian

Continuous work “on” a meridian (or rather “in” a meridian) is a way to reach the vibration level of an energetic organ and to influence it. Influence occurs simply by presence in the meridian. A simple touch is sufficient, special manipulation is not necessary; on the contrary it can even spoil the effect. At this point it should be mentioned what it means to talk about the vibration within a meridian. Chinese medicine says that Qi flows in a meridian. It is said in different texts that this happens at the speed of the width of one hand with each breath.

This may be so. However in shiatsu I experience this statement being not of any real relevance. The reaction to touch within a meridian (and also beyond the meridian) as well as the connection between two areas being touched take place very fast. In any case faster than man can think. In a way one can only watch it happen. I prefer to see a meridian as a kind of vibrating space. Through the ability to vibrate and to go into resonance each part of the meridian is connected with all other parts. In the same way the information stored in one place on the meridian is available to all other places. Interruptions of the flow are spots where the ability to vibrate and to resonate has been restricted out of different reasons. Not only is the vividness of this spot suppressed. More so the ability of the whole meridian and the underlying energetic organ to react and express itself is diminished.



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Simple touch in a meridian can dissolve or lessen such restrictions. A touch of that kind is like diving into the sea of the meridian. It is not enough to be physically present on the surface of the body where a meridian is supposed to be – although it is essential for this kind of work to be familiar with the precise flows of the meridian paths. Simple touch means that in a natural way the whole body and personality of the giver become a part of that touch. Technically seen this contains physical depth and energetic space.

Physical depth means that when sinking in the practitioner reaches a depth in the body of the client where he/she reaches the communicating level and the meridian therein. As initially described this depth can be different in different areas of the body. Students are always surprised how deep this can be when we try to locate these depths in a special exercise in class. Shiatsu is always bodywork as well and the physical depth is an essential part of the work.

Energetic space means getting in real contact with the meridian as an energetic entity. As already mentioned above a feeling of expansion and space within the practitioner is an important prerequisite. Entering a meridian in this way makes it possible to experience as real multi-dimensional entities. Although an outer demarcation does ultimately not exist there is a point when entering the meridian where its special vibrations can be felt for the first time by a first clear reaction to the contact. The level of first contact seems to depend on the attention by the person making the contact. It is possible that the depth varies with different practitioners. It is however apparent to the spectator. This level of contact could be called the periphery of the meridian.

The periphery is yang and the energetic reaction to touch at this point is relatively “loud” i.e. quite noticeable. Sinking in more deeply leads usually towards the centre of the meridian. However, if the contact remains merely physical the real centre will be missed. One will physically be at the right place but will not have arrived. This has to do with the energetic nature of a meridian. The energetic space can only be entered when expansion and space of the contacting person are available as a sort of key. The centre of the space is yin and the energetic reaction to contact in the centre is quite often relatively quiet.

Kyo and Jitsu - Landscape of a Meridian

When following the course of a meridian, it can be noticed that, both the first contact at the periphery, as well as the centre of a meridian are at different places and at different depths and also that reaction to contact can be very different.

The first contact can be achieved by touching the skin lightly or even before. At another place it may be necessary to go much deeper (possibly a few centimetres) before getting a first

reaction. Between the first reaction and the centre of the meridian can be a clear space, which the practitioner has to cross. At other times the two can be so close together as to almost seem identical. The reaction to contact can be clear and definite or hardly noticeable or fuzzy. It all seems to depend on the energetic quality of the meridian as a representative of the underlying energetic organ.



Places where the meridian energy is close to the surface and where reaction to touch is rather clear (loud) and rather "pointed" or "bright" can be called jitsu. On the other hand, places where contact is established deeper down and where reaction is rather "dark", quiet and "wide" (although it can be quite strong) are in a state of kyo.

In a deep kyo first contact and centre are almost the same. The more a place is in jitsu the greater the distance between first contact and centre - and in a pronounced jitsu it can sometimes be impossible to reach the centre of the meridian because of tension in the tissue.

If the experience with subsequent meridian places is mapped out it produces a landscape of hills and valleys. It can principally be said that the points, which are most important for the treatment are as a rule in places of strongest kyo or jitsu respectively. These are places where the interruption of the meridian flow is most pronounced, in other words the places where the energetic space of a meridian is most clearly restricted in its ability to vibrate

These observations may lead to the assumption that extraordinary talents are required for this kind of perception. This is however not the case. The perception of energy in particular has not been considered of importance in our culture for centuries and is therefore not part of education. It can however be learned if there is real interest (which is nearly the only prerequisite). Determined practice of Shiatsu will gradually develop the perception of energy.



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Exercises to develop Space

In the Shiatsu training at our school in Hamburg we try to support this development of increasing energetic perception with special exercises. Especially the so-called Inner Techniques increase the readiness of the body to get involved in this adventure. The following describes three such inner techniques:

Touching the whole Body

This exercise is quite simple - like all Inner Techniques. The main thing is to simply sink in and touch as usual. The actual exercise is linking the touch with a particular image, which characterises this special exercise. Such an image is created by the mind of the practitioner (and not performed by his body), hence the name Inner Technique. While usually it seems easier to use the idea when touching kyo-places it is more difficult with jitsu-places. However, one can apply it to any area of the body. In this exercise one imagines that touch not only has an effect on the spot where the thumb, hand, elbow, or knee etc. of the practitioner is placed but that its effect is spreading all through the whole body of the other person.

At first it may not be quite so easy to develop this idea. But when it works, something will have changed in the body of the practitioner. It is as if the idea of touching the whole body is only possible when the body of the practitioner feels different. And that is what it is all about. It may happen (and it will happen!) that the shoulders of the practitioner e.g. become wider; that the practitioner feels softer and wider inside, that the back is straightening all by itself. The pelvis and sacrum changes its position slightly, and out of the blue the practitioner notices places on his/her own body, where he/she needs to let go. This is precisely the point: the relaxed and clear intention to reach the whole body of the client by touching one area creates the need in the practitioner to prepare him/herself for such a contact. That is to become wider and softer, to let go in certain areas and to create space in him/herself. Touching the whole body is more than physical contact. The physical touch develops an energetic quality, which is only possible if the body of the practitioner develops space within itself. If this idea is used regularly in shiatsu treatment the body recognises this situation more quickly each time. Finally it becomes a habit, which the practitioner can achieve quickly almost as if pressing a button. A simple exercise, which has a great effect.



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© Wilfried Rappenecker, born 1950 near Köln (Germany), is director of the "Schule für Shiatsu Hamburg" (D-22769 Hamburg, Oelkersallee 33, <http://www.schule-fuer-shiatsu.de>), co-founder of the GSD und author of two books dealing with shiatsu. As physician for general medicine he mainly works with shiatsu.

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