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The Six Combined Channels

(Bill Palmer)

This article is about the Six Channels, which combine one meridian in the arm with a different meridian in the leg to form a whole body channel. My research with children in the 1980's [1] suggested that infant movement development is guided by these channels in a very precise way. Babies learn psychological skills as well as motor skills through these developmental movements.

I was excited to realise that these psycho-motor capacities, described by Western scientists and developmental therapists, such as the Bobaths and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen [2,3,4], corresponded very closely to the Oriental Qi function of the meridians in the channel. I think that this connection gives a satisfying explanation of the channels: that they are the paths along which we learn to use our bodies and thus hold a memory of the energies activated by that stage of development. In treating the meridians, we are reminding the person of a skill they already know!

These capacities are deeper archetypes than the functions of the individual meridians. The Ling Shu states "The arms reach to Heaven while the legs stand on the Earth". So each arm meridian embodies an energy through which our body expresses emotional, mental and spiritual capacities. In contrast the leg meridians express the way in which our feelings, thoughts and spirit can become embodied, supported by the Earth and transformed into action.

The combined channel forms a bridge between the body and spirit and this bridge is a kind of combination of the energies of the leg and arm meridian. Together they express six developmental themes, through which one can view the body as a profound classroom in which we learn the lessons of this life.

Along with all other English writers, I have in the past called these channels the Six Divisions but this translation is inaccurate and I want to correct it. Originally, in the Yellow Emperor's Classic, the Su Wen, they were called the Liu Jing – which means Six Threads or Channels. Each channel was also associated with a different stage of disease, which was given the same name as the channel. In Chinese these classifications of disease were called Liu Bing (six syndromes) and it is this phrase that has come to be translated as Six Divisions. But I do not want to classify disease, I want to describe healthy development. So, in this context I would like to revert to the original usage and call them the Six Combined Channels, to avoid confusion with the 12 organ meridians.



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The Archetypes of Qi

Traditional Chinese Medicine is a form of poetry. A particular function of the body is viewed as a metaphor for a psychological process, and so treating a part of the body also effects the corresponding aspect of the mind. For instance, the process of digestion can be seen as a metaphor for mental processing, or thinking, so Chinese medicine classifies both digestion and thinking as part of the function of the Spleen and treats worry, or 'over-thinking', by working with Spleen Qi.

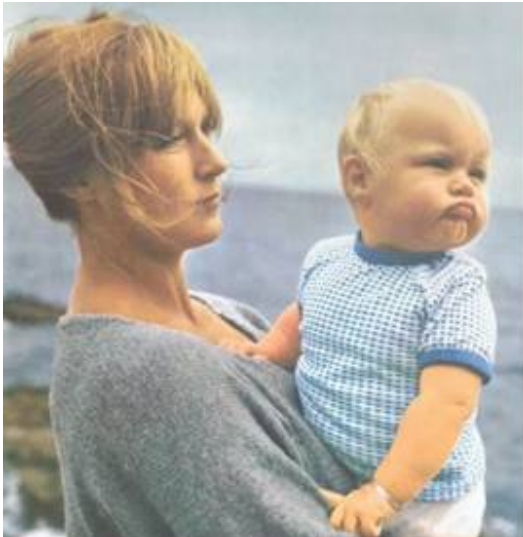
The forms of Qi describe holistic archetypes, which express themselves metaphorically in both body and mind. In fact, one can find the same archetypes being expressed in behaviour, anatomy, physiology, movement and psychology. Making this connection means that working with one of these dimensions has an effect on all the others.

Some Western writers have dismissed this idea as 'primitive sympathetic magic' but recent research into brain function shows that the evolution and development of the brain follows exactly this principle. For instance, scans of brain activity during emotional pain show exactly the same areas being activated as during physical pain. The current idea amongst biologists is that, when animals evolved the capacity for emotional pain to help avoid social mistakes, evolution just re-used areas already developed for avoiding bodily harm by experiencing physical pain. As another example, premature babies whose digestive systems haven't matured tend to be unable to reach with their mouths (which newborns can usually do) and, when hungry, tend to be passive rather than crying for food. Here we see all the metaphors for the act of getting nourishment: anatomical, movement and emotional, developing together.

These premature babies tend to have low tone in the front of the body along the Stomach meridian, exposing another body metaphor for the same theme. When all of these aspects of the baby start to develop, then the primitive reflexes concerned with feeding and getting support from the ground all develop precisely along the traditional Chinese Stomach meridian and this pathway gains tone. At the same time that the Stomach meridian is developing the ability to get nourishment and support, the baby is learning to use his arms to push against this support to move himself away from the ground. These movements start in the arms, developing up the Large Intestine meridian and, by six months old, culminate in the baby being able to push away unwanted things, in effect to say 'No'.

So you can see that the Stomach and Large Intestine are two aspects of the same theme, which we could call "Using Outer Support". The Stomach reaches for, makes contact with and receives the support of the outer world. The Large Intestine pushes against this support to individuate, to separate and to move. Without the Stomach the Large Intestine would not have

anything to push against. Without the Large Intestine, the baby would be glued to the ground, could never let go of his mother to be himself.



This 8 month baby is learning to individuate, you can see how he uses the stability of his mother to push against, turn away and be himself. She is beautifully embodying the Stomach meridian, so together they complete the Yang Ming.

The turn of his head is very typical of this stage, exposing the Large Intestine meridian from the hand to the nose.

At the same time as this energy is developing, the muscle that extends the index finger develops tone and activity (you can see it in the picture). The baby starts to point. It's as if he is saying "That is over there – that is not me"

Yang Ming – The Bright Yang Channel – ‘Using Outer Support’

This is the first of the combined channels, called the Yang Ming. The movements that develop along the Stomach Meridian in babies are ‘reach and tone’. This manifests in feeding movements such as rooting, sucking and swallowing in the upper meridian but also in reflexes that reach and contact the ground along the torso and legs. The movements developing along the Large Intestine meridian are ‘push away’ movements, which have a distinctive spiral quality that add power to the push.

It is interesting that, when the arms learn to ‘reach and tone’ (the Stomach Meridian Skill) to support body weight, they do so along the Large Intestine Meridian and when the legs learn to ‘push away’ (the Large Intestine Skill) in order to crawl, the same spiral extension takes place along the Stomach Meridian. So both aspects of the Yang Ming are active in both arms and legs. It was this that convinced me that the combined channel was more than just the addition of two meridians, but was a more general entity in its own right, of which the Stomach and the Large Intestine were two facets.

I find it useful to see these combined functions as developmental skills. Instead of seeing people's issues as problems to be cured, they are seen instead to be lessons to be learnt. The combined function of the Yang Ming is to negotiate between the Inner and the Outer; to take in what is needed and to reject what is not wanted; to use support to move without getting too

attached. The lesson of the Yang Ming is therefore to learn to individuate – to feel comfortable with one's difference to other people and to be able to disagree without losing contact. Paradoxically, the ability to disagree means that you can make deeper contact with another person, because you can really be yourself.

I hope I have given a sense of how the development of motor skills in an infant is a precursor to the development of the archetypes of Qi, which span both body and mind. This is a great justification for bodywork. Building up the foundation of Qi-skills through bodywork, the person automatically develops the associated capacities in their emotions and behaviour.

Tai Yin – The Great Yin Channel – ‘Tone, Response & Expansion’

Each of the three Yang Channels is associated with a Yin channel. Whereas the Yang Channel is a pathway along which an active skill is learnt, the Yin channel expresses and embodies the energetic quality that the Yang skill generates in the body-mind.

As we saw, the Yang Ming actively gets what we need and releases what we don't. This allows us to feel supported but also to be able to express ourselves as a separate individual. If we feel we need to agree even though we don't, then that blocks our expression and makes us unresponsive. This is why the ability to be different allows for deeper contact.



The quality that this process gives us is best described as 'Bounce'. If you poke me, I respond. The physical metaphor for this quality is good muscle tone and a buoyant posture. This is the essence of the Tai Yin. The Leg Tai Yin is the Spleen Meridian, which receives the support of the ground and transmits it upwards. The Spleen gives us a central feeling of being nourished and gives tone to the flesh. This inner expansion is developed further by the Lung Meridian, which fills the whole posture with Qi and continues outwards to express our energy to the outside world.

A young baby who is loved and fed will naturally have healthy Tai Yin and their muscle tone will be bouncy. On the other hand, the lack of the Tai Yin shows itself in postural collapse, tense or floppy muscle tone, sagging of the shoulders and contraction of the person's energy in general. A chronic lack of Tai Yin is one of the most



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difficult things to work with because it is experienced as shame. Shame contracts us because we feel we are rotten inside and don't want to expose ourselves to scorn.

The key to working with it is to remain expansive, open and un-shockable. In the safety of the a Shiatsu session, clients may expose a bit of their shame. If one remains unshocked and warm, then this slowly changes their view of themselves (because they are expecting other people to be disgusted) and heals the shame. Trying to 'fix' them is counterproductive because their unconscious will perceive that as a confirmation that something inside them is bad. Shame takes a long time to heal and, like a nervous animal, needs patience, stillness and calm to expose itself and to realise that it is safe to come out. This is why the essential still touch of Shiatsu is the ideal therapy for this condition.

Shao Yin – The Lesser Yin Channel – ‘Spontaneity and Excitation’

The Lesser Yin Channel combines the Kidney and Heart. The Kidney is the source of our primal energy. The Heart is the centre of our primal awareness.

Both Organs are at the deepest level of the energy organism. They do not act themselves but are the foundation and source of our sense of Physical and Spiritual vitality. They are the centre of self but do not, themselves, have characteristics. As such they embody what the Buddhist philosophy calls Sunyata or the Void. This is not emptiness, but an un-formulated energy, which can easily transform and manifest in different ways, because it is not attached to a conditioned view of self.

This means that the Shao Yin is helpful when working with frustration. Frustration occurs when you want to do something and are blocked. Shao Yin is the energy underlying the emotion, before it has become attached to an object and working with it is the essence of Tantric Practice [5]. If one can experience this pure excitement, without an outside object of desire, then, even though the desired object may be unattainable, the underlying energy can find another path to satisfaction; a path that is available and open. This is also useful for other blocked emotions, such as anger. Typically, one can resolve many such blocked emotional states through spontaneous movement initiated from the Shao Yin.

Tai Yang – The Greater Yang Channel – ‘Clarity and Alignment’

The Tai Yang Channel combines the Bladder and the Small Intestine, which both express the clarity of a person's intention so that their spirit shines through their actions without being clouded by inhibitions. These clouding energies are called impurities in Oriental philosophy.

For instance, if we feel that we should do something but, in our heart, we don't want to do it, then our action is unclear and inhibited. In psychological language these 'shoulds' are called introjects; they are someone else's opinion that we have swallowed without digestion. Introjects physically contract the neck and shoulder and inhibit energy from flowing freely through the body.

The Small Intestine traditionally separates the pure motivations, those which we can assimilate into our sense of self, from the impure introjects and thus clarifies our awareness and our impulses. This allows us to reach freely forwards towards our true aim. The development of the Bladder meridian in babies aligns the skeleton so that a push from the legs travels clearly up the spine and into movement. Thus the Tai Yang is the channel of our Will, turning excitement into clear action and aligning our whole self in that direction.



This picture exposes the whole of the Tai Yang. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen showed how the eversion of the back foot (using the peroneus muscles along the Bladder meridian) aligned the pelvis and the spine to create a straight line of force up the Bladder meridian from legs to spine to eyes. You can also see the wholehearted reach of the liberated Small Intestine meridian, starting with the little finger and extending through the shoulder blade and the Latissimus Dorsi muscle right down to the Small Intestine Shu points on the sacrum.

flying towards its single target.

The Tai Yang is like an arrow, straight and true,

Tai Yang and Shao Yin – The Dimension of Action

The Yin and the Yang Channels together give us a sense of authentic action, acting from our truth. This is hard for social animals like us humans because we are always having to temper our impulses to suit other people. So the next two channels are the final ingredient to help us act authentically while also maintaining contact and dialogue with other people.

Shao Yang – The Lesser Yang Channel – ‘Collaboration’

The Shao Yang combines Gall Bladder and Triple Heater. The Triple Heater is the traditional function of integration, the avenue along which Primal Energy (Yuan Qi) acts through the whole body. The Gall Bladder mediates between potentially conflicting aspects of our energy, facilitating collaboration and giving the experience of making a decision (because all of the internal arguments are settled). Therefore the Shao Yang gives us the ability to act as a unified being, to act from the whole of ourselves.

Developmentally, the movements initiated along the Shao Yang, integrate the baby's body through the spiral movements of rolling. A new-born baby is physically disconnected. By four or five months they have found their centre and their movements act on the body as a whole. The Shao Yang continues developing throughout childhood, using spiral pathways of connection to develop athletic skill and graceful movement.

These two dancers show both the Shao Yang and the Jue Yin. The one on the left shows the integration of the limbs to the torso that the Jue Yin develops, pulling everything together.



The dancer on the right is flexible and responsive but, on the other hand, being pro-active. The definition of collaboration. He is in the middle of a spiral turn, which is the signature movement developed along the Shao Yang in a 4 month infant who is learning to roll. The spiral integrates left and right, top and bottom and the back and front of the body.

Jue Yin – The Persistent Yin Channel - ‘Persistence and Integrity’

The Jue Yin combines the Liver and Pericardium, or Heart Protector, meridians. It is often called the Absolute or Ceasing Yin, but ‘Persistent’ is a deeper and, in this context, more accurate translation of Jue [6]. The character for Jue in Chinese contains the connotation of a plant, which is pushing through difficulty, like a seedling growing up through concrete. If we meet an obstacle, the Pericardium spreads the load into the whole body so we are not traumatised while the Liver acts like a spring, absorbing the set-back and using the stored energy to guide us back onto our original track. Both Organs respond flexibly, bending with the wind, and the Liver keeps going, holding to the original vision, persisting on our path. Thus one can understand the traditional function of ‘Smoothing the flow of Qi’.



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Developmentally, both meridians do this by binding the periphery to the centre. Reflexes, such as the Babkin reflex develop along the Pericardium meridian to bind the arms and head to the torso. Postural reactions and reflexes integrate the legs and body, developing first in the core muscles such as the psoas and then continuing to develop adductor tone down the Liver meridian. This pulls the body into balance around its central axis for the development of standing. Together, this postural binding gives a sense of the body being a cohesive system necessary for balance and coordination. It helps us to physically stand but also gives us the inner strength to stand up for ourselves.

The capacity that the Jue Yin teaches is the ability to pull ourselves together, to persist through difficulty so that one's central purpose is not lost. It is the channel that, more than any other, gives us the sense of integrity and is the necessary basis for most relationships, social interactions and moral fibre.

Shao Yang and Jue Yin - The Dimension of Relationship

As you can see, the Jue Yin gives us a sense of integrity and purpose while the Shao Yang mediates our internal conflicts to facilitate self-integration. These two channels thus help us to knit together, but also form the basis for our external relationships, providing the skills of commitment, collaboration, persistence, contact and dialogue which are necessary for any but the most superficial friendships.

Conclusion

The archetypes expressed by the Six Channels are at a very deep, spiritual level. Often I find they illuminate a core issue in a person's life, which one could see as a life-task. By bringing this core task into awareness the work takes on a different dimension. Instead of trying to 'solve problems', the issues can be seen as challenges and stimuli within the person's life process; a deep part of themselves which can be a seed for learning.

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