

# Introduction to Meridians and Traditional Chinese Medicine

## History of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

TCM has a long history: there is evidence that there was a sophisticated approach to medical problems as long ago as the Shang Dynasty (circa 1,000 BC). Archaeological digs have unearthed early acupuncture needles, and discourses on medical conditions have been discovered inscribed on bones. Early Asian shamanic practices are believed to be at the foundation of TCM, and the Chinese emphasis on the balancing and governing forces of nature seem to have developed through the observation of the natural world.

By the 1st century AD, the first and most important classic text of Chinese Medicine had been completed. The text was probably compiled over several hundred years and based on the writings of many authors, and takes the form of a dialogue between the legendary 'Yellow Emperor' and his Minister, on the subject of medicine. The 'Inner Classic' expounds the philosophy of Chinese Medicine and a further section deals with the benefits of acupuncture, herbs, diet and exercise. Over the following centuries, these basic writings were expanded upon, and much of the current practice of TCM reflects traditions that have developed over the last 3,000 years

## Tao

Chinese Medicine evolved alongside the ancient philosophy of the **Tao**. The Tao literally means a “way” or “path” and to Taoists it came to mean “the way of the universe”. The Tao cannot be known or described through the analytical tool of words; it must be apprehended through direct experience. It must be lived. It is both hidden to one’s mind and yet intimate to one’s being. Disease in the Taoist vision is seen as a situation where the individual is at some level “out of step” with the dynamic, ever-changing yet harmonious balance of Nature. Living according to the Tao is Creating without claiming, Doing without taking credit, Guiding without interfering.

## Basic Components of TCM

### Yin and Yang

The Yin/yang are inseparable of the Tao; they are the hands through which the Tao manifests and orders creation. One of the oldest classics of Chinese Medicine, '*The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*' (referred to above) states that:

*To live in harmony with Yin and Yang means life.*

*To live against Yin and Yang means death.*

*To live in harmony with Yin and Yang will bring peace.*

*To live against Yin and Yang will bring chaos.*

These two fundamental forces of the universe are said to be in opposition yet interdependent; to consume each other and to transform into each other. Nature is seen to group itself into pairs of mutually dependent opposites, for example the concept of 'night' has no meaning without the concept of 'day'; 'up' has no meaning without 'down'.

Despite their polarity, each contains the embryonic seed of the other within itself, as illustrated by the familiar Yin/Yang circle. The circle itself represents the Supreme Source, half Yin and half Yang, each with a dot of its own opposite growing inside. Complementary couplings of Yin and Yang pervade the entire universe and their elemental opposition provides the dynamic tension required for all movement and change. As we shall see later the Yin/yang principle is used to classify the internal organs into pairs, each pair sharing the same element.

## The Vital Substances

At the basis of Chinese medicine are fundamental substances:

- Jing Essence
- Qi
- Blood
- Body Fluids
- Shen (mind-spirit)

The word “substance” is perhaps misleading as they should be viewed as vital forces.

**Jing Essence** is Qi at its most dense. It is formed at conception, something that we inherit from our parents and the state of a person's Qi and Blood depend on this 'essence'. The strength of our Jing determines our constitution, it is stored in our kidneys, and it allows us to develop from childhood to adulthood to old age. The Jing that we inherit at birth is all that we have for the rest of our lives, it varies in amount from one person to another, and most people have an average amount of it. Overwork, poor diet etc. over a long period will contribute to the early depletion of Jing but it can be strengthened through special way of cultivating Qi such Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Yoga and meditation.

**Qi** is the energy that underlies everything in the universe. Condensed it becomes matter, refined it becomes spirit, and everything that is living, moving and vibrating does so because Qi moves through it. An old Chinese text called the *Nan Jing* says that "Qi is the root of all human beings". It governs the body processes, both physical and mental and thus appears as different types of Qi varying in location and function. Original Qi stems directly from the Essence and can be considered our constitutional energy. It acts as a catalyst for the creation of all the other types of Qi.

**Blood** in Chinese medicine is not the same as the 'blood' that we think of. 'Blood' is described by what it does rather than by what it is, and it is seen as the fluid that nourishes and moisturises the body. It also houses Shen (see later). For example, the symptoms of 'blood deficiency' include:

- Frequent pins and needles or cramps due to malnourishment of the muscles and tendons
- Dry skin and brittle nails due to lack of moistening of the skin
- Constant anxiety, poor memory and lack of concentration due to the blood not 'housing' the Shen.

The blood has a close interdependence relationship with the Qi. Not only Qi is crucial to Blood formation but is also necessary for the circulation of Blood through the vessels. The Qi moves the Blood.

**Body fluids** are derived from food and drink. They are referred to as 'Jin Ye' in Chinese medicine. The functions of body fluids are to moisten and nourish the body. Jin fluids nourish the skin, muscles and hair. They also flow from the body as sweat, tears or saliva. Ye fluids provide nourishment for the joints and brain. If the body fluids are 'stuck' then the free movement of Qi and Blood in the body can be obstructed. These body fluids are the most 'substantial' of all the vital substances in Chinese medicine!

**Shen** by contrast is the most 'insubstantial' of all the substances in the body, and it can be said to be a rarefied form of Qi. It could also be said to be our very spirit itself. It is housed in the heart by the Blood. **Shen, Qi and Jing** are called 'the Three Treasures', and together they are seen as the basis of our health. The Chinese will often use the term 'Jingshen' as a sort of shorthand term for vitality or vigour, and the term sends us the message that the basis of a healthy life is a good constitution and a strong spirit.

## The Meridian System and 'Organs'

A useful comparison that is often used in Chinese medicine is to describe the Qi flow to be like a river. A river has a source and it follows its course ultimately towards the sea. As it flows it will vary from shallow to deep, quick flowing to slow flowing, while following the most natural path. A river system is complex with many tributaries. The meridian system is likened to the river system and best described as a bodily channel, which conveys Qi. The meridians make up an invisible network, which connect all the organs and tissues of the body and in Chinese medicine they are regarded as being more important than the nerves, blood or lymph because they circulate Qi.

Both acupuncture and acupressure work on specific points along the meridians called acupuncture points. If anything occurs to weaken or block the energy flow, the result will be an energy imbalance possibly resulting in pain or problems in the associated organ.

Medical scientists in the West have often believed and argued that the meridians were products of an imaginative mind. Modern research however, especially by a North Korean scientist called Dr Kim Bong Han, has shown that meridians do exist. Other research has shown that the meridians convey electro-chemical impulses.

The 12 main meridians are linked together at their ends in the hands, feet, head or elsewhere, so providing a continuous flow of chi throughout the body. All the main meridians are bilateral which means that there are identical meridians on each sides of the body. The other two meridians called vessels are the Governing Vessel that runs up the centre of the back and the Conception Vessel that runs up the centre of the front of the body. If there is a disorder in one of the main meridians its connected organ will also be affected.

The meridian network is said to have its own in-built safety system, which consists essentially of eight special meridians which supplement the function of the main meridians by providing alternative pathways for the chi should it be needed. In addition to bypassing diseased organs or blocked meridians, these special meridians provide an escape for the chi when it occurs in excess and provides for the circulation of chi if a main meridian becomes completely blocked.

The twelve main meridians correspond to the five Yin “solid” organs, Liver, Heart, Heart Protector, Spleen/Pancreas, Lung and Kidney. These organs are considered to be deeper in the body and are concerned with the manufacture, storage and regulation of the fundamental substances. The six Yang “hollow” organs Gall Bladder, Small Intestine, Triple Heater, Stomach, Large Intestine and Bladder. These organs are considered to be closer to the surface of the body, and have the functions of receiving, separating, distributing and excreting body substances.

Yin Organ	Yang Organ	Element
Spleen	Stomach	Earth
Liver	Gall Bladder	Wood
Kidneys	Bladder	Water
Heart	Small Intestine	Fire
Lungs	Large Intestine	Metal
Pericardium	Triple Warmer	Fire

**The meridian pathways of each pair of coupled organs are connected**

Although the majority of the meridians are related to physical organs that we in the West would recognise, not all of them are, and they do not necessarily work on the same physical basis. For example, there are two 'organs' that are unknown to Western physiology: the Pericardium (or Heart Protector) and the Triple Burner or Triple Heater/warmer. The Pericardium protects the heart from emotional upsets and 'knocks', and protects us from external 'attacks' such as infections. The Triple Heater harmonises the organs and ensures the safe passage of energy and fluids through our bodies; malfunctioning is seen as causing Chi or body fluids to become blocked in our systems.

We also must be aware that the word 'organ' does not have the same meaning in Chinese medicine as we would understand in the West when we think of the liver or the heart, for example. Each organ has a much wider range of associations, characteristics, functions and influence than the physical organs we perceive in the West. Each 'organ' functions on all levels of our body-mind-spirit, and are part of an overall dynamic energy process. One organ/meridian can be seen as supporting the next. So the Heart supports and nourishes the Spleen, and this in turn nourishes the Lungs. The Lungs support the Kidneys, and these nourish the Liver. The Liver supports the Heart and so on.

## The Main Meridians

**The Heart meridian** starts at the armpit and runs down to the little finger. It is the meridian for insomnia, poor memory, lack of concentration and mental problems such as epilepsy and schizophrenia. The heart governs the blood and is open to the tongue, it houses the spirit and its element is fire. Any disharmony in the heart will not be confined to a cardiac complaint. Disharmonies could include a speech impediment or an emotional condition such as manic depression, or even a simple problem such as chilblains, which are the result of poor circulation.

**The Lung meridian** starts 5cms/2 inches from the nipple and runs in the direction of the arm, ending in the thumb. It is the meridian for asthma, coughs, chest and shoulder pain. The lungs govern breath and are open to the nose. The associated element is metal and it rules over the skin. The lungs also receive the 'heavenly chi', which are both the air, which we breathe, and the spiritual quality, which gives meaning and purpose to life. Disharmonies in the lung meridian can affect the sinuses, throat, chest, or create an emotional problem whereby the victim becomes apathetic and lethargic, and loses interest in his or her surroundings.

**The Liver meridian** starts at the big toe and goes up to the outside of the rib cage under the nipple. It is the meridian for hernia, chest stuffiness, lumbago and menstrual problems. The liver governs the movement of chi, its element is wood and it rules over the eyes. Most menstrual disorders are treated through the liver channel, as are eye problems such as conjunctivitis and any stress disorders associated with anger-, which is the emotion, linked with the liver.

**The Spleen meridian** starts at the big toe runs up the centre front of leg through the side of the abdomen and curves to the side of the rib cage. It is the meridian for menstrual problems, stomach trouble and blood deficiencies. The spleen meridian is the centre of the body and is connected with the functions of the other organs. It transforms food and drink into chi and blood and distributes them around the body. It rules over the muscles. Dysfunctions associated with the spleen meridian include digestive problems and prolapse problems.

**The Kidney meridian** begins on the sole of the foot and runs to just below the collarbone. It is the meridian for genital diseases, bladder and kidney complaints, breathlessness, cataracts and blurred vision. The kidneys have a very special function in Chinese medicine because they store the essence of life. They are open to the ears, and their element is water, which in medical terms means not just urine, but also seminal and hormonal fluids. The adrenal glands, which are just above the kidneys, are regarded as an integral part of the kidney function. The kidneys also rule over the bones and the marrow, which nourishes the brain. Water retention, infertility problems, deafness and tinnitus are all regarded as dysfunctions that can be treated via the kidney channel.

**The Pericardium meridian** starts from the nipple up to the shoulder and down the arm to the middle finger. It is the meridian for chest pains, heart problems, palpitations, and all forms of sickness. The pericardium's job is to protect the heart from emotional damage. The meridian of the pericardium is known as the heart's 'protector'. The heart, as the emperor of the body, is vital to the smooth running of the state of the body. It is therefore vulnerable to attack and to pressure, and needs a guard to watch over it. The pericardium fulfils that function. Its channel is often more effective in treating cardiac conditions than the heart channel itself. Some sexual dysfunctions and relationship difficulties causing emotional illness would be treated on this channel.

**The Large Intestine meridian** starts at the tip of the index finger runs up the arm, over the shoulder to the opposite side of the nose. It is the meridian for head, face, mouth,

neck and throat pain, lower jaw and problems involving the teeth. The large intestine is linked to the lungs, and part of its function is to discharge waste material through the bowels, and toxins through the skin. This channel will be used to treat constipation and diarrhoea, skin problems and sinus trouble.

**The Small Intestine meridian** starts at the little finger goes up the arm, across the shoulder to the ear. It is the meridian that is used for treating problems affecting the jaw, neck, shoulder and arm pain. The small intestine is paired with the heart and is responsible for receiving and making things thrive. It ends at a point in front of the ear. It is also used in the treatment of some hearing disorders.

**The Gall bladder meridian** starts at the outer edge of the eye, runs zigzag over the trunk, down the side of the leg to the fourth toe. It is the meridian for pain at the side of the head, back, joints, thigh, knee and leg. It is also the meridian used to treat malaria. The gall bladder meridian is connected to the liver meridian. In Chinese theory it is believed to be connected with a person's self-image and personal confidence. This channel is used to treat menstrual difficulties, eye problems, headaches, arthritic hips and knee problems, and lack of confidence or indecision.

**The Triple Warmer meridian** starts at the ring finger runs up the back of the arm and side of the neck to the temple. It is the meridian for nervous problems, paralysis, tinnitus, migraine and neuralgia. The triple warmer isn't, strictly speaking, an organ at all. It is the body's thermostat. It has its own channel because it is closely connected with the other eleven organs. In Chinese theory, the trunk of the body is divided into three sections, all of which control the heat within it and are responsible for keeping homeostasis.

**The Stomach meridian** starts underneath the eye, travels down the side of the body and leg to the second toe. It is the meridian for digestive disorders, ulcers, mouth problems, high fever and diarrhoea. The stomach meridian sends the food to the spleen and is regarded as the keeper of the storehouse. It begins the digestive process and will be the meridian used to treat some gastric disorders and bowel problems. Because food has such profound psychological influences, it is also the meridian involved in the treatment for eating disorders.

**The Bladder meridian** starts at the inside corner of the eye, goes over the head, down the back and leg to the little toe. The Bladder meridian is closely connected with the Kidney and its main function is to distribute the fluids in the body and getting rid of 'bad' water. The meridian runs the length of the body, beginning at the corner of the eye, crossing the head, and passing twice down the back before running right down the leg to end at the little toe. It acts on many skeletal problems, sciatica, and many types of back pain, cystitis and incontinence.

