

## Acupressure, Acupuncture, and Acupoints

As was mentioned in the overview of Chinese medicine, there are 5 main branches of treatment in Chinese Medicine:

Branch	Some Included Practices
Acupuncture:	needling, cupping, or moxibustion
Herbs:	soups, teas, “pills,” salves, and poultices
Lifestyle:	Feng Shui, diet, exercise, personal relations
Body Manipulation / Touch Therapy:	Tuina, acupressure, reflexology,
Qi Gong:	Tai Chi, Yoga, meditation, and other forms

### Acupuncture

In the U.S., when most people hear “Chinese medicine” they immediately think of acupuncture. After a little more thought they might expand their view to include herbal medicine. This is unfortunate because in Chinese medicine as it is meant to be practiced, acupuncture is actually the least important branch.

It is probably the most well known in the U.S. because it is very different than Allopathic medicine without becoming intangible like, for example, Qi Gong is to most people. There has also been a lot of scientific research investigating the effectiveness of acupuncture. Unfortunately, most of these studies have skewed data. The classic scientific research experiment on the efficacy of X to treat headaches gathers together a group of people with headaches. Some of the people get the X treatment and the others get a placebo. This design is inherently flawed when studying acupuncture and much of Chinese medicine. First, what can be used as the placebo? A needle that is not placed in an acupoint is painfully obvious. Not needling at all is completely obvious to the patients.

Another difficulty arises with the individuality of treatment. In Chinese medicine, two people would rarely receive the exact same treatment, directly violating scientific experimentation which insists that all patients must receive the exact same attention and treatment. What is effective for one person in Chinese medicine may not be effective for another.

Many studies choose a single acupuncture point and test its ability to treat what Chinese medicine claims it treats. For example, LI 4, the source point for the Large Intestine Channel, is supposed to be good for treating headaches. However, what most scientific studies don't account for is that it is used to treat a *specific kind* of headache, one that is towards the front of the head and generates pressure or pulsing behind the eyes. If someone has a headache that is dull and to the sides or pounding along the top and back, needling LI 4 will be largely ineffective. Another discrepancy with this approach is that an acupuncture treatment never consists of a single needle in a single point. Multiple acupoints are always used to generate the desired effect.

Despite the difficulties in studying acupuncture scientifically, many studies support its efficacy. Most major hospitals in the U.S. offer acupuncture as a form of anesthetic and major insurance companies cover acupuncture treatments. Acupuncturists are also now accepted in many states as primary care providers, much in the same way as some highly trained nurses. This acknowledgment has made acupuncture very visible to Americans, while the rest of Chinese medicine remains largely unrecognized by the public. Many Chinese medical doctors from China move to the U.S. and shift to acupuncture as the bulk of their practice simply because there is a lot of money to be made in acupuncture and much less to be made in the other branches.

### **Acupressure**

Acupressure is the same thing as acupuncture except acupoints are stimulated with the fingers, not needles. Depending on the skills of the doctor, acupressure can be more effective than acupuncture, but usually it is a weaker and gentler stimulation that requires longer treatments. There are many reasons for this, but the most immediately obvious is that any number of needles can be placed in the body, but an acupressurist only has two hands to hold acupoints with.

Acupressure is probably the oldest systemized form of touch therapy, dating further back than even the earliest texts c.2500 BC. Touch therapy is any form of rehabilitation that effected by another living being's touch, usually a human. By this definition, acupuncture is not a touch therapy. Instinctually we all engage in touch therapy; rubbing a body part when struck, and holding one's head to stimulate memory were examples given earlier. Holding a friend during difficult times in life and holding a sick, bed-ridden loved one's hand and brushing the forehead are other examples of touch therapy. The human element, or at least the element of another living being, is very important in touch therapies. If a baby is crying and you pick it up with a net, chances are it will keep crying. If you have your dog sleep next to it, the baby may or may not calm down. If you pick the baby up in your arms and hold it, chances are it will stop crying. If you are the baby's mother or father, the calming effect is even stronger.

Acupressure is an effective touch therapy that can be done with the clothes on. Technically acupuncture can be done through clothing also, but the patient must be careful not to allow the clothing to shift and tug on the needles. Acupressure utilizes the 12 organ channels and, more rarely, the 8 extraordinary channels in the same way that acupuncture does. If the 8 extraordinary channels are used, usually it is only the 2 that have their own acupoints: Governing Vessel (related to the Brain), and Conception Vessel (related to Sexual Function).

An acupoint is a point along a channel where blockages form. All blockages occur at or very close to an acupoint. Acupoints also have the special property of boosting and conducting qi and electricity through the channels. For more details on this, refer to the Qi notes in the section that discusses different ways technology has been able to detect qi.

Acupressurists hold different acupoints, often in a flow, to help release blockages. Acupressurists can be much less precise than acupuncturists, having about a quarter-sized target to hit the acupoint rather than one the size of a pinpoint. The goal of acupuncture and acupressure is to balance qi at the acupoint, in the related meridian, and in the entire body. It is important for acupressurists and acupuncturists to consider all of these. Clearing a blockage at a single point while ignoring other blockages will have therapeutic effects, but will also worsen the blockage immediately “downstream.” If I have to dams in a river and I remove the one on upstream, then the one downstream suddenly feels more pressure and more water pools around it. So, while releasing a single blockage does have therapeutic effects, it could potentially create even more problems at the same time. Therefore, the goal of an acu-therapy session is not to clear as many blockages as possible, but to release different blockages to different degrees to achieve a dynamic balance in the whole person. All the blockages in a person would be completely removed only after repeated treatments.

### **Tips for Performing Acupressure Flows**

It is important to remember that these are general flows, not individualized treatments. They will be more effective for some than others, but most people will feel a noticeable difference after receiving any of these flows and will benefit from them.

Ideally, both the receiver and the performer will be well hydrated, will have had something to eat within the last couple of hours, and will not have recently taken any medication or alcohol. This is to ensure the smooth flow of qi, preserve a true balance, and to lessen the effects of the release of toxins into the bloodstream. Any time a blockage is cleared or lessened, toxins that were deposited at the site of blockage are released into the blood. There is no danger in this unless the receiver is extremely sick or in a highly toxic state. However, a great release of toxins into the bloodstream will make the performer feel dizzy and nauseous at the end of the session. The receiver may even experience mild illness for a few days. To prevent this, we must ensure that the blood sugar is constant and that there is enough fluid in the blood to make sure the concentration of toxins remains low. (see section on hydration)

It is also important that the performer keeps both hands on the receiver throughout the flow. The performer and receiver are sharing qi space, and to a certain degree their qi flows through each other. Performing acupressure with a single hand makes it easy for qi to drain from the performer to the receiver, especially if the performer is really intent and focused on the receiver. Placing both hands on the receiver enables a circuit to be made and lessens the likelihood of the performer becoming drained at the end of the session.

Remember, intent and belief are critical in acupressure. Since most of us are not consciously sensitive to qi and cannot control it, our best way to affect qi is through intent. Every thought generates a related action in the body and a related effect in the qi. At the same time, the belief of the receiver, or at least the openness, is very important. A receiver who spends the entire session doubting and saying nothing is going to happen automatically sets up defenses against their qi being influenced. Even if the performer's influence is stronger and a change is made, if the receiver continues to disbelieve his

body will slowly revert to its original imbalanced state before the treatment because of the influence of the mind on body and qi.

### **Some Thoughts on Proper Hydration**

One of my coordinators and guest lecturer Denise LeCompte asked me why many Chinese Doctors feel that giving water before and after a treatment is so essential. Below is a direct copy of the reply I sent back to them (less formal language!):

Water . . . well, like I was saying in the lecture, for every thought, there's an associated body effect and for every body effect, there's an associated qi effect. And vice versa. So whenever we release qi blockages, there's also a release of accumulated toxins into the bloodstream. If too many toxins are released at once, then the person will faint. So drinking water helps dilute it in the bloodstream and flush them out (makes the person go to the bathroom).

If we think of it in terms of qi, what are we doing? Well, when we have a blockage, we have an accumulation and stagnation of qi on one side of the blockage and most likely a deficiency of qi on the other side. If the release of the blockage is sudden and the difference in qi level on either side of the blockage is large, then we have a sudden rush of qi from one place to another. Sudden drainage can cause a person to faint, especially on meridians like bladder, kidney, heart, stomach, lung, . . . hm . . . pretty much all of them I guess =) Denise prevented this (whether she knows it or not) by choosing points both in your legs and in your head. I'm guessing that she used a point or two in the legs from the stomach meridian to keep you grounded, i.e. quiet, steady, calm, comfortable, and preventing a qi rush to the head (which some say can lead to an out-of-body experience, which I define simply as a release of most of a person's qi, usually through the head, usually through the crown shakra)

So what does water do for us? Well, I guess it's not just water. We never do acupuncture on someone who's dehydrated, who hasn't eaten all day, or someone we think may already have a high level of toxins in their bloodstream (ex. someone who is drunk or is on medication). Well, I guess if you were both a highly experienced doctor and qi gong master, you might. But most of us aren't either of those =) Water and being well-fed gives us a stable base to work from, so qi doesn't fluctuate too much. Remember, normally we derive our qi from the air we breathe, the food we eat, the fluids we drink, and our environment. So we make sure the person is hydrated (most of us go through the day dehydrated and complain of things like being tired and inalert) and will flush out the toxins released during acupuncture. We make sure that the person is relaxed and comfortable so their breathing isn't hypertensive. And we try to provide a quiet, still, and soothing environment for the person to be in while the treatment takes place (low stimulus: proper body alignment which maximizes comfort and qi flow, soft but not necessarily low light, comfortable seat/bed, quiet room, etc).

So basically, we give water to prevent fainting (in rare extreme cases toxic shock), flush toxins from the body, and to help prevent large fluctuations in qi levels on a meridian level. A this applies for acupressure, massage, reflexology, and any kind of body work.