

Getting to the Point ... and the Meridian, Too

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As acupuncturists, we all know how to locate points and meridians according to the classical measurements. But why not try to find them by the *qi* - or even fine-tune the location? There are two major components (some may consider them hurdles) to doing this: relaxation and attention. The method is fast and simple. As a student, it gave me confidence on point location exams, especially the NCCAOM exam.

Relaxation. Without it, you will get nowhere fast. Relaxation allows you to go to the state of mind necessary to perceive anything beyond the physical. How you reach this preparatory state of mind is not important. You can meditate, go through some *qigong* movements, count breaths, chant a mantra, stare at a mandala, or whatever helps. One way you know you have reached the right state is that you feel comfortable and are not very concerned about success or failure. If you are thinking, "I'm just wasting my time," then you probably are. If you are thinking, "I'm going to make this work," you probably won't succeed, either. That is because these thoughts and accompanying emotions are distractions. If your mind is pretty blank and/or you are thinking, "I don't know what is going to happen, but I'll just wait to find out," then you're on the right track.

Pay attention to what you feel. Hold your hands apart in front of you while you are relaxed. Hold your hands apart about 6-8 inches out, with palms facing each other. You can either wait a few minutes for a sensation to emerge between your hands, or you can move your hands minute distances toward and away from each other until you feel something. This is where you pay attention. At first, the sensation is barely perceptible, with the emphasis on barely. As you remain relaxed and continue to pay attention, the sensation will increase in intensity. Sensations include but are not limited to pressure, pulling, tingling, heat, or coolness. This is a common method to becoming aware of *qi* and other subtle energies.

This basic exercise is meant to shift your awareness and maintain it for more than a few moments. It is helpful to perform this exercise often or before the following skills until it is no longer necessary.

To feel the *qi* of an acupuncture point, begin by pointing your finger at an acupuncture point. It is not important if you point the tip of your finger or the pad or the finger. It doesn't matter which point you choose, but an easily accessible one like LI 4 or LI 10 is a good start. Hold your finger about two inches away from the body surface of the chosen point, then move your finger back and forth parallel to the body surface in a range of a few inches. You should feel some type of sensation at your fingertip. Pressure, tingling and pushing are common. Where the sensation or disturbance is the strongest is the most "central" portion of the point. Remember - during this process, relaxation and attention are imperative. If either vanishes, nothing will happen.

This type of location tends to enhance "getting the *qi*." It seems that this method of location has a "sensitizing" or "priming" affect on the point. When the needle is gently inserted with attention and the patient is relaxed, he or she is more likely to feel sensations of tingling and "heaviness" of the meridians and at the point, respectively.

Locating a meridian is virtually the same as locating an acupuncture point. While you are relaxed and paying attention, point your fingertip at the meridian, about two inches above the body surface. Next, move your finger back and forth perpendicular to the direction of the meridian. This movement is similar to plucking a string. You will soon notice a sensation at your finger tip that indicates the presence of the meridian.

A few words of caution. Do not hold your fingers still at any one region for a prolonged period of time (more than 30 seconds). This is because your body's energy may begin to interact with the patient's without your knowledge. After locating points and meridians, it is a good idea to shake your hands for a few seconds to shake any *qi* or energy that may have accumulated at your fingers. Even better, wash your hands between patients - remember clean needle technique? If you begin to find disturbances that do not correspond to known acupuncture points, do not automatically consider them new or extra points. They are likely imbalances or other energetic structures.

Occasionally you will have a patient who is naturally "sensitive" and will feel your locating techniques as physical contact. I simply tell them that I am locating the point through direct awareness of their *qi* dynamic. Their typical response is a perked interest in their treatment and maybe a "Wow."

These techniques have a few clinical bonuses in addition to location and enhanced *qi* response. They help practitioners with tough locations. Sometimes relevant structural landmarks are not readily discernable due to swelling, clothing, bandages, or casts. You can estimate the location using the regular methods and use the energetic variations as an additional guide. Finding the *qi* of the point and meridian also helps with tough-to-locate patients. Patients who have structural imbalances often have atypical point and meridian locations. For example, I have treated patients with severe scoliosis. One theoretical issue and clinical concern is whether the Urinary Bladder meridian and points are located in relation to the central line of the body or the spine. From experience, the Urinary Bladder flows parallel to the spine; along with it are the points.

With practice, these techniques can be used quickly and discretely so that the patient does not even notice. Locating with energetic awareness of the point can become so natural that a single finger movement is enough to fine-tune your point location. It's pretty amazing what one can accomplish with a little relaxation, attention, and a single finger!

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