

Search for the Meridians

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The Theory of Meridians is the most important component of traditional Chinese medicine and at the core of acupuncture treatment methods. In recent years, scholars, researchers, scientists, and others have dedicated a significant amount of time and human, financial, and material resources to the research of meridians, offering many theories about what the meridians actually are. Some people even question their very existence. That begs the question: Are we really looking in the right direction?

What Led Us Here?

Setting aside the differences between various researchers and their academic backgrounds (which affect their research approach and analytic abilities), we should instead focus on the fact that there are still no established standards for the study of the meridians. These standards must define the characteristics that are fundamental to meridians – as well as the mindset that we must adopt when we are conducting such research in order to ensure that we are actually studying the Meridians and not something else entirely different.

Therefore, I propose five standards that researchers should keep in mind when conducting a study of the meridians.

First, Meridian Theory was first proposed and applied in traditional Chinese medicine and recorded in the canonical texts (e.g. *Huang Di Nei Jing*). Therefore, the characteristics of the meridians that we find in our research and studies must match the characteristics of those that were described in these earliest Chinese medical texts. Otherwise, it would be meaningless to study the Meridians – or, in other words, what we are studying are not the meridians at all.

Second, if the meridians exist objectively inside the human body, then there must be a material basis for them. If so, when we employ the research methods that modern medical researchers use when conducting research on the structure of the body through its biological components and pathological changes, we should be able to encounter, and thereby, confirm the existence of the meridians.

Third, the meridians and related meridian phenomena should be verifiable by modern scientific research through different angles. Moreover, these experiments should be repeatable.

Fourth, the meridian system should be an independent and unique system in the human body. This system should not be explained or described as any previously-established systems in the body, proven and well documented through medical research such as the nervous system, circulatory system, lymphatic system, etc.

And finally, the meridian system was established through actual clinical practice and is not an abstract concept. The ancient Chinese medicine sages and scholars saw it as being able to: "determine life and death, manage all diseases, moderate deficiency and excess" (Meridians,

Huang Di Nei Jing: Ling Shu). These clinical applications of meridians have significant meaning. Therefore, the end goal of our research into the meridian system must be to advance our abilities to improve patient health in our clinical practices. That's the ultimate value of the meridian system.

When a study is able to yield results that include the five above listed criteria (i.e. satisfy the five requirements), we will be able to prove that the meridian system: matches the original descriptions in the classical traditional Chinese medical texts; exists objectively inside the body; may be proven with experiments designed according to modern science standards; is distinct from any other body systems that have already been discovered; and most importantly, can be used clinically for the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of diseases. It can even make up for some of the existing deficiencies in modern medical science, increasing its efficacy.

Because previous meridian studies lacked a consistent standard or guide for reference, there are often experiment results where:

- The Meridians are mistaken for what (material) is contained within.
- The factors that influence meridians are interpreted as the meridians themselves.
- The meridians and their contents are simplified into the same entity.
- Meridian phenomena are erroneously mistaken to be the actual meridians.

Ultimately, these cases of "mistaken identity" are due to the researchers employing a way of thinking that is habitual and limiting, which leads to erroneous results or misguided interpretation of the results. A key factor to take into consideration is that, so far, all the researchers have been searching for a physical entity within the body that matches a specific description of the meridian system.

These various hypotheses not only disrupt more expansive development of the proper understanding of and research into traditional Chinese medicine's Meridian Theory, they also impact the meridian system's value as an important reference and guide in our clinical practice, when we are searching for the best treatment for our patients. In a broader sense, these conclusions may limit the meridian system's possible positive influences on modern medical science. Currently, the growth of the use of traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture on a global scale has been unable to gain more momentum, leading to a delay in applying this system and its modalities for the improvement of human health.

Therefore, establishing standards that can be used as a reference and guide when studying the meridians is essential not only to the research into the meridians themselves, but also to whether or not traditional Chinese medicine can be passed on in the proper manner to future generations of practitioners, who can continue to innovate on and improve the medicine upon its foundations. Only on this proper path can we move forward with the search for the answer to the question that has confounded scholars and researchers alike: "What are the meridians?"

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