

The Mysterious Divergent Channels

A STUDY OF SELF-PRESERVATION AND DEGENERATION

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The *divergent channels* are among the most mysterious entities in all of Chinese medicine. They are rarely mentioned, lacking reference in modern TCM study, and rarely used within popular Chinese medical treatment. Yet, the divergent channels provide profound teachings on the life processes of physical maintenance and decline.

One of the most interesting modern commentators teaching the divergent channels is Jeffrey Yuen. He presents these illusive channels as a continuum describing the body's self-preservation mechanism. The sequence of the divergent channels as they are presented in chapter 11 of the *Ling Shu* are a detailed study into the way the body maintains its integrity in the face of life's challenges. The divergent channels are also a study of how the body declines and ultimately collapses.

Historically, the theory of the divergent channels pre-dates that of the *extraordinary vessels*. Both channel systems explore the constitutional yuan-level of the body: the root of all strength and capacity. However, it was not until relatively late in Chinese medical history that information about the extraordinary vessels was organized into a complete study, leading to direct clinical treatment methods.

Royston Low, Nguyen Van Nghi, and Miki Shima (with Charles Chace) have written interesting exploratory books about the divergent channels. Many of the themes these authors present come from their translation and interpretation of *Ling Shu*, chapter 11. Shima and Chace comment on the fact that chapter 11 begins not with a discussion of the divergent channel trajectories or seemingly anything *medical*, instead describing how the *cosmos* are *reflected* in the human body. Van Nghi discusses the importance of the *separation* and *union* of the channels. Low states that the divergent channels, while thought of as *collaterals* or *secondary vessels* in modern acupuncture, are actually *separate master meridians* in and of themselves.

Yuen makes the connection between the divergent channels and several concepts in the *Nan Jing* and *Nei Jing*; the first being the significance of the points of *confluence* or *union* along the trajectories of the divergent channels. Much like the primary channels, the divergent channels have points of union between the yin and yang channels within each element. For example, the bladder and kidney divergent channels are said to have *confluence* at the points BL-40 Wei Zhong and BL-10 Tian Zhu; the gallbladder and liver divergent channels have confluence at CV-2 Qu Gu and GB-1 Tong Zi Liao.

The upper *confluent* points of each channel are all points located near the sensory orifices or along the throat at points that have come to be known as *windows to heaven* points. *Windows to heaven* points are mentioned in chapter two of the *Ling Shu* as exerting strong influence over the sensory orifices in the head.

The lower *confluence* points of the divergent channels are also a special grouping of points, says

Yuen. Since these points are not organized into a specific group within the *Nei Jing* like the *windows to the sky*, Yuen gives them the name *doorways to the earth*, keeping with the theme of the divergent channels being reflections of heaven and earth in the human body, as suggested by chapter 11 of the *Ling Shu*. The *doorways to the earth* points have resonance with the lower orifices of the body, settling the theme that working with the divergent channels in some way involves working with the upper and lower *portals*.

The significance of the upper and lower *confluent* points on the divergent channels in relation to their specific locations is illuminated by many chapters in the *Nan Jing*. Chapter 37 of the *Nan Jing* speaks about the concept *closure and resistance*, which involves blockage in communication between the yin and yang aspects of the body. The concept of *closure and resistance* is complex, but chapter 37 suggests it involves a severing of passage and communication between the internal organs and the external portals, which includes the upper sense orifices as well as the lower orifices of elimination. The *Nan Jing* warns the danger of *resistance and closure* is *premature death*.

Chapter one of the *Su Wen* describes that the method to maintain health and live a long life is through *modeling oneself on yin and yang*, which will help *keep physical appearance and spirit together*. The basic theme that is set at the beginning of the Chinese medical classics is the problem of degeneration that we all face as humans. Yin and yang separate and as a result our bodies degenerate and our spirits depart. The major focus of the medical classics is how to delay this from happening: how to maintain the connectivity of our bodies and minds so we may live out the years allotted to us by heaven. Chapter 11 of the *Ling Shu* arguably names the divergent channels as the conduits most involved in this process.

Yuen teaches that the divergent channels are pathways to protect the internal organs from disease and degeneration. They are said to emerge from the internal organs as pathways to divert pathogens. Anything threatening the organs will be diverted into the joints where they will be stored, protecting the organs from direct attack.

Study of other channel systems in the body shows how hard the body tries to keep pathogens away from the internal organs. If something makes it past all the barriers the body places in the way of movement into the internal organs, this indicates either a pathogen that is very strong, overwhelming the body's defense measures, or a weakened, insufficient defense system. To save itself, the body utilizes the divergent channels.

Pathogens that our bodies cannot get rid of must be stored somewhere in the body. It is the divergent channel system that manages the most challenging of these *latent* pathogens.

Clinical use of the divergent channels can be approached in two major ways. The channels can be *consolidated* to maintain latency of a stored pathogen, keeping it hidden and asymptomatic. They can also be used to pull deep pathogens out of the body. Since the joints are seen as storage areas for pathogens threatening the internal organs, they become the major areas the divergent channels detox. Clearing the joints is therefore an indirect way to clear the organs.

The divergent channels are organized as a continuum of self-preservation. Jing essence is the heaviest substance in the body. It is first substance used by the divergent channels to trap and hide an overwhelming pathogen. The Jing essence is supported by all the other yin substances in the body: the blood and fluids. Each divergent channel consolidates a particular yin substance to support the process of latency in the body.

Latency is taxing on the body. When we hold onto things for an extended period of time, the body's

yin substances get consumed. Each divergent channel pair can be seen as a stage within the disease process relating to latency.

The bladder and kidney divergent pair represents the Jing essence as it maintains latency. The gallbladder and liver pair support the Jing essence with the blood stored in the liver. The stomach and spleen do so via the fluids they produce. As the Jing essence declines through taxation, greater stress will be placed on the blood and fluids. Eventually, all the yin of the body will be consumed, causing leakage: a *loss of latency*. Lacking adequate yin to keep the latent pathogen stored, symptoms will manifest.

Each stage within the divergent channels manifests its own symptoms showing signs of distress. The Luo vessels, as described in chapter 10 of the *Ling Shu*, introduce the important medical concepts of *fullness* and *emptiness*. The divergent channels are like Luo vessels. When they *fill* with pathogens, they exhibit signs showing that they are being stretched and stressed. Each stage in the divergent channel progression will show increased stress and taxation on the body until the holding vessel breaks open and *empties* back into primary circulation.

At that point, with no more yin to contain the problem, the pathogen comes out, but this time stronger than the body can handle since it has now exhausted its resources. This is often when major life-threatening illnesses manifest, sometimes as if from nowhere.

Developing resonance with the divergent channels as clinical tools is a deep, involved process. The *Ling Shu* suggests these channels reflect the mysterious order of *heaven and earth* as they are reflected in the human body. The *Nan Jing* suggests they have relationship with perception and the ability to recycle and renew the self. When they become full, they reduce the body's capacity, slowly weakening and consuming its resources.

My next article will explore how to access the divergent channels via the *confluent* points; and strategies for working with latent pathology stored in the divergent channels, as suggested by passages in the *Ling Shu* and *Su Wen*.

Through the process of working with the divergent channels and seeing their workings within our own bodies and lives, aspects of their mystery begin to reveal themselves.

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