



CLINICAL CARE

Treating the Spirit: Acupuncture, Psychosomatics and Healing Via The Luo Vessels

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The study of psychosomatics benefits by understanding classical Chinese medicine. Mind and body, emotions and physicality are inseparably linked within our healing art. Acupuncture is the study of body humors: *qi*, blood, fluids, *jing* essence and *shen* spirit. These humors create the myriad of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual manifestations within the human being. Mental-emotional distress can be as much a dysfunction of *qi* and blood as physical disorders.

Among the acupuncture channel systems presented in the *Ling Shu*, the *Luo* vessels are perhaps best suited to explain and illustrate psychosomatics: the way the body and mind influence one another or manifest symptoms concurrently due to an internal imbalance of body humors.

The Luo Vessels: Full vs. Empty



The *Luo* vessels are conduits of *ying*-nourishing internal *qi*, particularly blood and fluids. The *Luo* vessels manifest symptoms within the *ying* (internal) level of the body, but translocate symptoms onto the *wei* (external) terrain and the *yuan* (constitutional).

Modern-day commentators such as Royston Lowe and Jeffrey Yuen differentiate the various pathway manifestations of the *Luo*. The "longitudinal" *Luo* manifest symptoms outward into the *wei* (external) level of the body as varicosity. This is known as a state of "fullness."

The *Luo*, being containers for body stressors that the primary acupuncture channels cannot resolve, "fill" to saturation, keeping unresolved issues contained within blood static states until these vessels overflow and "empty" back into the primary channels. If the primary channels still cannot (or will not) deal with these issues, they can be emptied into the level of the *yuan* constitutional terrain of the body, i.e., the Curious Organs (uterus-prostate, bones, brain, marrow, blood vessels).

The "transverse" *Luo* vessels keep unresolved pathology contained within the internal branches of the primary channels, until they too move deeper into the level of the "source."

Signs that the *Luo* vessels are "full" is discerned through varicosity on the skin. "Emptiness" is classically seen as manifesting swellings or lipomas that can be palpated. Transverse *Luo* vessels manifest inflammatory "heat" symptoms and eventually deficiencies.

The study of blood and fluids within Chinese medicine is complex, especially to the Western mind. *Ying qi* (blood and fluids) provides sensation within the body-mind. Yet blood is seen as also carrying the *shen* spirit, which contains consciousness; while fluids are of a more instinctual, unconscious nature.

"Fullness" of the *Luo* vessels implies there is a type of conscious awareness of an unresolved issue, since blood is that which is maintaining the problem; whereas an "emptiness" of the *Luo* vessels,

maintained by fluids in the form of lipomas or fatty cysts, becomes more unconscious.

The shift from "full" to "empty" occurs due to exhaustion of the blood that results from oversaturation of the *Luo*.

Beyond the Physical: The Consequences of the State of the Luo Vessels

Take the symptoms of the spleen's *Luo* vessel as an example. When the spleen's *Luo* becomes "full," there's the physical symptom of abdominal pain described as "sharp." The mental-emotional manifestation of this "fullness" is obsession. The person is unable to stop thinking about a particular issue, yet cannot achieve cathartic resolution.

When the spleen's *Luo* becomes "empty," the obsession turns into habituation, which is more associated with behavior than a mental process. The person's mind no longer tries to work through the issue; instead, it begins to become unconsciously acted out through behavior and lifestyle stagnation. The physical symptom associated with emptiness of the spleen's *Luo* is abdominal "drum-like distention," showing dysfunction within the digestive and assimilative process of the gut.

The transverse *Luo* of the spleen manifests in chest tightness and pain in the tongue, showing movement into the internal branch of the primary channel. The *Luo* vessel of the spleen, as described in chapter 10 of the *Ling Shu*, travels from the foot (at the point SP 4 - *Gong Sun*) into the stomach and intestine organs. Symptoms affecting the chest indicate pathology has moved beyond the *Luo* vessel trajectory (which only reaches the abdomen) into the primary channel, which travels into the chest and tongue via its internal pathway.

Acknowledging the Patient's "Spirit"

As acupuncturists, when working with our patients, we must acknowledge both the physicality as well as the "spirit" of the patient. Chapter 8 of the *Ling Shu* emphasizes this. In order for a person to heal, it is often necessary to encourage and promote a mental shift. This is arguably why discussion of the *Luo* vessels, which are conduits of blood and therefore highly involved with the *shen* spirit and consciousness, is presented after the primary channels within the same chapter.

Chapter 10 of the *Ling Shu* begins by describing the pathways of the primary channels along with their pathological symptoms. Afterward, *Luo* vessel pathways and symptoms are described. Chapter 10 therefore mimics the famous quotation from Chapter 8, affirming that all acupuncture treatment must be "rooted in the spirit."

We first identify physiologically what is wrong, but we don't stop there. We must also explore the mental and emotional roots and/or accompaniments. We can then promote not only the physical, energetic process of healing, but also the consciousness of healing.

What's Causing the Problem? Always go Through the Luo

It's difficult to always know what's causing what. Is it a physical trauma that's created a mental-emotional disturbance? Or has the mental-emotional caused the physical imbalance? The *Luo* vessels suggest they often occur concurrently and therefore need to be addressed together.

The art of acupuncture is identifying where a problem is located. This is the crux of the *Ling Shu*, which states that a superior healer understands the "transmission" of disease: where it is currently located, where it may have come from and where it may travel into next. Yet acupuncture is also "spiritual" medicine. To treat the "source" of a problem, one must go through the *Luo*, i.e., the

blood.

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