

Ling Gui Ba Fa: The 8 Methods of the Sacred Turtle

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While discussing the confluent points of the Extraordinary Vessels with students several years ago, one student asked, "Why is the *Dai* paired with the *Yang Wei*?" This intrigued me, as none of my teachers had ever discussed this.

My research led me to discover that Dou Han Qing was credited with pairing the confluent points in 1295. He believed these points to be "the essentials of acupuncture." He also claimed that the confluent points are associated with the Nine Palaces, commonly known as the Magic Square:¹



Further research into this association of the confluent points with the Nine Palaces led to discovering *chronoacupuncture*, the concept of treating patients in specific ways at specific times in accordance with the energy cycles of nature.

Humans are intimately connected to the rhythms of nature, the cycles of the sun and moon, and the seasons. Chapter 25 of the *Su Wen* states, "Every individual's life is intimately connected to nature," and chapter 26 states, "Acupuncture should follow the rule of the celestial and the terrestrial and keep in conformity with the time of day."² Chronoacupuncture follows the ebb and flow of *qi* in determining how to treat patients.

The first mention of the term *chronoacupuncture* was in 1153 by He Rou-You in relation to the Zi Wu Liu Zhu (Midnight Midday Flowing and Pooling) technique.³ Then in 1495, Xu Feng mentions the *Ling Gui Ba Fa* (8 Methods of the Sacred Turtle) in *Comprehensive Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (Zhen Jiu Da Quan)*.⁴ These are two pre-eminent acupuncture chronotherapies, of which the Sacred Turtle is considered paramount.

The *Ling Gui Ba Fa*, or 8 Methods of the Sacred Turtle, is an ancient Daoist acupuncture protocol first written about in great detail by Yang Jizhou in "*Great Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion*" (*Zhen Jiu Da Cheng*), written in 1601.⁵ This technique utilizes the confluent points of the Extraordinary Vessels combined with the theory of the 10 Celestial Stems and the 12 Terrestrial Branches. The Extraordinary Vessels are considered to be the original, primal energetic channels to develop in the body; precursors to the primary channel system.

During the Ming dynasty, the physician Li Yan stated that the "366 points of the whole body are dominated by the 66 points, the 66 points are dominated by Eight Confluent points."⁶ The "66 points" are the five *shu*-transport points of the 12 primary channels plus the *yuan*-source points of the *fu* (the *yuan*-source points of the *zang* are the same as the *shu*-stream point). This is a profound statement, that the 8 Confluent Points, as the "keys" to open the Extraordinary Vessels, dominate

and treat the entire body.

According to legend, Huang Di asked the Daoist sage Da Rao Shi to develop a calendar to mark the passage of time. Da Rao Shi then observed the movements of the sun and moon, and developed the 10 Celestial Stems and the 12 Terrestrial Branches. The 10 Celestial Stems represent the yang energy of heaven. They combine the theories of yin / yang with the *wu xing* (five phases). Each element of the *wu xing* has a yin and yang nature. For instance, yang metal would be a sword, while yin metal would be a plow. Each of the five elements having a yin / yang nature makes 10 stems.

The 12 Terrestrial Branches represent the yin energy of earth. They symbolize the 12 months of the year and the 12 two-hour times division during the day. When the 10 stems are juxtaposed against the 12 branches, this creates a repeating cycle of 60, be it 60 hours, day, weeks, months, or years, known as the *gan zhi* or sexagenarian cycle.

When using the *Ling Gui Ba Fa*, one must first determine the stem and branch of the day and then the stem and branch of the hour. Using a slightly complex calculation method detailed by Yang Ji-Zhou (which is beyond the scope of this article), one can then determine which of the confluent points is "open" at a specific time for treatment. The "open" point is then needled first, followed by its coupled point.

There are three ways in which this technique can be applied. The first is by the *appointed time*, i.e., determining which confluent point best treats the patient's ailment, when that point is open, and then scheduling the treatment at that time. This is not feasible in the modern clinic, as the treatment may have to be delayed several days or done at an inconvenient time.

The second is by *random times*. No matter what the patient's chief complaint is, use the point that is open at the time of the patient's visit, regardless of what it is considered to treat. The third is by *random time with other points*. The open point is used with a few other points that may be more specific for the particular ailment. These latter two applications are easy to use in the clinical setting and can enhance the treatment by using fewer needles.

References

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4. *Ibid*.
5. Yang J. *The Great Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, Volume V*. (Trans. Wilcox L.) Portland, OR.: The Chinese Medical Database, 2010.
6. Liu BQ, *Op cit*.

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