



TREATMENT ROOM

## Rectifying the Mind: The Importance of the *Luo* Vessels in Addiction Treatment

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Acupuncture is well-suited to addiction treatment. The *luo* vessels are especially applicable to help modify behavior and mental-emotional patterns. The *Su Wen* says the *luo* vessels are useful in treating "*shen* excess"; i.e., mental-emotional issues. The *Ling Shu* says the *luo* treat "rebellious *qi*." Chapter 10 of the *Ling Shu* describes the *luo* as manifesting states of "fullness" and "emptiness," giving detailed signs and symptoms.

Classical treatment of the *luo* is through bloodletting: pricking the *luo* point and varicosities along the trajectory. If a condition is one of "emptiness," often manifesting as lipomas, moxibustion is added. This releases heat and cold stagnation, rectifying rebellious *qi*, which can be seen as physiology gone awry, but also as irregular psychology or behavior.



Jeffrey Yuen in particular has contributed greatly to the understanding and use of the *luo* vessels clinically, especially in relation to mental-emotional and behavioral issues. He teaches that the somatic symptoms noted in the *Ling Shu* can also be read as psychosomatic metaphors.

### The Psychology of *Luo*

As a channel system, the *luo* are conduits of *ying qi*, comprised of blood as well as fluids. To work with psychological issues, including behavior, the *ying* level is often a major area of focus.

The *shen* circulates through the blood and is "housed" in the heart (the governor of the blood). The *luo* vessels have an intimate relationship with the heart and pericardium (as well as the stomach and intestines). These four organs are the only *zang fu* that the *luo* vessels connect with directly.

The *Ling Shu* establishes the significance of the heart and pericardium as organs that manage blood circulation. The stomach and intestines are also implicated as having a very close relationship with blood via their lower *he sea* points, which are designated *shu* transport points for the "sea of blood" in the *Ling Shu*.

The heart and pericardium connect with the *luo* vessels via their selfsame trajectories, while the stomach and intestines are visited via the spleen's *luo* vessel. The spleen holds a special place in the treatment of *shen* disorders. Jeffrey Yuen has said the psychosomatic symptoms of the spleen's *luo* vessel are pain in the abdomen (stomach and intestines) and drum-like distention that can translate as obsessiveness and habituation.

The stomach's *luo* vessel is unique in that it is the only *luo* vessel whose symptoms are described in psychological terms in the *Ling Shu*: manifesting states of manic-depression (*dian kuang*).

The bladder's *luo* vessel, manifesting head and sinus symptoms, relates to the body's feedback system, ranging from a tendency to go beyond one's physical and mental limitations (not knowing

when "enough is enough") and/or perpetually being in a state of panic or hypersensitivity.

The kidney's *luo* vessel, manifesting urogenital symptoms, gives rise to obsessive-compulsive tendencies and paranoia.

Jeffrey Yuen has said that states of *luo* vessel "fullness" can relate to addictions / obsessions: areas of one's life in which a person is highly animated; whereas "emptiness" relates to aversions and insecurities.

The heart's *luo* vessel is described as manifesting "heart pain" related to a sense of "betrayal" or victimization that can lead to "muteness": the inability to express something. The pericardium's *luo* also leads to "heart pain" (albeit a more severe manifestation) and stiffness of the neck, which Yuen likens to the inability to control one's emotions and/or inability to interact socially.

#### Clinical Application: Applying the "12 Steps"

Interest in addiction recovery has developed in the United States since the 1930s, with widespread acceptance through the past three decades. Clinically, we can adopt the precepts of the most famous of addiction recovery programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, and apply them to treatment via acupuncture.

An adjunct to the famous "12 steps" is the necessity to address the energetics of the addiction: habituation and obsessive-compulsive behavior (via the spleen and kidney *luo*); the fluctuation between mental-emotional extremes (via the stomach and bladder *luo*); and treatment of trauma which may have caused the condition (via the heart and pericardium *luo*).

Steps 1-3 of the "12 steps" ask its adherents to admit that they have a problem, and decide to surrender to "a power greater than themselves," which is promised to lead to "a spiritual awakening." This strategy can be supported with the *luo* vessels.

The *luo* point of the heart, HT 5 (*Tong Li*), is said to "regulate the *shen*," while ST 40 (*Feng Long*) works with a person's "spirit-disposition." The *luo* points of the heart and pericardium address blood stagnation, which can be manifestation of trauma and its effects; and points such as LU 7 (*Lue Que*) encourage a state of "surrender."

The *luo* points of the pericardium, spleen, lung and triple heater are all "opening points" for the extraordinary vessels, impacting a person's constitution and nature, even treating the "congenital" and inherited aspect of addiction.

The transformational aspect of the "12 steps" (steps 4-5, 8-9 and 10), through which a person reflects on their past behavior through "personal inventory," can arguably be supported via the *luo* of the intestines. The names of these points from a Confucian point of view [SI 7 (*Zhi Zheng*: "The Upright Branch"); LI 6 (*Pian Li*: "The Veering Path")] suggest the ability to reflect on one's life and see where it might have gone "off the path," deviating from the "upright."

#### Learning to Care

As Rufus Wainwright wrote in a song describing his recovery from drug addiction, an important task is "learning to care." The psychological symptom of the triple heater's *luo* (TH 5: *Wei Guan*) is indifference, while the pericardium's *luo* (PC 6: *Nei Guan*) treats the inability (or unwillingness) to interact.

The *luo* vessels of the gallbladder and stomach become important in the later stages of the

recovery process, which can give rise to crisis. As a person changes their life, they may encounter a lack of knowing where to go or what to do. This is especially present as one leaves behind certain behaviors, people and places. The recovering person is often left with empty space, loneliness and alienation. They may need support with their sense of inner direction and passion as they develop new habits, relationships and activities.

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