

Tracking the Dragon

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“It is by virtue of the twelve channels that human life exists, that disease arises, that human beings can be treated and illness cured. The twelve channels are where beginners start and masters end. To beginners, it seems easy; the masters know how difficult it is.”¹

Chapter one

Feeling Channel Qi

Feeling channel Qi is easy.

This book gives instruction in learning how to feel channel Qi, how to use that information to form a most accurate Asian Medicine diagnosis, and how to plan an appropriate treatment.

Feeling channel Qi in the hand

It can be extremely difficult to detect the flow of channel Qi in one’s own body without simultaneously altering the flow as you go. Therefore, it is best to practice feeling the channel Qi of a friend or a fellow student.

It can be easiest, in the beginning, to feel channel Qi in the center of your palm, at acupoint P-8, by holding the center of the palm over a channel.

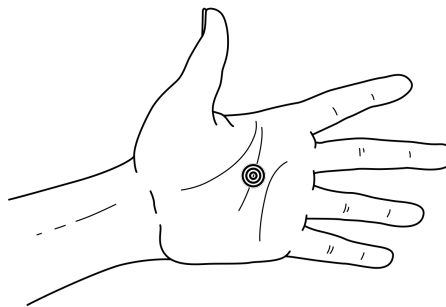


Fig. 1.1 The bulls-eye shows the location of P-8, pronounced “P-eight” or “Pericardium eight.”

The palm should be held about one inch above the friend’s skin. The hand should *not* touch the skin. The friend may remain fully clothed: clothing does not interfere with the perceptions of channel Qi. The energy emitted by channel Qi passes through clothing in the same way that radio waves pass through the wall of a house.

¹ *The Spiritual Pivot [Nei Jing]*, chapter 17: translation taken from *A Manual of Acupuncture*, Peter Deadman and Mazin Al-Khafaji, 1998.

The “twelve channels” is a reference to the twelve, large, easily feel-able “primary” channels. Maps of these twelve channels are included at the back of this book.

Good channel locations on which to begin your practice are the lower leg portion of the Stomach channel, the arm portion of the Large Intestine channel, and the torso portion of the Ren channel. These sections of channel Qi don't crisscross with other channels, and your friend can be comfortable, lying supine.

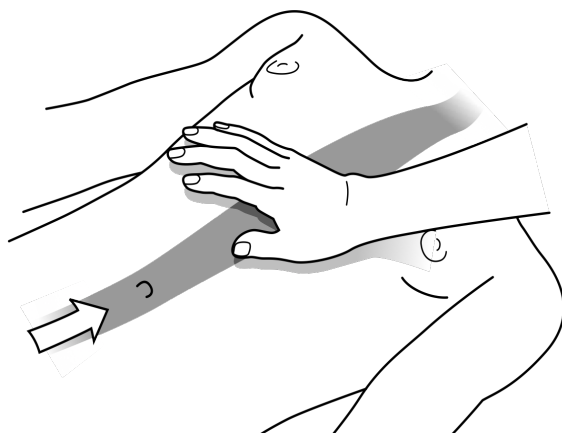


Fig. 1.2 The patient is lying down on a treatment table (or “couch,” in England). The center of the practitioner’s palm, acupoint P-8, is centered above the Ren channel. The hand is held about half an inch above the skin (or clothing, if any).

The arrow shows the correct direction for channel Qi flow in the Ren channel. The hand may be stationary, or moving with or against the direction of channel Qi flow.

If the practice buddy has had any surgeries, severe injuries, or psychological issues that relate to the above-mentioned channels, either choose some different channels to practice on or choose a different friend. For example, a friend with a C-section scar may have moderately-to-severely reduced channel Qi flow in her entire Ren channel. It might be easier to work on her Large Intestine channel, instead – unless she also has a history of dislocated shoulder.

Step one: noticing the two directional sensations of channel Qi

Start by placing the palm of your hand over your friend’s ST-36.²

Let your hand linger for a few moments over ST-36. Don’t *do* anything with the energy in your hand. Be passive. Notice whether or not your hand notices any sense of a

² The drawing gives a general idea for locating acupoint ST-36. A person with no background in acupuncture point location may wish to go online to learn the *exact* locations of specific acupoints: simply search for ST-36 or Stomach 36. All acupoints mentioned in this book can also be found on the channel maps at the back of the book.

An excellent but expensive book on the subject, with beautiful, clearly detailed diagrams of channels and *exact* acupoint locations, is Peter Deadman’s *A Manual of Acupuncture*, Eastland Press, Seattle.

faint tingle, or even a faint movement, as if the *idea* of a gentle trickle of electrically charged air is moving against the palm of your hand.

If this is your first attempt at feeling channel Qi, you will probably feel nothing at all. That's fine. You are actually feeling something, but you have not yet learned to recognize the sensation as anything significant.

Next, let your hand move slowly *down* the Stomach channel, towards the ankle: "downstream" from ST-36.

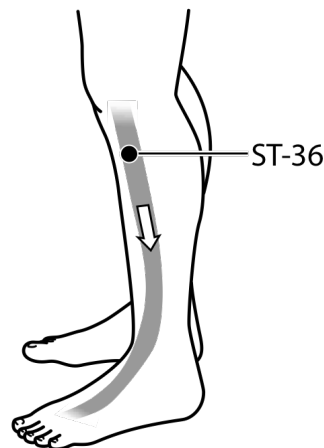


Fig. 1.3 The location of ST-36. The arrow shows the correct direction of the Stomach channel's Qi flow.

Relax your arm as you let the palm of your hand float down the path of the channel. Keep the palm of your hand about an inch or so away from the skin, hovering in the air, as you pass the center of your palm over the path of the channel.

Don't spend too long: only use three or four seconds, no more, going from the knee to the ankle.

Keeping the palm of the hand about an inch or less above the surface of the skin, bring the hand back *up* the Stomach channel at the same speed, moving "upstream," until you come to ST-36 again.

While you may not have noticed anything that you can refer to as "Qi flow," you may have noticed that your palm felt a difference between moving it downstream (with the flow of channel Qi) and moving it upstream (against the flow of channel Qi).

If you did not feel anything different between how your palm felt when moving downstream as compared to upstream, repeat the above exercise twenty or thirty times.

If, after doing this twenty or thirty more times, you still do not feel any difference in the sensation visited against your hand while moving your hand slowly upstream and downstream, an inch above the channel, you were probably making *the most common mistake*: you were trying to push some internal force of your own onto the patient. You cannot hope to feel the patient's channel Qi if you are trying to force your own thoughts, energy, or will onto the patient.

Feeling the air

If you can't feel anything different between moving your hand one direction along a channel's path compared to moving it the other direction, try this: hold your hand up in the air. Notice if you can detect, on your hand, the faint movement, if any, of the air in the room.

Notice this: while attempting to detect the movement of air with your hand, you never use your hand to "push" energy at the air. Instead, you wait quietly to notice any faint rustling that passes over the palm of your hand. This is the same type of perception used for feeling Qi: you let the outgoing energy in your hand become passive while you heighten your observational powers of the incoming energy.



Fig. 1.4 Practitioner's P-8 being held over patient's left-side ST-36. (Patient's black pants are rolled up to her mid-knee.)

If you become convinced that there is no air movement whatsoever in the room, try blowing gently across the palm of your hand: let a faint stream of breath pass over the side of your palm, crossing from your thumb over to the little finger. Notice the sensation.

A student who can feel channel Qi right from the start does not need to spend any time blowing on his hand. The experiments with feeling air do *not* demonstrate what channel Qi feels like. The experiments with feeling air are only presented as a *tool for learning passivity*. This can be helpful for students who are accustomed to "feeling" the world around them by pushing on it.

Common errors

Pushing on a patient's channel Qi

In my years of teaching, I've noticed that some students with a strong background in physical therapy or massage therapy have a very difficult time feeling Qi, in the beginning. When I let them practice on me (while I amp up the applicable sections of channel Qi as much as possible, to make it highly "feel-able"), I sometimes notice an ugly sensation being perpetrated against my own channels by a few of these students. The genuine irritation to my own channels causes me to sometimes snap at them, "Stop that!" Sadly, in this situation, some students have been more proud of their ability to have "done something" energetic than they have been chastened by having done something *incorrect*.

I suspect that some students are so accustomed to pushing on patients instead of letting their hands passively “feel” the patient, that they can’t help themselves: they force their own Qi onto patients instead of feeling the patients’ channel Qi.

In a similar vein, those of my students who have been taught, incorrectly, that “medical Qi Gong” consists of tampering with a patient’s channel Qi flow – as opposed to teaching the *patient* how to perform the Qi Gong exercises which might heal or restore the patient’s own channel Qi –often have a very hard time feeling and respecting the patient’s channel Qi flow. Instead, some of these students seem determined to *influence* the patient’s channel Qi, rather than “merely” notice it.

If your past training lies in this direction, or if you learn from the world by pressing on it instead of letting it come to you, practice trying to make your hand’s presence become invisible to your friend, as if you can feel him, but he can’t feel you. This may help.

Drugs

When teaching classes for the general public in which I have taught how to feel channel Qi, I have noticed that *some* people who are taking antidepressant medications have had difficulty in feeling channel Qi. I have no idea if there is a relationship between the medication and the inability to feel channel Qi. I only mention the observation. For the most part, my general-public students, very often people with no experience in medicine, let alone acupuncture or bodywork, have had *no* problems quickly learning to feel channel Qi.

Using the fingertips

Another common impediment to learning is using the fingertips instead of the palm of the hand. It is *much* easier to recognize the *directional* feelings of channel Qi at the center of the palm of the hand. Of course, channel Qi can be felt with any part of the body, and once you get good at it, a patient’s channel Qi can – and should – be felt from across the room, the moment the patient enters the treatment room. (Please be aware, to do so at any other, *non-clinic*, time may be a transgression of professional standards. It is just as foul to secretly spy on someone else’s channel Qi flow, as it is to, for example, read other people’s personal mail.)

But for beginners, I highly recommend using the palm of the hand, held above the surface of the skin, at a distance that ranges from a quarter of an inch to two inches.

Aside from these errors and exceptions, most students can start feeling the difference between “to” and “fro” channel Qi within about fifteen minutes. It may require several months to be able to feel channel Qi while holding your hand in one place, above a random acupoint. But learning to feel the difference between the sensations of moving downstream and upstream along the channel’s path is the thing that is easy: it’s also the thing that’s of greater importance.

What am I trying to feel? Describing the “feeling” of channel Qi

My students have described in many ways the sensation that feels “different” when going upstream (*against* the flow of channel Qi), as compared with going downstream (*with* the flow).

Some of my favorites are as follows:

“When I go *upstream*, it’s like rubbing velvet *against* the nap; downstream feels like rubbing velvet with the nap.”

And from another student: “When I go *downstream*, it’s like rubbing velvet *against* the nap; upstream feels like with the nap.” (Note: this is the opposite of the first observation.)

“Downstream feels cool; upstream feels warm.”

And the opposite from another student: “Downstream feels warm; upstream feels cool.”

“Upstream feels more prickly; downstream is smoother.”

And of course, “Downstream feels more prickly; upstream is smoother.”

“Upstream feels weirder”

“Downstream feels weirder.”

And so on. You get the idea: when attempting to describe, in words, a new, purely sensory experience, such as the sensation of channel Qi, metaphors differ, opposites abound. When a person, in striving to describe something inexplicable, describes it by comparing it to something else, the words don’t necessarily help. This lack of cogent description doesn’t really matter. All that really matters is that *you* learn to focus on the “something” that feels different depending on which way your hand moves. However *you* describe it is fine – just so long as you can tell a difference between upstream and downstream.

What channel Qi *really* feels like is the electromagnetic side effect of a moving electrical current.³

This moving current is the “Dragon” of Asian medicine, the moving dynamic that joins “heaven and earth.” The channel Qi in all living systems is the sum of the places where electromagnetic waves and fields (the unseen energy of the vibratory realm:

³ I will not enter into the fray of current (so to speak) discussion as to whether or not the channel Qi is moving along a substrate that is fluid, fixed, or fascial (with fascia being the leading contender at present). Nor will I divert into the ongoing discussion as to what molecule, if any, carries the moving electron through the substrate. Popular ideas include nitrous oxide, oxygen, blood, “no carrier,” and so on. Let us just say that flowing channel Qi has properties *similar* to those of an electrical current, including the propensity to follow the path of least resistance, and the ability to be encouraged by the presence of a voltage differential (as demonstrated by the effectiveness of using gold and silver acupuncture needles – or even stainless steel, or even the micro-differentials formed by even the tiniest physical manipulation of body tissues, such as acupressure or Tui Na).

heaven) are directed, by consciousness (ideas, life force instructions), to transition back and forth, as needed, into currents of electrons (formed, tangible matter: earth).⁴

The current-like sensations given off at the more concentrated areas of the channels are palpable, even at a distance.⁵

For purposes of this text, the “distance” referred to is “approximately an inch away from the skin.”

Sensations cannot be described in words – they can only be compared to other sensations. For example, one cannot describe the taste of an orange to a person who has never eaten an orange, so that the listener can say, “Oh. Now I know what an orange tastes like.” For that matter, one person might say “Oranges are sweet” and the next person might say “Oranges are sour.” Opposite descriptions, and both somewhat correct!

If three people tried to describe the taste of an orange, one person might say “bright and refreshing,” another might try “acidic like a lemon, only sweeter,” and a third might say, “slightly pulpy, but squirty with juice.” But for a fact, despite their best descriptive efforts, the listener will have no idea whatsoever of what an orange tastes *like*.

Each student must experience for himself/herself what channel Qi feels “*like*.” But in the end, it doesn’t really matter what it feels “*like*.” The important thing is to be able to feel it.

Very often, after about ten minutes of slowly moving his hand back and forth over the channel and noticing the difference between the upstream and downstream sensation, and then just holding the hand in one location while the Qi runs past his hand, the student blurts out, “I think I could feel this before, but I didn’t know that it was something with a name!”

Yes. Channel Qi is very easy to feel.

On the other hand, students often have the opposite response: “I *think* I’m feeling something, I think, but I’m not *sure* it’s channel Qi; I’m afraid I might just be imagining that I’m feeling something.”

Building confidence

To help those students who are doubtful of their ability to feel channel Qi, I sometimes have students feel the channel Qi of a patient during “rounds” at the school’s clinic. In “clinical rounds,” the licensed instructor treats the patient, while up to five students observe at close range. In clinical rounds, we can ask the students to participate in a minimal manner: feeling the pulse and/or observing the tongue.

⁴ The currents created by the various waves are made up of electrons, photons, and other wave-derived subatomic particles. However, for the purpose of brevity and simplicity, the rest of this text will refer to *all* these current components simply as “electrons.”

⁵ The channel Qi of some patients who are taking high levels of anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, or anti-parkinson’s medications may give off a weird, writhing, static sensation, instead of a somewhat straight line. Students have sometimes described this jumbled signal as being like snakes or like bugs crawling around just under the skin.

If, during rounds, I silently notice that a patient's channel Qi has an obvious blockage, I might make use of the situation in order to help students gain confidence in their channel-Qi detection skills. I don't tell the students that one of the channels is awry. I innocently name two of the channels, and ask the students to quickly run their hands upstream and downstream, over the paths of those two channels, just for practice. I also ask that, if they notice anything curious in the channels, they silently make of note of it in their charts.⁶

I may even casually remind the students to always maintain a professional, reassuring expression on their faces, and not linger too long while observing tongue, pulse, and channel Qi. My real motivation in asking them to keep a poker face is that I don't wish them to "give anything away" to their fellow students. As I remind the students to make a quick note on their own student copies of the patient's chart about the condition of the channel Qi flow, the patient has no idea that I am requesting anything out of the ordinary.

Then, after inserting needles or other appropriate treatment for the patient, the students and I congregate in the discussion room. There, I ask the students to place their notes on the table. I ask the students to take turns going around the table, telling their classmates what they thought of the channel Qi, as supported by their notes.

And then, amazing to the students, they discover an unexpected, and highly comforting, *uniformity* of student observations! All the students will have felt the *exact* same "something curious" or "something wrong" at the exact same place. Even the students who, days earlier, had meekly protested, "I'm not sure; I don't think I can feel Qi; I don't know what I'm doing," have to admit – they felt "something is different" or "wrong" at the exact same location as their fellow students also felt that "something is different" or "wrong."

Sometimes I have to repeat this group experiment two or three times before the most self-doubting student is willing to admit that he or she is indeed feeling Qi – or is at least feeling the same thing that everyone else is.

The curious thing is that these students don't need to have been "following" the flow of Qi, necessarily (a skill described later in this chapter). They were just moving their hands up and down a channel, trying to notice if they could feel *anything*. And despite their doubts, they all felt the same thing, and could identify one specific area as "wrong."

While some students might never get the opportunity to experience the above "group" response, the very fact of this easily obtained uniformity in self-doubting students should serve to encourage every student to trust what he feels.

If you doubt your Qi-feeling ability, practice, practice, practice. For some people, as much as thirty minutes of practice is necessary.

⁶ Teachers who are using this book as a text, who do this experiment, should be sure to remind their students to emit *no* outgoing energy from their hands. They must use utterly passive hands: observing, not seeking. Otherwise, an unthinking student might exert force on the patient's channel Qi, altering it. Once he's done this, it may take several minutes for the patient's channel Qi to revert back to its starting point – so the rest of the students will be feeling the effects of the pushy student instead of the patient's true situation.

If, after ten or fifteen minutes, you truly feel no difference at P-8 when moving your hand one direction along a channel, and then the opposite direction, don't worry about it. Try feeling channel Qi on a different person. Sleep on it. Sometimes we need a little sleep to process new sensations. The next day, try again. Practice a little every day, and very soon, you *will* be able to notice the difference between going with the flow and going against the flow.

Step two: associating the two different sensations with channel direction

Once you can feel a difference when you move your hand above the channel Qi, first one direction, and then the other direction, associate those feelings with what you already know about the “correct” direction of channel Qi flow.

For example, you already know that the direction of the Large Intestine channel flow goes from the wrist to the shoulder.⁷ Therefore, the way that the channel Qi feels to you when you move your hand slowly over the path of the Large Intestine channel from the wrist to the shoulder, is going “with the flow.” No matter what words you might use to *describe* the actual sensation, the wrist to shoulder direction is “going *with* the flow.” We are assuming, of course, that your friend is healthy and has *no* history of significant injuries along the path of this channel.

Oppositely, the way that the channel Qi feels in the Large Intestine channel when you run your hand in the opposite direction, from the shoulder to the fingers, is how channel Qi feels when you are “going *against* the flow.”

“With” the flow and “against” the flow will feel the same in all people. If you can teach yourself to identify a sensation as being “with” the flow, you will be able to recognize this same sensation in anyone when your hand is moving “with” his flowing channel Qi.

Step three: going with the flow

Once you have learned to recognize the sensation of channel Qi that is going “*with* the flow,” practice letting your hand be carried along by this sensation. *Forget* about the sensations that occur when your hand moves *against* the flow. Those were just training devices.

When you let your hand move at the same speed and direction as the energy that is traveling “*with*” the flow, your hand will be moving in the same direction as the channel Qi.

By following the flow of current with your hand, and comparing the flow with the healthy, normal paths you learned in school or in this book, you will be able to tell if the channel Qi is flowing correctly or if it is flowing sideways, out of the channel's normal path, into another channel or into a divergent channel. You will be able to tell when a channel is running backwards, also called “running Rebelliously,” which is to say, in the opposite direction of the pattern you learned in school.

⁷ If you are not familiar with the directions in which the channels are supposed to flow, look for the arrows on the channel maps at the back of this book.

Practicing passivity

Let your hand feel that it is being pulled along by the energy that is moving “with the flow.” Or you might think of this as matching the movement of your hand with the movement of the energy that you can feel. But letting your hand be pulled by the energy is far easier, and more accurate.

If your ability to be a passive observer is good, you might even feel pleasure, like the sweet in-the-moment feeling of drifting in a canoe, as your hand is “carried along” by the channel Qi under your hand.

A dance example of “following energy”

A good “following” dancer is able to abandon any preconceived notions as to where the leading partner is going to go. By cultivating perfect relaxation with regard to *where* the movement is going, the “following” dancer is able to float around the dance floor, “carried” by the leading partner. In our busy lives, it can be pleasant to just follow, pleasant to *not* be in charge, for a moment or two, now and then.

In much the same way as the dancer, the dragon tracker, by perfect abandonment of any intention for where his hand might be led, other than to keep it parallel to the surface of the patient’s skin, might begin to feel as if his hand could be being carried along by the patient’s channel Qi.

Practice

Practice feeling channel Qi, back and forth, on several channels, on several healthy people. Then, practice letting your hand be carried along by the channel Qi flow on as many people as you can. The more you do this, the more you will feel comfortable with the idea that your hand can move “*with* the flow.” Once you know how it feels when you’re going with the flow, you can let your hand float along above the channel Qi anywhere on a patient’s body. As you compare the direction of your hand’s movement with what you know to be the correct pathways of channel Qi, you will be able to see your hand move in a “wrong direction” when a channel is flowing aberrantly.

Assessment

For example, if your hand is resting over a patient’s Ren channel, and you feel your hand being carried up to Ren-13 and then being carried over to the Liver channel, you can be certain that something is amiss.

Or, if you are resting your hand over the patient’s Du channel and your hand is carried a short way up the spine and then propelled up into the air, away from the body, the patient has a problem.

Again, no matter how you might *describe* the sensations of moving channel Qi, all that really matters is that you learn to 1) discern the direction in which the channel Qi is moving (going “*with*” the flow), and 2) learn to let yourself be carried by the flow of that channel Qi. After you can feel and follow the direction and route in which channel

Qi is flowing, you can compare that direction and route with the correct pathways.⁸ That comparison is the assessment.

More practice

If you aren't sure what is meant by "follow the Qi with your hand," put your hand close to your mouth. While blowing as gently and *slowly* as possible *across* the palm of your hand, move your hand at the same rate of speed as the breath. Breathe very *slowly*, and try to move your hand away from your mouth at the same speed as your breath. When your hand moves at the exact same speed and direction as your breath, you don't perceive the moving air of your breath. Let your hand get the full length of your arm away from your mouth as it moves at the same speed as the breath. Imagine that the energy in the breath is pushing your hand along.

Next, bring your hand close to the mouth again. Blow across your hand again, in the same way, but do not move your hand. You can again feel the movement of the air passing over your hand.

You have now experienced two styles of "feeling" the breath. You detected the speed of the breath by noticing the rate at which your hand is "moved along" by your breath *and* you experienced the sensation of having the breath move against your hand. In the first case, with the moving hand, you have felt both the direction and speed of the breath. In the second case, when you left your hand in one position and let the air move across it, you also felt the direction and speed.

Feeling channel Qi can also be accomplished either by allowing one's hand to be carried along by the flow channel Qi, or by holding the hand in one place and noticing the feeling of channel Qi moving across the hand.

I fear I'm making the learning seem far harder than it really is. Most of you won't need to blow on your hands.

The most important thing to remember is: "don't *think* about it." As soon as you start getting all logical on yourself, you can't be paying attention to your perceptions.

For example, consider the experience of listening to music: if you are busy *thinking* about what you are feeling, or *describing* to yourself how you feel when you listen to musician Jimi Hendrix, you will be missing the Jimi Hendrix *Experience*. Feeling channel Qi isn't *thinking* about sensations: it's having a direct experience of energy.

⁸ If you've forgotten or never learned the directions for the flow of the channels, you can use the maps in this book or use any basic text that shows the location of the numbered acupoints. In most cases, the numbering sequence of the points shows the direction of the channel Qi flow. The overall direction of the channel Qi flow usually goes from the smaller-number point towards the larger-number point. For example, if the channel Qi is running from ST-36 to ST-45 (the numbers going from smaller to bigger), it's running the right direction in that segment. If it's running from ST-42 to ST-36 (numbers getting smaller), it's running the wrong way.

Thinking, or not

Of course, as soon as you *do* know how to feel channel Qi, you might *then* have to think about what you felt coming from your patient's channels. For example, if Qi was running the "wrong" way, or not running, you might need to ask yourself "Why?" Later chapters will help you answer this question. After you've felt the channel Qi, you will need to think about what the sensations might mean in terms of diagnosis and treatment. But while doing the actual feeling of channel Qi, don't be thinking about what the channel Qi is *supposed* to be doing.

Again, for most people learning to feel channel Qi, all they need to do is practice moving their hands back and forth over a few channels. When they do this long enough, *whether or not* they know what Qi "feels like," they do *eventually* feel a difference between the two directions. The difference is caused by running the hand either with, or against, the current of channel Qi. It doesn't matter what words the brain comes up with to "define" the experience. All that matters, in the beginning, is that you are able to notice that some gentle force is moving in the patient, and it feels different when your hand moves "with" it than when you move "against" it. After that, practice letting your hand be carried along by the sensation that moves "with" the channel Qi – and notice where the sensation leads you. It will lead you along the paths, right or wrong, that the channels are taking.

The width of the channels

Channel widths vary. For example, the Stomach channel is fairly thin, less than an inch wide, as it passes over ST-41. But in the vicinity of ST-36, the channel can be more than three inches wide, in an adult. When you are following the flow of Qi with your hands, you will notice that sometimes there is a narrow "line," only a quarter inch wide, or so, where the Qi feels strongest. This line, in many cases, will follow fairly closely the Traditional theoretical "line" created by the sequentially numbered acupoints. In some places where channel Qi runs in a very wide path instead of a narrow path, it can be harder to feel the movement of the channel Qi.

For example, on the relatively wide band of channel Qi in the portion of the Urinary Bladder channel that flows down the back, the channel is wider than the two parallel rows of acupoints that run down the back. The medial points follow the area of decreased electrical resistance along the medial border of the channel, and the lateral points define the area of decreased electrical resistance along the lateral border of the channel. The relative width of this channel spreads the channel Qi somewhat thinly over the back. This channel width can make the channel Qi harder to detect, in this area, than the flow in a narrower channel – for the beginner.

In general, when trying to ascertain "where" the Qi is going, just do your best. Until you feel confident, you can start off by tracking the imaginary "line" that connects the "dots" of the acupoints.

Case study #1

Restless leg at night

(The following case study took place in clinical rounds. The students were very new at feeling channel Qi. They had been instructed in feeling channel Qi the week before, for a period of fifteen minutes before starting rounds. I do not know if any students had done any practicing at home. I know that a *few* of the students had done no practicing at all. I only mention this so that the reader will understand how quickly, and with how little practice, the students had mastered the art of feeling channel Qi.)

Female, age 58, came into the clinic for increasing restless leg syndrome, at night, in her right leg. She was otherwise very healthy and fit.

Tongue and pulse diagnoses showed nothing remarkable. Although an intuitive pulse master might have been able to detect the source of her restless leg problem, there was *nothing* in the pulse reading to suggest a diagnosis. Her bearing was athletic and her demeanor cheerful.

While standing on the right side of the patient, while feeling her pulse, I noticed a channel Qi disruption. I hadn't used my hands to feel her channel Qi; I just became aware of a sensation of blockage in the lower right quadrant of my torso. (Feeling ambient channel Qi gets easier, the more you attune yourself to it.) I asked all the students to, one at a time, run their hands very quickly over her left *and* right stomach channels, from approximately ST-19 down to ST-36 – while making sure to not influence her channel Qi in any way.

I innocently asked the students then and there if they'd noticed anything, and where. They gleefully answered as if with one voice, "There!" They were all pointing at an area a few inches below her navel, on the right side. Quickly considering the most likely reason for the blockage, given the location, I asked the patient if she'd had her appendix taken out.

"Yes," she replied, "but that was *years* ago; I was a child."

I answered, "It feels to all of us as if something right here (I pointed) is preventing energy from getting into your leg. It's most likely the scar tissue from the appendectomy. May I take a look?"

She bared the abdomen in the suspect area. Right where we'd all felt the blockage, she had a moderately thin, quite long, indented scar running perpendicular to the Stomach channel. The students gave little gasps of excitement. They'd been able to pinpoint a Qi blockage!

I explained to the patient, "Scar tissue, like rubber, is non-conductive: electrical currents can't pass through. May I insert some acupuncture needles through the scar to see if you can get some energy moving along the surface of the metal needles, moving the energy *through* the scar tissue?"

I told her that I didn't usually like to needle scar tissue on a person who'd never had acupuncture before. Unlike some styles of acupuncture, needling scar tissue is often very painful. I gave her the quickest possible version of the flashback sensations and

surgical memories she *might* re-experience when the needles penetrated the scar, and asked her if she was willing to let me try it.

She was game.

The main point of this case study is to demonstrate the uniformity of my student's experience. Be encouraged by this.

As an aside, to make this case study clinically relevant above and beyond the issue of feeling channel Qi, here's the conclusion: one week later, the patient returned to the clinic. Her restless leg syndrome was greatly reduced. Her symptoms had decreased the first night after the treatment, and continued to improve.

During the second treatment, I needled through the appendectomy scar again, placing the needles in slightly different locations from before, but still passing the needles through the keloid tissue at a right angle to the line of the scar. This second time, the sensations she experienced were more like the normal sensations associated with acupuncture.

Case study #2

Wrist treatment sends channel Qi to opposite foot

The following case study occurred in my private practice.

A female, age 60, retired semi-professional golfer, came in for wrist pain. She had sprained her right wrist a few weeks before, and now she was slicing all her drives off the tee. I palpated the right wrist. Several carpal bones were displaced. I did some very gentle, Yin-type, Tui Na (Chinese medical massage/manipulation), and the bones slid nicely back into place. I could have sent her home, knowing that the next surge of channel Qi through the Large Intestine channel, at 5:00 the next morning, would give the wrist the energy it needed to keep the bones in place. Instead, I decided to be on the safe side, and inserted a needle at *right*-side LI-4 to immediately increase the Qi flow through the wrist, thus strengthening the positioning of the restored carpal bones.

In just over two seconds (three seconds is about average for channel Qi to travel from LI-4 on one side of the body, to ST-45 on the opposite side of the body, following a needle insertion), she felt something in her toes on the *left* side. She asked me why the left side of her leg and her toes had tingled. I replied, "The side of the leg right here?" pointing out the path of the left Stomach channel on the lower leg. I continued, "And is it the second and third toes on the left side?"

She expressed surprise at my seeming prescience, but she agreed that I was exactly correct. I explained that the wrist needle was bringing up to speed the energy level in a current that flows up the arm to the face (Large Intestine channel), crosses over to the *other side* of the face, and then, on that other side, streams down the face, neck, torso and leg to the second and third toes (Stomach channel). She was pleased to know that her perceptions made sense according to Asian medical theory.

She asked why she'd felt the tingle during this treatment; in the past, she'd been needled at LI-4 and had not noticed anything subsequent in her opposite leg and foot.

I explained that her wrist injury had been causing significantly diminished energy flow in the Large Intestine channel. This, in turn, was causing significantly diminished energy flow in the Stomach channel on the opposite side.

She was a very healthy person. Ordinarily, there was enough channel Qi in her channels that she did not notice the difference when a slight increase pulsed through the system in response to a needle at LI-4. But because she had been walking around, for a few weeks, with a considerable insufficiency in those two channels (because of the wrist injury), she was able to feel the change when a full measure of channel Qi coursed, once again, through channels that had been depleted.

I gave her an example that one of my professors had given to me. “If a cup is full, and you put more tea into it, the extra will spill over the sides. You still have only one cup of tea. Your amount of tea has not changed. But if your cup is empty, and someone pours tea into it, you will have a changed amount of tea. You can tell that you have something more than before.”

My patient was an athlete, and keenly aware of how her body felt. The sensations that she reported to me, and the sensations that many other patients have reported to me, have contributed to my appreciation for and personal knowledge of channels: channels do exist; they follow specific pathways.

More to the point, observant patients such as the one discussed above can sometimes feel channel Qi flowing in the locations described in the classic texts, even when they don't know to expect it.

This case study makes this point: the conformity of the sensations experienced by patients, together with the matching sensations that we can feel with our hands, serve as a confirmation that we are not “just imagining” the existence and sensations of channel Qi.

Self doubt

Probably the biggest impediment to using channel diagnostics is self-doubt. A novice may doubt that the sensations he is experiencing are the “real thing.” But after overcoming the initial bout of thinking that feeling Qi is going to be very hard, most people can very easily feel channel Qi if it's running in the expected pattern. The real problems with self-doubt usually arise in cases where a patient's channel Qi is weak, missing altogether, running backwards, or attacking another channel.

I've worked with students and colleagues who do an excellent job of diagnosing channel Qi aberrations when the blockages are pretty straightforward. But these same practitioners, when confronted with something unexpected or unprecedented in their experience, suddenly don't trust what they're feeling.

Even colleagues who've been practicing this work for a few years will suddenly be hit by self-doubt when the signal behaves *very* strangely. They sometimes assume, in these cases, that they've lost the ability to feel channel Qi. In such cases, it's far more likely that the problem (the inability to feel the channel Qi at some particular location) is coming from something going on with the patient, not the practitioner. Still, self-doubt does crop up easily.

Some of the self-doubt may arise from the fact that we are dealing with something unseen *and* most of us grew up thinking that feeling energy was impossible. As long as we think that we're doing something that borders on the impossible, we are holding the door wide open for self-doubt.

Not so amazing, really

What we are doing when we feel channel Qi is not really that amazing. Many perfectly “normal” jobs require a similar level of sensory discretion.

For example, a musician, tuning his instrument, is listening for sound variations occurring at hundreds of vibrations per minute. If a violinist’s A string is tuned to resonate at 443 beats per minute instead of the tuning fork’s 440, he needs to be able to hear the irregular beat generated by the difference, and correct it.

It is said that Mozart once noticed more than one hundred notes and/or rhythmic variations in some bird’s simple cry – a bird song in which I probably would have heard three notes and two rhythms.

Likewise, some visual artists can discern extremely fine gradations of color that most people cannot see. I’ve seen people who work in a house-paint store matching color swatches with an astounding speed and accuracy.

A tea taster can differentiate flavors that most palates don’t know exist.

These skills are impressive, but we do not doubt that they exist. Because we have been raised to think these enhanced levels of job-related sensory perception are perfectly reasonable, we don’t doubt that such attunement is possible.⁹

In our job, we work with channel Qi. After practicing acupuncture for even just a year or two, most of us can easily feel when an inserted needle goes from “connected to nothing” to “connected with something.” When this happens, we say we’ve “Got the Qi.” There’s nothing really amazing about our ability to do this. This skill is only recognition of a sensation to which we’ve become attuned. There’s nothing *amazing* about it.

When we are feeling channel Qi by hand, from an inch or so away from the skin, we are only noticing the exact same sort of energy that we can easily learn to recognize when the channel Qi pulls on a needle. We’re just feeling it from a little farther away, without the medium of the needle.

Channel Qi is *not* a freakishly difficult thing to feel. In fact, when I run my hands over a patient and explain that I’m looking for an energetic glitch, I’m surprised at how often my patients say something along the lines of, “Well, I should hope so.” These patients are *not* surprised that I can feel channel Qi. They *expect* it. I’ve had patients who’ve said to me, “When I was out of town, I went to an acupuncturist who couldn’t even feel channel Qi! Can you believe it?”

⁹ One of my favorite examples of “what is possible” occurred when a nine year-old girl stayed in the room while I treated her nineteen year-old sister. The younger girl had never heard of acupuncture, and had no expectations whatsoever. After the treatment, I asked the young girl if she’d enjoyed herself. “Oh yes!” She replied, “The best part was watching the blue-green light arcing between those [left and right side] needles down by her ankles.”

She pointed to the needles at left- and right-side SP-6. I’d never seen that light, although I’d heard of it. I just smiled and said, “Yeah, that’s really cool.” I have to wonder, if I didn’t already *know* that it’s impossible to see that light, would I be able to see it, too? If students didn’t start off with the knowledge that feeling channel Qi is nearly impossible, would they be able to feel it with more confidence?

And, leaping to a completely different subject, this anecdote also demonstrates why channel Qi is often referred to in the *Nei Jing* as “color.”

We expect a violinist to know how to tune his violin, even though most of us do not have the sensory skills needed for such a job. Our patients have the right to expect us to know how to feel when we have “Got the Qi” or when channel Qi is flowing the wrong way, even if most people aren’t used to noticing channel Qi.¹⁰

Looking ahead

Direct perception of the channels is often the most accurate and elegant method of forming an exact medical diagnosis and treatment plan. All of the “pattern” diagnoses of Asian medicine, ranging from Five Elements to Eight Parameters, are, at root, labels for pathologies that are set in motion, and maintained, via aberrant flow of channel Qi.

Channel Qi is the *leader* of the Blood, the leader, or driver, of all physical manifestation. Channel Qi is an electrical manifestation of waves set in motion, originally, by consciousness. These channels, in turn, generate physical manifestations (atoms and molecular structures) *and* the power to drive them into the correct behaviors. Channel Qi drives both the Yin (matter) and the Yang (energy) of our bodies, both the organs and their functions. All health issues that involve Yin, Yang, Qi, or Blood, or the Five phases of channel Qi can be most elegantly detected and treated by working directly with channel Qi for diagnosis and treatment.

In the realm of Asian medicine, the *exact* knowledge of where a patient’s channels actually *are*, and the quality of the movement, held up against the knowledge of where and how they are *supposed* to be flowing, can often tell a health practitioner the *exact* nature of the patient’s problem and, therefore, the exact treatment. Detecting the flow of channel Qi provides this exact knowledge. Almost anyone can learn to detect the flow patterns of channel Qi.

As the masters pointed out in the *Nei Jing*, “To beginners, it seems easy.”

It *is* easy to detect the sensations of a patient’s channel Qi and thereby derive an extremely accurate diagnosis and treatment plan.

As an aside, the hard part referred to in the *Nei Jing*, the part of channel work that masters “know is difficult,” is a spiritual goal not directly related to the practice of doctoring others. This “difficult” part of channel work is the attainment of complete control of one’s *own* consciousness, which then gives the ability to consciously regulate one’s *own* channels – holding the channels, and therefore the body, in pathways of perfect health in spite of pathogens, climate, injury, or toxins. At the highest level, one can control one’s own channels to the extent of consciously altering the body’s energetics in order to enter the breathless state, in which one’s energy and awareness can be

¹⁰ Acupuncturists are not the only medical professionals that make use of the signals produced by channel Qi. Many chiropractors, naturopaths, osteopaths, craniosacral therapists, and even MDs take advantage of their ability to consciously or unconsciously feel the various signals and static created by incorrect channel Qi flow, and thus improve their diagnoses and treatment outcomes. What separates acupuncturists from these other professionals is that our medicine is *based* on the movement of channel Qi. If we fail to consciously work with these forces, we aren’t actually practicing Asian medicine: we are guessing as to the underlying problem based on “pattern” generalities, and treating semi-blindly.

consciously directed to leave and re-enter one's own body at will, and/or manifest other masteries of the physical realm. The masters recognize that this aspect of "knowing the channel Qi," which at the highest level involves complete surrender of ego, can be very difficult to master.

Again, the easy part is learning to detect the flow of channel Qi in patients, and using that knowledge to determine an elegant and effective medical treatment. Even a *beginning* student can arrive at a highly accurate diagnosis and effective treatment plan by noticing errors in a patient's channel-Qi flow pattern.

Sensing the flow of channel Qi requires only that one learns to recognize the distinct *physical* sensations emitted by the flow of channel Qi. Any person who is able to feel the sensation of gentle wind on his cheek, or who can tell the difference between the sensation of rubbing velvet one direction when compared to rubbing it the other way, should be able to quickly master the art of tracking the flow of channel Qi in a patient.

Then, if he knows the *correct* patterns of channel Qi flow, as described in the classics, he can quickly recognize if, and in what manner, the Qi flow in a patient is aberrant.