

Governing Vessel 12 (*Shen-chu* 身柱: “Body Pillar”)

Introduction

One of the most important occurrences in the practice of T'ai-chi ch'üan is the awareness of vital energy, or *ch'i* in Chinese, moving through the body. In acupuncture it is said that an unimpeded flow of this *ch'i* is what causes health. A blockage or disturbance, on the other hand, causes disease either on the physical, emotional or mental level. The sites where these blockages occur in the body-mind are the points, or cavities (*hsüeh* 穴), used in acupuncture. Since the circulating *ch'i* nourishes all parts of the body-mind, these “blockages” occur because it is perceived subconsciously as threatening to either receive this nourishment (this is associated with deficiency), or to pass it on into the general circulation flow (an excess). In relation to *Ch'i-kung* and T'ai-chi, excess is accompanied by pain, heat or mental aggravation, whereas deficiency is accompanied by numbness, cold and mental sluggishness. If a practitioner experiences these sensations it is an indication that their body-mind is not functioning properly. The nature of this dysfunction can be determined by the nature, or “spirit,” of the point in question. There are several major points that *Ch'i-kung* and T'ai-chi practitioners should become aware of. This article will focus on the “spirit” of one of these points, *Shen-chu*, which is located in the middle of the upper back.

Shen-chu is where the *ch'i* circulating up the spine in the Governing Vessel splits off from the main vessel in order to circulate out into the arms and hands. This splitting of energy forms the beginning of what is called the Grand Circulation, *Ta chou t'ien* 大周天. In *Ch'i-kung*, the Grand Circulation is one of the preparatory stages in the transformation of the physical body (represented by the *ching-ch'i* 精氣, or essence) to spirit (represented by the *shen* 神). For internal martial artists, *Shen-chu* is important for directing the *ch'i*, first stored in the *tan-t'ien*, and then whipped up the spine from the feet and legs into the arms, hands and fists with the *ching* 勁, or striking power.

While *Shen-chu* is used differently by *Ch'i-kung* practitioners, martial artists and acupuncturists, there are, nevertheless, important common denominators between them. An overview of some of *Shen-chu*'s functions in acupuncture can help to bridge the connection between these interrelated disciplines and, thereby, deepen their understanding.

Shen-chu

Also called Governing Vessel 12 (or Gv12), *Shen-chu* is the twelfth point of the Governing Vessel which runs up the back of the spine. *Shen-chu* is located between the third and fourth thoracic vertebrae in the area of the upper inside wings of the shoulder blades. It lies slightly medial to the cavity Bladder 13, *Fei-shu*, which is a major opening into the Lung. This proximity accounts for a comprehensive understanding of the functions and actions of *Shen-chu*.

Chinese medicine is characterized by its detailed attention to the yin/yang interplay of Heaven and Earth which give rise to various polarities including those of matter and spirit, structure and function. In addition, each of these interplays was seen to have a different proportion of these yin and yang forces. Much of the theoretical foundation of acupuncture is based upon an analysis of the unique intricacies of this interplay. At *Shen-chu* it is that of the rising yang *ch'i* in the Governing Vessel with the condensing function of the Lung and its associated Metal phase.

Metal is one of the five energetic phases of yin/yang used throughout ancient Chinese culture which also include Water, Wood, Fire, and Soil. These phases basically correspond to the cyclic energy of the four seasons plus a fifth “balancing” season which keeps them all in harmony. Metal corresponds to Autumn and has two significant aspects which come into play at *Shen-chu*. The first is the retreat of the life force into the earth at this season which relates to death and the **martial** instinct. The second relates to the refinement, or **perfection**, of physical existence that results in the attainment of the Perfected, or Enlightened Person (*cheng-jen* 正人) in the human world, and the metal gold in the mineral. Early Chinese thinkers thought that all living things and all substances undergo a long condensing process of refinement that ultimately leads to their ability to embody spirit. They symbolized this process by the Metal phase, because, in Chinese, the same word used for gold, *chin* 金, also stands for Metal.

In the “Great Norm” chapter of the *Book of History* compiled and edited by Confucius around 483 BC, it is written that ... “the nature of Metal is to yield and be modified.” This statement refers to the attributes of Metal from the viewpoint of early Chinese potters, smiths, and alchemists. According to the symbolism of this image, Metal takes the shape of its mold and then solidifies into place creating an

enduring and stable form. It is no coincidence that the acupuncture cavity only one vertebral space above *Shen-chu*, Gv13, is called *T'ao-tao* 陶道 or “Kiln Path.” At *Shen-chu* the *ch'i* of the Governing Vessel is directed toward the materialization of body form due to the influence of the phase Metal and the Lung within the “kiln” of Gv13.

The importance of the Metal phase in the creation of this materialization is related to the spirit of Metal which is called *P'o* 魄. Ancient Chinese thinkers thought that human beings were created and sustained within a balanced matrix of spirit and matter which they symbolized by the terms Heaven and Earth. These polarities unite to create and sustain both human form and consciousness. The spirit of Heaven, *Hun* 魂, symbolized by the dragon, is what gives us our mental capacity and ultimately our “Humanity” (*Jen* 仁). On the other hand, the spirit of the Earth, *P'o*, symbolized by the Tiger, is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the body's form and gives us the fighting spirit to survive. This materializing aspect of *P'o* is also related to sensory awareness as well as sexuality, both of which are used to establish physical connections with the external world and, thereby, extend as well as maintain one's *physical* boundaries.

The idea of the Metal phase in conjunction with the Lung producing physical form relates back to the cavity *Shen-chu* 身柱 not only through its proximity to the Lung and Metal phase “entry point”, B13, but also through its very name. In Chinese, the word *shen* 身 means “body,” or the “material form of things.” *Chu* 柱 means “a pillar.” Thus, *Shen-chu*, or “Body Pillar” refers to the condensing and materializing function of the Lung, the phase Metal and the Earth spirit *P'o* on the physical body. *Shen-chu* is the “functional” pillar of this materialization (*shen* 身), as I have described above, in the same way that the spine itself, at the location of Gv12, is the “structural” pillar.

***Shen-chu* and Healing**

On a more physical level, *Shen-chu* is the pillar of physicalization due to the Lung's relation to the *ch'i* and blood. According to Chinese medicine, *ch'i* and blood are the most fundamental of nourishing substances and are, therefore, responsible for the formation and preservation of body structure. In chapter 18 of the *Ling-shu*, one of the most ancient of classical acupuncture texts, it says that both *ch'i* and blood are produced in the Lung from the transformation of nutritional energies rising upward from the digestive organs as they mix with the *ch'i* of the air we breathe. It said that *ch'i* and blood then flows out of the Lung and circulates through the acupuncture main meridians in order to nourish the entire body. Deficiencies of the Lung function, *ch'i* and blood, lead to a lack of physical, mental and sexual energy. An abundance of this same function is what gives us vitality and insures longevity. *Ch'i-kung* practice in concert with acupuncture treatment, works well together toward these ends.

***Ch'i-kung* Revisited**

With the condensing nature of *Shen-chu* and its compressing function on the *ch'i* now established, it will be easier to see how it functions in *Ch'i-kung* to divert the circulation of the Governing Vessel which normally goes from the tip of the tailbone, up over the top of the head and down the face to end between the nose and upper lip. This stage of circulation in the Governing Vessel is the first in what is called the Taoist Small Circulation (*Hsiao-chou-t'ien* 小周天) which circulates up the back and down the front. The compression of the Metal phase on the *ch'i* circulating in the Governing Vessel diverts the normal circulation up to the head, out into the arms instead, and into what is called the Taoist Grand Circulation (*Ta-chou-t'ien* 大周天). According to Jou Tsung-hwa in *The Tao of Meditation: Way to Enlightenment*, this second stage of energy transformation is accomplished with prenatal breathing by leading the *ch'i* from the *tan-t'ien* to the area of *shen-chu* and then out the backside of the arms, in through the frontside of the arms to the chest, down the trunk and inside of the legs, and up the outside of the legs back to the *tan-t'ien*. (p. 152,3)

Both the Grand and Small Circulations involve different channels of circulation than the main meridians which are connected to the internal organs and circulate the *Ying* 營 “nourishing energy and blood” from the Lung. The Grand and Small Circulations are part of what are called the Eight Extraordinary Vessels (*Chi-ching pa-mo* 奇經八脈). With the exception of the Governing Vessel and Conception Vessel (which runs down the front) the “Extra” Vessels have no cavities of their own but, rather share the points (and, indirectly, some of the functions) with the main meridians. They also differ in the type of *ch'i* which circulates in them and in the direction in which that *ch'i* circulates. Whereas the main meridians circulate yin and yang aspects of the *Ying* nourishing energy made in the Lung, the Extra

Vessels circulate *ching* 精 “essence.” The presence of *ching* 精 “essence” in the “Extra” Vessels is what makes the Grand and Small Circulations so important in *Ch'i-kung* as well as in the more ancient Taoist internal alchemy from which *Ch'i-kung* was derived. The goal of inner alchemy is to convert the material aspect of the body to spirit. Since the *ching* essence is the most refined aspect of the physical body, and since it circulates primarily through the “Extra” Vessels, the internal alchemists and their successors, the *Ch'i-kung* practitioners, focused their primary attention in this area. Hence, the importance of the Grand and Small Circulations in Taoist meditation, as well as in martial arts. These channels carry a much more refined and powerful form of energy, the *ching* essence at the material root, and the *shen* 神 spirit (note the same pronunciation as *shen* 身 body, but different character) as the flower.

These more refined forms of energy, nevertheless, remain interconnected with lower forms such as the *Ying* nourishing energy, as well as the Five Phase and internal organ functions. In particular these two aspects come together at *Shen-chu* in order to benefit both levels in their reciprocity. The basic Lung/Metal function of compressing the *ch'i* at *Shen-chu* assists in the production of *ching* essence and the further refinement and spiritualization of this energy through the Grand Circulation. At the same time yang *ch'i* traveling up the Governing Vessel stimulates and catalyzes the transformation of *Ying* nourishing energy at the Lung. Both the yang energy of the Governing Vessel and the survival instincts of the Earth spirit *P'o*, as manifested through the Lungs, combine to produce the martial spirit that the internal artists capture here at *Shen-chu*.

When the *ch'i* circulating in the Governing Vessel and/or the Lung is too weak or too strong, abnormal conditions can result from their interaction at *Shen-chu*. For example: 1) If the *ch'i* in both the Governing Vessel and the Lung is in excess, but the *ch'i* in the **Governing Vessel** predominates, then the expression of this excess yang *ch'i* is led outward to a martial extreme so that homicidal mania can result; Conversely, 2) If the *ch'i* in both the Governing Vessel and the Lung is in excess, but the *ch'i* in the **Lung** predominates, the excess yang *ch'i* is bent inwardly so that the person might display suicidal tendencies. On the more benign side of this unbalanced continuum, it may be the “perfectionistic” qualities of the Lung that come into play. Here, the outward expression would result in making, perhaps, unreasonable perfectionistic demands on others, whereas the inward expression would result in making them on oneself. Whatever the particular expression may be, excess, or blocked *ch'i* in the region of *Shen-chu* will result in various forms of Lung disturbance as well as physical tension accompanied by tightness and restricted motion in the upper back, shoulder blades, shoulders and arms.

***Shen-chu* in T'ai-chi ch'üan and *Ch'i-kung* Training**

A good way to incorporate the theoretical aspect of this article with *ch'i-kung* practice is to become more self-aware of the **specific** content of *shen-chu* on a **personal** level. Although this can be done in *ch'i-kung* practice or meditation, as well as in daily life, a good way to begin is through stationary practice as in, for example, a modified horse stance (*ma-pu*). In order to first establish the proper body structure stand with the feet parallel about shoulder width apart. Bend the knees slightly as if sitting on a horse (do not extend the knees beyond the toes). Then raise the arms in front of the body with the palms facing towards the chest until the hands reach shoulder height. Then round the back and sink the chest (*pa-pei hsiung-ku*). Feel the top of the head as if it were suspended by a thread from Heaven. The next step is then to lengthen the joints beginning from the feet and working your way up through the ankles, knees, hips, spine, shoulders, elbows, wrists, hands. Then lengthen the neck and the bones in the head. The key is to relax the muscles so that the bones and ligaments can support the body without any tension. You should become aware of the affinity between the hands and feet, elbows and knees, and shoulders and hips. The spine should feel loose, yet connected, like one column supporting the head. Breathe gently, deeply and evenly through the nose. It is good practice to stand in this way with your awareness concentrated on correct body posture with emphasis on loosening of the joints and relaxation of the muscles for several minutes before going on to the next stage.

The next stage involves the *ch'i* circulation of which the first step is an open, general awareness followed by a mental exploration of the Small and Grand Circulations as described earlier in this article. The next step is then to concentrate on a specific point (in this case *Shen-chu*) for several minutes at a time (10 -20 minutes is good to start with). During this period of focus, allow yourself to become receptive to any emotions, thought patterns, memories, or beliefs that come up. These things are the personal content of the point and act as the foundation for any further insights and healing which may follow. The second stage consists of being gentle and compassionate with yourself in order to develop an objectivity about the

subjectivity of the content as it comes up. This perspective allows you to acknowledge that the content is yours but not you. The third stage is a blend of the first two. The part of you that holds the focus is the objective side. The content itself is the subjective. By holding them both together and allowing them to be what they are movement occurs. This movement is the flow of *ch'i* on a psychic level that allows for transformation, change and healing to occur. This healing then becomes the further basis for the flow of *ch'i* on the more physical level. Without this healing integration of the subjective contents of any point in the Large and Small Circulations, the experience of the physical flow of *ch'i* alone, though part of the process, may be insufficient for psychological and spiritual progress to take place. If there is any confusion at stages 2 or 3, adjunctive acupuncture and/or psychological therapy may help. After all, acupuncture and *ch'i-kung* are partners in the same tradition and do work best when used in conjunction with one another. Acupuncture, *Chi-kung* and martial art training can effectively work synergistically in order to maintain the function of the body/mind in areas like *Shen-chu* at a high level.

Bio:

Dennis Willmont has been practicing Oriental medicine in conjunction with *T'ai-chi ch'üan* since 1971. He currently maintains a practice in acupuncture and Chinese herbs in Marshfield, Massachusetts. Dennis studied *Wu* style *T'ai-chi ch'üan* with Li Li-t'a in the 70's, Yang style *T'ai-chi ch'üan* with T.T. Liang in the 80's and currently studies Yang style with Yang Jwing-ming. He has also studied *Hsing-i*, and *Pa-kua-ch'üan* with Liang Shou-yu.

Ideas and information in this article are derived from Mr. Willmont's extensive research into the cultural background of ancient acupuncture. He is currently writing a book on this topic which specializes on the interpretation and development of acupuncture through the symbolism of the acupuncture point-names.