

The Riddle Of The Waist And Feet

The Riddle

A question that frequently comes up at many schools in push-hands practice concerns the role of the waist in relation to the feet, rooting, and the origin of movement in T'ai-chi-ch'üan. Some people say that movement originates in the waist, others in the feet. The source of this confusion lies in the T'ai-chi-ch'üan Classics where we find two apparently contradictory statements. According to the "T'ai-Chi-ch'üan Treatise" by Chang San-feng, "The root (of movement) is at the feet, (is) generated from the legs, controlled (*chu* 主) by the waist, and expressed by the fingers."¹ In contrast, the "Thirteen Postures: Comprehending External and Internal Training" by Wang Tsung-yüeh states: "The Hsin 心 (heart, mind) is the order (*ling* 令), the Chi (ch'i) is the message flag, and the waist is the banner."² This last statement is usually interpreted to mean that the ch'i communicates messages from the heart/mind to the waist which then initiates action³. So where does movement really come from. Is it the waist, or is it the feet? Since the Classics can never lie, both of these answers must be true, but how can this contradiction be resolved?

One approach is to examine the relation between the Heart, feet and waist in other Chinese cultural traditions such as herbal and acupuncture medicine. In acupuncture the different parts of the body are associated with more general energetic, or archetypal, patterns, of which the **Five Phases** (*wu-hsing* 五行) of Water, Wood, Fire, Soil and Metal, and the **Three Powers** (*san-ts'ai* 三材) of Heaven, Earth and Man are the most representative. In the Three Powers pattern, Earth represents the lower body including the Kidneys, lower legs and feet; Man represents the Spleen/pancreas and abdomen, and Heaven represents the area from the diaphragm to the head including the Heart. In the Five Phase pattern, Fire represents the Heart, and is related to the hands and the circulatory system, whereas Water represents the Kidneys and is related to the feet and the bones. In addition, Water in the Five Phase system connects to Earth in the Three Powers system, while Fire connects to Heaven.

In the two apparently contradictory statements from the Classics, the Heart in Wang Tsung-yüeh's statement corresponds to Fire and Heaven; whereas the Kidney (feet and bones) corresponds to Water and Earth in Chang San-feng's. The contradiction in these two statements from the T'ai-chi-ch'üan Classics is also found in the polar opposition between Water and Fire in acupuncture where, according to acupuncture theory, the mystery of life is contained. In an attempt to solve this riddle of the waist and the feet, we will now turn to the theories of acupuncture and its comprehensive energetic perspective.

Internal & External Aspects

The resolution between the Water and Fire polar opposition takes place, according to acupuncture, on both an internal and external level. The **internal** level works through the Soil phase which commands the *I*, or Intention. This allows the Kidneys (feet and bones) and the Heart (circulation) to communicate internally. Wang Tsung-yüeh, the "Heart specialist" in the classics, describes this connection as initiated from the Heart:

"It is also said: first in the Hsin 心 (heart, mind), then in the body; the abdomen (is) relaxed and clear (sunken) so the Chi (ch'i) condenses into the bones; the Spirit (*shen* 神) is comfortable and the body is calm; remember this in the heart at all times."⁴

Elsewhere he explains more succinctly how the *I* makes this connection:

"(Throughout your) entire body, your mind (*I* 意) is on the Spirit of Vitality (*ching-shen* 精神), not on the (Chi (ch'i). (If concentrated) on the Chi (ch'i), then stagnation. A person who concentrates on Chi (ch'i) has no Li 力 (strength); a person who cultivates Chi (ch'i) (develops) pure hardness (power)."⁵

In acupuncture, it is said that the Spirit (*shen* 神) resides in the Heart and is related to (*ching-shen* 精神) which could also be translated as "concentrated awareness." "Pure hardness" is another reference to the bones where the *ching* 精 of the Kidneys is stored.

On an **external** level, the resolution between Water and Fire takes place through the Gall Bladder meridian, or *shao-yang* (Triple Heater and Gall Bladder). The *shao-yang* has three functions relevant to our discussion. First, it contains what is called “ministerial fire” (*chu-huo* 主火) which means that as “the fire... rising up from the water, from the depths of life and the kidneys,”⁶ it is the intermediary, or “pivot” (*shu* 樞), between... the Kidney and the Heart. Second, the *shao yang* is also considered to be a mediating “pivot” between the inside and outside (*biao-li* 表裏) through which it is in charge of the circulation of the Guardian *ch’i* (*wei* 衛)⁷ which protects the body from dangerous outside influences including those associated with the martial arts. Third, the Gall Bladder connects to the waist through the Extraordinary Vessel *Tai-mo* 帶脈 which emerges externally from the Kidneys through the acupuncture point G26, named *Tai-mo* 帶脈, on each side of the waist.

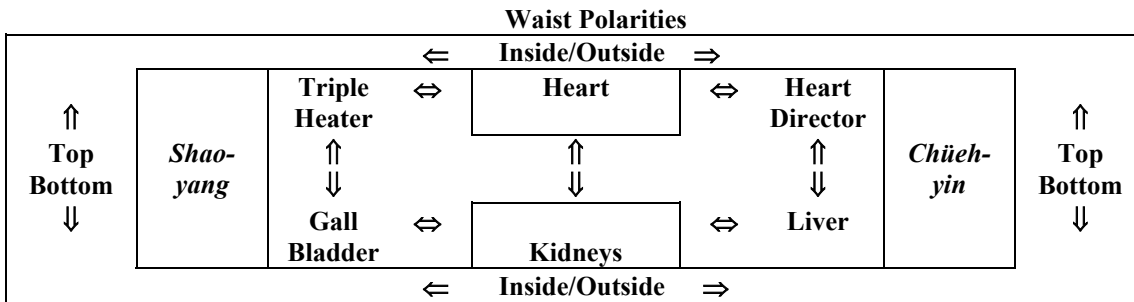
It is through the Gall Bladder’s function as “pivot” in it’s relation to the waist that directly provides the waist’s energetic connection to Water, and the Kidneys (feet/bones). Important acupuncture points on the Gall Bladder meridian are named according to the importance of this “pivot” role: Gv7, on the back near the entry point to the Gall Bladder organ is called “Pivot Center” (*chung-shu* 中樞; G27 and 28, two points on the hip at the juncture of the waist and *kua* 胯 (inguinal crease), are called “Outer Pivot” (*wai-shu* 外樞), and “Five Pivots” (*wu-shu* 五樞), both names together referring internally to the Five inner organs, and externally to the movement in the five directions that the waist, as the largest, strongest and most supple “joint” in the body (pivoting in three directions from left to right, side to side and front to back), provides. The *shao-yang*’s connection to the Kidneys and between the Kidneys and the Heart provides an energetic “pivot” between inside/outside and top/bottom as well.

Three Power, Five Phase Relation to the Waist

Internal	Heaven Fire/Heart/Shen/Circulation			External
	Soil/Spleen/I	Waist	Gall Bladder/ Pivot	
	Water/Kidneys/Bones/Feet Earth			

Resolution: Three-in-One, One-in-Three

Rather than there being one answer to the riddle, there now appears to be three, or, perhaps more accurately, three in one. Heaven initiates **mental** movement through the heart/mind. Earth initiates **physical** movement through the feet. Heaven and Earth come together at the waist: (1) via the Heart (circulation) through the *I*/Intention of the Soil phase; and (2) via the Kidneys (feet and bones) through the “pivot” of the Gall Bladder. The waist is the “banner” of the movement generated by the Heart, and the director (*chu* 主) of the movement generated by the Kidneys through the bones and feet. In the inverse way that the waist is the director (*chu* 主) of the Kidneys (feet/bones), there is also a “director” (*chu* 主) of the Heart that energetically completes the polar relationship between the Heart and the Kidneys and, therefore, our two apparently contradictory propositions. This “director” is called the Pericardium (*hsin-chu* 心膈), or “Heart Director,” or Pericardium. The “Heart Director” not only connects **externally** to the Gall Bladder through it’s inside/outside (*biao-li* 表裏) relation to the *shao-yang* (Triple Heater/Gall Bladder), but also **internally** to the Kidneys from the Heart. This is because the “Heart Director” is considered the energetic through which messages from the Heart are “directed” (*chu* 主) inward to the Kidneys and waist, whereas the waist itself is the “director” (*chu* 主) of movement from the feet, bones and Kidneys outward.



In T'ai-chi-ch'üan training these three aspects (Heart, Kidney, Waist) are developed together but in slightly different ways. *Shen* training occurs **mentally** through mastering and integrating all of the Yin-Yang aspects of the T'ai-chi-ch'üan sequence including breathing, guiding the origin of physical movement from the feet to the waist and hands, and the shifting of weight from substantial to insubstantial throughout the entire body (not just between the two legs). On the other hand, Kidney/bone/feet training occurs **physically**, mostly through the Standing Postures, as the bones establish their root in the Earth. As Wang Tsung-yüeh suggests, the origin of movement first takes place consciously through the Heart *shen*. Unconsciously, however, and only after long-term physical training, the origin of movement will **eventually** occur habitually in the feet.

¹ Yang Jwing-ming, *Advanced Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan 1- Tai Chi Theory and Tai Chi Jing* (Jamaica Plain: YMAA Publications, 1987) 213.

² Yang 227.

³ Yang 227.

⁴ Wang Tsung-yüeh, "Thirteen Postures: Comprehending External and Internal Training" Yang 228.

⁵ Wang 228.

⁶ Claude Larre and Elizabeth Rochat de la Vallee, *Heart Master and Triple Heater* (Cambridge: Monkey Press, 1992) 76.

⁷ Larre 76.