The Mind-Body Link: Traditional Chinese Medicine is Designed for Treatment of Mental Health

By Nicholas Sieben, LAc

Acupuncture remains highly underutilized in mainstream treatment of mental-emotional health. It is a modality that is still viewed as "somatic" medicine, despite the fact that countless Chinese Medical clinicians and scholars have been successfully working with mental health for centuries.

Acupuncture is being subjected to a struggle like psychoanalysis in the 1920s. Wilhelm Reich was one of the forefathers of modern psychoanalysis. In his book "Discovery of the Orgone," he describes the conflict between MDs and psychiatrists during a time when psychoanalysis was becoming known to the public. At the root of the struggle, explains Reich, is the perceived separation between body and mind. In his work, Reich searched for an underlying "energy" that showed connection between body and mind. Unfortunately his theories were never fully accepted by the medical community.

Chinese Medicine has already developed its theory linking the body and mind. Aspects of the mind are related to all the organs: the Spleen (consciousness), the Liver (memory and collective consciousness), the Heart (animation), the Kidneys (the will) and the Lungs (instinctual animal consciousness and morality). Each of the acupuncture channels is also related to aspects of the mind, as well as the emotions. Furthermore, the Zang organs are said to "store" aspects of the spirit.

Chapter 8 of the Ling Shu implies all ailments are essentially a disturbance to the spirit. Furthermore, it is the spirit that heals all disease. Many ancient medical systems have a similar way of thinking. The Hawaiian Huna spiritual tradition sees the body as possessing three souls: a physical soul, a conscious mental soul and a spiritual higher soul. The soul, called Ling in Chinese Medicine, is an embodiment of the Shen spirit.

The Huna notion of the soul is much like the Chinese idea of the Ling Po (animal "corpse" soul), the Ling Shen (mind, consciousness, animation, our "agenda") and the Ling Hun ("etheric" soul, often seen as a record book of our past, present and future). All of these soul aspects come together to create our physical, mental and spiritual life as emanations of the big Shen.
All of the organs have spiritual aspects, just as they all have physical, mental and emotional components. There is Shen in everything. Altogether they create the entirety of our being. Within Chinese Medicine, the mind doesn’t reside in the brain, but in all areas of the body.

Even the description most of us are taught about the Po, Shen and Hun is a bit limited. When we work with the physical body, we are working with the Po. It is the yin aspect of the body. It is the essence. It is also wei qi. It possesses an instinctual wisdom that knows how to rebuild the body when it is injured, and maintains daily autonomic function. An aspect of it is the Kidneys, which we modernly associate with the DNA and hormonal-endocrine systems. Another aspect is the Lungs and the pulsation of the breath that keeps things moving and in order.

The Shen is associated with the blood: ying qi. It is the conscious aspect of the mind. It is associated with the Spleen that manages the blood, the Heart and Pericardium that circulate the blood and the Liver that stores the blood. The Shen relates to the different ways we deal with our thoughts: we rationalize and transform them, we recall them, we make them into reality - belief systems. The blood feeds the tissues of the body, just as our conscious thoughts also feed us. Alternatively, the blood and our thoughts can poison us if they are toxic.

It is through the mental level that we have major control over the physical body, say the Kahunas of the Huna Tradition. "The mental soul is the master; the body soul is the servant." We see this in Chinese Medicine through the Luo Vessels and their relationship to the Extraordinary Vessels and the Yuan Level. The Luo Vessels are conduits of ying qi: they conduct blood, which carries the Shen. The Luo Vessels are a way into the Yuan level, as shown by the Transverse Luo Vessel theory which says unresolved pathology in the level of the Luo can find its way into the source. Incidentally, many of the Extraordinary Vessels utilize Luo points as "opening" points to activate the channel.

When people say "it's all in your head," they are right! Our minds can make us sick. They can also make us well. People tend to scratch their heads in frustration when they are told this however. We, as Chinese Medical practitioners understand how energy circulating through the ying level can affect the constitution and wei levels of the body. We possess a lot of wisdom that can help explain how something "in our heads" can cause problems in our physical bodies.
A pathogen that has originated in the ying (internal) level of the body has many pathways by which it can spread to different energetic levels of the body. Ying qi and wei qi have a close relationship: they are constantly adjusting to one another. At times when a greater amount of wei qi is needed, ying qi transforms itself into wei qi, and vice versa. The Longitudinal Luo vessels, as well as the Primary Channels are areas where ying and wei interact. A toxin residing in the ying level (blood: mind and emotions) can easily affect our immune function, sensory organs, peristaltic activity and sleep patterns: all aspects of wei qi function.

Ying level pathology can also find its way into the yuan constitutional level to affect our DNA via the Transverse Luo vessels. This can create endocrine disturbances, problems in the Zang Fu and Curious Fu, as well as shifts in personality.

Chinese Medicine goes beyond mere theorizing about psychosomatics: they show energetic pathways that explain them. Chinese Medicine has never had a problem with the link between body, mind and spirit because its science is that of energy, which permeates all things. If it is the spirit that is the root of all disease, as well as the force responsible for all healing, this creates a medical system embracive of all things.

That which has solidified into physical form is simply a more dense form of energy: more an aspect of the Po: a yin manifestation of qi. There may be a change in physical structure: ying or yuan; blood, fluid or Jing. Or potentially the yang aspect of wei, ying and yuan: qi-functionality will show problems.

The mental-emotional manifestation of disease can show up in different energetic forms: as a mood disorder (a wei level phenomenon), thoughts or emotions (ying level), or personality shifts (yuan level).

The Luo Vessels teach us that underneath everything (physical, mental, emotional) is its energetic nature. Ying level pathology can show up in many forms: as physical symptomology or mental-emotional disturbance; on the wei, ying or yuan levels. The classical symptoms associated with the Longitudinal Luo Vessels are mostly presented as somatic. They manifest visually as blood or fluid masses, physically as Bi Obstruction, and functionally as counterflow qi. They can also manifest though Shen disturbances. Pathology can be translocated into the wei level as varicosity on the surface of the skin, into the ying level as blood or fluid masses, or internally in the yuan level as inflammation.

The Luo Vessels are perhaps the best illustrations of the transformation and translocation of pathology within Chinese Medicine. The vast "network vessels" travel throughout the entire body, manifesting in the physical, mental and emotional terrain.
As a field of medicine, we can be emboldened by knowledge that our system is built to address mental and emotional health concerns. Chinese Medicine has a profound understanding of the human mind and spirit, and how they interact and manifest through the physical. We have been given the gift of the acupuncture channels, which provide lessons about the mysteries of the body. They map out and support the cohesive unity of all aspects of the human self: body, mind and spirit, dispelling confusion about a mind-body split.

Qi circulates everywhere. In some manifestations it is called "wei," in other forms it is "ying." At its root it is "yuan." Each layer of qi can transform itself into another form of qi. Just as pathology can be translocated to the surface of the body, the interior, or the root, it can show itself as a change in physical structure or function, within the mind or the spirit.

We, as Chinese Medical practitioners have much to offer the mainstream medical community and its patients, especially in the mysterious field of mental health. The Western psychological community has been searching for what we have to offer for decades. It is time we create partnership and become greater participants, emboldened by the power of our profoundly wise medical tradition. We must find ways to communicate what we know so others can hear us.

Wilhelm Reich died an alienated man. His theories were largely rejected by the mainstream medical community. Only recently are his writings being re-examined with interest. Perhaps now is the time when energetic forms of medicine are about to be accepted by the medical establishment. It is up to us to create dialogue, fully confident in what we know our medicine can do. We are here to help, to heal and to educate. Sharing our "truth" about the body is not only our pleasure, it is our job. For many of us, it is also our mission.