

Riding the Will

Working with the Shao Yin and Tai Yang

by Bill Palmer M.Sc. MRSS

The Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing, one of the most ancient Chinese medical texts, states that the highest level of healing is helping a person to fulfil their purpose (Ming) and giving nourishment to their true nature (Xing). To the authors, this was more important than the mere curing of disease¹. What's the point of being cured if you've lost the point of living?

The Chinese word 'Ming' (命) means purpose or destiny, but the character depicts 'instructions being given at the start of a journey'. I like to think of the Ming as our spiritual genes, which contain the potential for development that will unfold through interaction with the environment. The word 'Xing' (性) is translated as one's nature; literally the character means 'heart-life'. Thus the Ming is the purpose of our life journey and the Xing is our way of travelling it.

If we are inspired by our purpose and are following our nature, we act with authenticity. The power of authentic action is called Zhi (志) in Chinese, which is usually translated as Will. Ted Kaptchuk² translates it as Wisdom and observes that two aspects of Will arise from the Zhi. The Yang Will is similar to our English usage: a conscious purposeful force behind our actions. The Yin Will embodies the sense of unconscious purpose that we sometimes have when we look back and realise that our actions have been working towards an end that was always meant to be.

Traditionally, the Zhi is the power that comes from our deepest unconscious nature so is intimately related to our Yin Will. For clarity, I will dub the conscious aspirations 'The Intention' and the unconscious drive I will simply call 'The Will'. This article attempts to understand the Will and how to reconnect with it if we have lost track of our Destiny. Shiatsu normally focuses on working with Qi but, unless that work is aligned with the Will of the person, I don't find that the treatment has lasting benefit.

We often think that the unconscious is sabotaging our conscious intent. For instance, a poll carried out by time management firm Franklin Covey³ showed that four out of five New Year resolutions last less than a month. However, I prefer looking at it the other way round. Maybe it's the conscious self that gets it wrong by not listening to the unconscious impulses. One can imagine the Will as a horse: it's bigger and stronger than the rider but is willing to be ridden as long as its basic needs are being met. But if a horse is hungry then it will resist being galloped towards the rider's goal and will turn off to graze at the roadside grass. So, if we can discover what the Will wants to do, we can try to satisfy it and then it may allow itself to be ridden.

In this article, we follow two themes, the first is how we can clarify the direction of the Will; this work is related to the Kidney and the Heart, forming the Shao Yin. The second theme is how to use bodywork and movement to align the conscious Intention with the unconscious Will. We show how this alignment is facilitated by the Bladder and Small Intestine meridians, forming the Tai Yang channel.

Developing Clarity

If our Intention conflicts with our Will then life does not flow easily but we don't know why. We need to find a way of helping the unconscious energy to come into awareness. One way of doing this is through Spontaneous Movement, which lets the horse run free and gives it an opportunity to articulate its purpose. In Japan, the practice of Katsugen-Undo, simply meaning *spontaneous movement*, lets unconscious energy express itself. However, Katsugen focuses on expression of all energy rather than focusing on the Will. In contrast, a movement practice called Outer Rushen, originating in the Dzog Chen tradition of Tibet, is designed to resolve energy arising from past, unresolved actions and is therefore effective in clearing a way through the fog of superficial emotions and revealing the underlying clarity of the Will.

Since language is intimately connected to consciousness, trying to express the Will in words will tend to an imperfect translation. But movement, like dreaming, is a native language of the unconscious and so can be a direct channel through which it can reveal itself. As we shall see later, the meridians of the Shao Yin, the Kidney and Heart, can guide the movement to specifically reveal the Will rather than the swirling impulses of more superficial emotions.

Once the purpose of the Will is clear, there is still the problem of how to align our Intention with it. The Ling Shu⁴ relates the legs to the body (and to the unconscious mind) and the arms and head to the conscious mind so learning to align the power of the legs with the reach of the upper body gives us the sensation of the Will being in harmony with the Intention. We can use this experience to sense whether we are aligned in the other actions of our life. There are many activities through which we can explore how reach and push can collaborate, such as climbing, dancing and running but the first, archetypal, movement that shows us how to unite the two is the act of crawling. Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen's analysis of crawling patterns⁵ gave me an insight into how meridians are involved in this discovery.

To crawl on his belly, a baby needs to bend his knee but the floor stops the flexion. So he either has to tilt his pelvis or rotate the knee outwards. Bonnie noticed that if a baby gets into the habit of tilting the pelvis then the force from the legs does not travel up the spine. Instead, it travels towards the opposite shoulder, and the upper body needs to pull the movement back into line. (see Method 1 in Fig 1). This creates a feeling of muscular effort, because the force is in a different direction to the intention. Also, because some of the muscular force is being used purely to pull the body back into line, the movement is constrained and laborious.

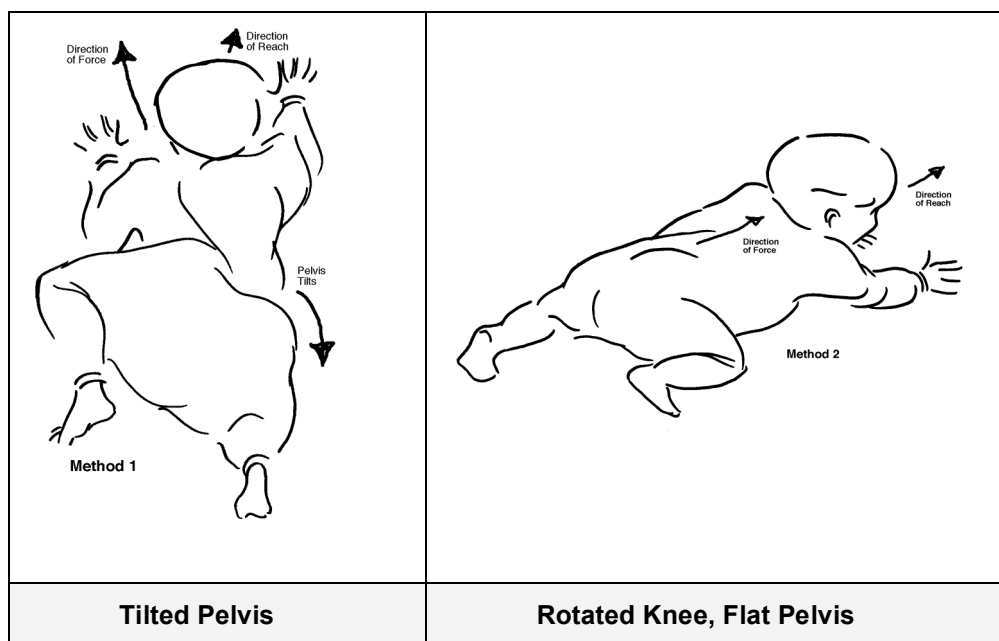


Figure 1: The Act of Crawling

If, on the other hand, a baby initiates the knee flexion by turning the foot and knee outwards, then the leg bends without tilting the pelvis too much. When that leg pushes, most of the force travels straight up the spine, allowing the arm and upper body to reach freely forward instead of having to pull the force into the required direction. This gives a fundamental feeling of clarity and ease.

The lesson to be learned from this analysis is that we can often reach a conscious goal in two ways, one of which aligns with the Will while the other doesn't. We can tell when we are not aligned by the sense of effort we have in our body as we try to pull ourselves back into the direction of our aim. So learning to be sensitive to this tension in the pulling muscles of the upper body is a practical way of sensing if there is a conflict between Will and Intention. As the next section shows, this awareness can be developed by focusing on the parts of the body associated with the Tai Yang channel.

The Tai Yang Channel

The Tai Yang is a zone along the back of the body containing both the Bladder and the Small Intestine Meridians. In this section we will show how the Bladder Meridian guides the alignment of the skeleton so that the force from the legs travels straight up the spine, while the Small Intestine meridian guides the release of the upper body to reach forwards. So the Tai Yang meridians are a team working together to align Will and Intention.

The muscles along the Bladder meridian are not involved in the actual push of the legs. Instead they align the leg so that the force is transmitted into the spine and support the spine to guide the force along its length (see Fig 2.). **It is exactly these muscles that are used to enable the easy method of crawling described above.** The meridian is a *map* showing which muscles must be coordinated to align the whole body in the act of going forward.

This gives physical meaning to the traditional function of the Bladder Meridian as a channel for the Will and it also suggests an explanation of the location of meridians. Muscles know what they are doing locally - they flex an arm or extend a knee - but the nervous system uses these primitive movements as components in higher order movements such as 'going forward towards a goal' or 'reaching for what is needed'. These whole-body movements require a large number of muscles to act together, and I believe that meridians are 'maps' linking the parts of the body that need to collaborate to perform these holistic actions.

We learn to make these complex actions in infancy. My hypothesis, confirmed by two decades of work with infants, is that the Yang meridians are internal maps that guide the development of multi-muscle movements in the first years of life while the Yin meridians are zones which are toned by the energy that underlies and motivates those movements. A more speculative hypothesis is that these early movement patterns cause the fascia to fold at the mid-point of the muscle contraction creating a line of thicker connective tissue running along the traditional line of the meridian. This may

explain the link between fascia thickness and meridians that Helene Langevin and her associates have found at the University of Vermont⁶. As Linda Hartley points out, infant movements do not only develop physical skills, they also give a foundation for mental and emotional capacities⁷. This suggests that Shiatsu works by reconnecting parts of the body along meridians, reminding them of their mutual role in body-mind movements.

In the case of the Bladder Meridian, the whole-body action has an obvious connection to the traditional function of the meridian. However, the relationship of the muscles along the Small Intestine channel to its traditional function is not so clear. These muscles collaborate to facilitate the action of extending the arm forwards. So the meridian is a map of muscles that enable the act of reaching for something. The same muscles are used in their opposite role in the act of pulling the body back and inhibiting the upward flow of movement. So awareness of tension along the meridian is the exactly the sensation we mentioned before which gives a way of feeling when the Will and Intention are in conflict.

While explaining the Small Intestine's traditional function of separating pure energy from impure Claude Larre and Elizabeth Rochat explain that 'pure' means energy that can be assimilated⁸. So if the Small Intestine is not working well, we are in danger if absorbing energy that we cannot assimilate. A psychological example is the way we absorb other people's judgements about us into our self-image. If we are scolded or shamed for our actions, then we later inhibit similar actions by pulling ourselves back saying to ourselves "I shouldn't do that". It is the muscles along the Small Intestine meridian that perform this act of inhibition.

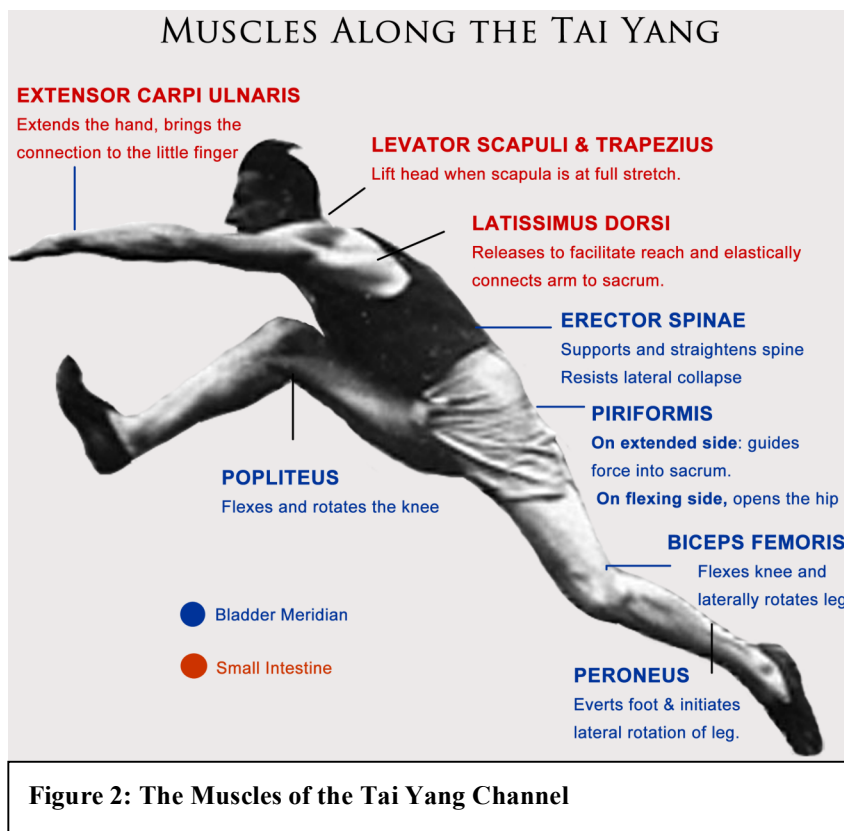


Figure 2: The Muscles of the Tai Yang Channel

Good parents and teachers act as surrogate Small Intestines, helping a child to assimilate society's values into his growing sense of self in such a way that he doesn't have to feel ashamed of his core impulses. But if society instils inhibitions in children rather than teaching them to act skilfully then the muscles along the Small Intestine meridian are used to physically perform the repression. Research⁹ suggests that a teenager's brain neurologically prunes itself to fix this behaviour into the maturing personality. In the process it is possible that they lose sight of their nature and develop a personality that conflicts with the Will. The Shao Yin facilitates our reconnection with our true nature and loosening the domination by social inhibition.



The Shao Yin Channel

The Will is deep and primal which is why it is traditionally said to be an aspect of the Kidney – the source of our deepest impulses. However, if we blindly follow its urges, we soon get into trouble. The art is to be mindful, to be aware of the energy of the Will before launching oneself into action. This awareness is, in Oriental Medicine, the function of the Heart. So the Kidney and the Heart, which together form the Shao Yin, work together to make a bridge between the Will and our conscious Intention.

To me, the Shao Yin channel represents a fountain running up through the core of the body and spraying into and out of the arms and face. Therefore, the channel helps us to be aware of our core impulses by bringing them into the expressive parts of our body. We can use them, as I mentioned before, in Chi Gung and Rushen, to focus spontaneous movement so that it reveals the Will rather than expressing superficial emotion.

The point is that, when one becomes conscious of the energy in the Shao Yin , one becomes aware of excitement *before it gets projected onto a particular target*. It has a purpose but not a specific direction. **This gives us the chance to choose the direction of action so that it is both true to our self and also in harmony with other people.** The awareness of the Heart gives us a chance to use the discrimination of the Small Intestine to find an authentic but socially acceptable way of acting.

Spontaneity is inhibited by fear of other people's disapproval, so that fear is best faced in the company of other people who are taking a risk. One can explore the Shao Yin most easily in the adult equivalent of play groups – for instance: music, singing or dance groups. In that context, fear can even be a useful guide. If we feel scared or embarrassed, the emotion is pinpointing an inhibition of our true self and we have the opportunity to face the fear rather than be frozen by it.

Once we start to feel the Shao Yin revealing our core motivations in our body, we inevitably become conscious of the muscles that are holding us back. It then makes sense to work with the muscles along the Small Intestine meridian to liberate ourselves.

Summary

The Shao Yin channel helps us to be aware of the Will by focusing on core excitement rather than superficial emotions. That awareness allows us to make a choice about the way we act. The Tai Yang positions the body so that Intention and Will are aligned. This gives a physical experience of what it feels like for conscious and unconscious impulses to be working together.

However, if our Intention doesn't listen to the Will, and moves in a really different direction, then we will be in a state of inhibited conflict. The team of meridians in the Tai Yang and Shao Yin act together to align our consciousness with the unconscious so that they are both satisfied. The effect is a sense of ease and liberation.

This is a shortened extract from Bill Palmer's forthcoming book, "The Tiger in the Grove". Bill is also teaching a series of three workshops on Meridian Teams in 2011-2012, and this also forms the central theme of the Postgraduate Diploma in Movement Shiatsu. See www.seed.org/courses for more information.

¹ **Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing** : An English translation is published as The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica by Yang ShouZhong. Blue Poppy Press. ISBN. 0936185961 + my study notes from the original Chinese.

² **The Web that has no Weaver**: Ted Kaptchuk . Contemporary Books. ISBN 080922840

³ **Article by Tara Parker-Pope**, New York Times Dec 31st 2007

⁴ **Ling Shu – The Spiritual Pivot**, translated by Wu JingNuan. University of Hawaii Press 2002

⁵ **Sensing, Feeling and Action**. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Contact Editions 1999 + my lecture notes from a 1989 seminar in Berlin with Bonnie.

⁶ **Mechanical signaling through connective tissue: a mechanism for the therapeutic effect of acupuncture**. Langevin H, Churchill D, Cipolla M. The FASEB Journal 2001; 15:2275- 2280.

⁷ **Wisdom of the Body Moving**. Linda Hartley, North Atlantic Books. 1989, 1995

⁸ **The Secret Treatise of the Spiritual Orchid**: Larre & Rochat, 1992b,

⁹ **Rebels with a Cause** : by John McCrone , New Scientist , 22 January 2000