

# The Coordinating Function

In the last article I talked about our source of spontaneity that the Chinese call the Kidney. This is our Inner Child, the initiator, the origin of the primal impulses that animate our life.

In this issue, I am focusing on how we modulate our impulses. How we can integrate our multiple desires to create a single choice. How we can deal with potential conflict creatively. The ability to do this is what Chinese medicine calls the energy of the Liver. I include within this the related energy of the Gall Bladder

Traditionally the Liver is the holistic function of “Smoothing the flow of energy”. However, described like this it is a mystery. **How** do we “smooth the flow”? An acupuncturist’s answer might be to stimulate various points on the body but, although this may work, it does not increase our self-awareness. Our energy is being manipulated by the acupuncturist’s needles and, even if we stimulate those points ourselves, we are not integrating this function into our *sense* of being. We perceive the Liver by its absence (conflict, irritation and indecisiveness) because we don’t know how to practically evoke its presence.

In order to take charge of this function in ourselves and learn how to deal with conflicting impulses we have to experience the mechanisms of Liver action in our bodies. This is the subject of this article.

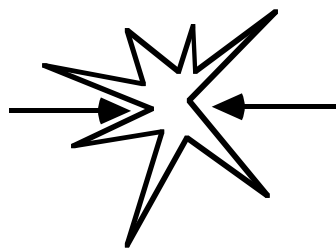
I first became aware of the possibility of embodying the Liver through movement 12 years ago when I started learning Feldenkrais’ method of Awareness through Movement. His movements induce a sense of natural ease and coordination in normal actions like walking, sitting and breathing. Underlying his method is the repatterning of movement by increasing the possible responses of the central nervous system. Instead of fighting habits to force ‘correct’ patterns, small movements stimulate the proprioceptive sensory system to create a wider image of the body in the cortex of the brain, thus providing more choice.

I used this principle of widening choice to develop the mode of work I call Liver Touch. Essentially, whenever there are two complementary forces acting in the body or mind, they can either act in conflict or, by widening the context in which they act, they can discover a common motivation and so resolve the conflict. This seems to me to also be a practical method for dealing with interpersonal and intercultural conflict. Such pairs of forces, which can either be in conflict or collaboration, I call *complements*.

Lately, Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen has shown me some very beautiful ways of engaging both sides of complements found at joints and I include these as examples of Liver Touch in this article. Her work is also based on the principle of extending choice rather than fighting habit.

Habits are often useful, how would you walk if you had to consciously stimulate each muscle in turn? However, if we stick with our habitual behaviour even when our circumstances change then we find ourselves acting inappropriately and conflict arises. This is why change is stressful and why we often resist it, attempting to rigidly control our environment to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, compared to most other animals, humans have the most potential to adapt to new situations. We are finely balanced between the animal’s resistance to change and the spirit’s fluid capacity for mutability. On our skill in dealing with conflict rests the evolution of the human soul.

So what possible ways are there of dealing with conflict? One of the most common is to fight. In energy terms, a fight is complements meeting head on and competing for dominance. This situation we can call a ‘Shoot-Out’



The Shoot-Out  
*One winner, one loser.  
The winner suppresses the loser.  
e.g. “Don’t DO that!”*

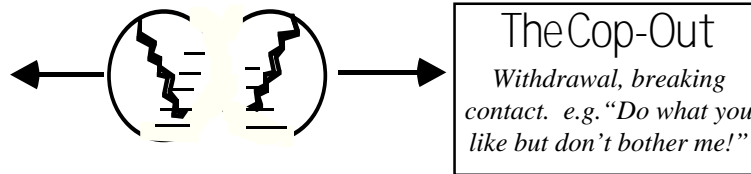
When a Shoot-Out happens internally one part of ourselves becomes the oppressive winner over another part. Self-suppression is a common strategy for dealing with internal conflict which probably originates in childhood. Children have difficulty modulating their impulses and rely on parental help to channel their energy and to find their way out of emotional turmoil. However, if the parents’ own way of dealing with conflict is the Shoot-Out then they often try to control and suppress the child’s behaviour instead of helping him direct his energy.

As we grow up, we try to control ourselves in the same way to gain the approval of the adult world. We soon learn to perceive our own life force as threatening to this carefully regulated environment. We become our own parents and are infected by fear of spontaneity. We suppress our own impulses, controlling energy rather than choosing a direction for it to flow.

The underlying forces driving self-suppression are felt as Shame and Guilt. Both these emotions seem to originate through adult disapproval of the child’s urges. The child reacts to this disapproval by feeling “I am not good enough as I am” from which it is a short step to “I must change who I am”. He cannot develop the core feeling of self-validity which is the solid basis for a healthy Spleen. This often gives rise to a personality common in Britain: ruled by an anxious ego (the internalised parent), often confused by rebellious impulses (naughty children) which sometimes break out of control and run riot.

## The Cop-Out

Another way in which we can deal with conflict is to ignore it. This leads to:



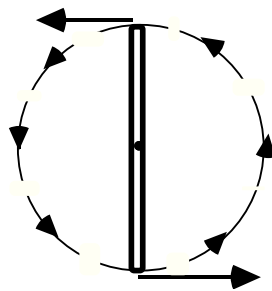
The result of the Cop-Out strategy in a family is that the child is always *reaching* for the contact he doesn't get rather than *pushing* against suppressive forces, as in the Shoot-Out. Instead of shrinking smaller under external pressure he expands further and further out to try and meet the boundary of another person until his sense of self is lost in the vacuum.

Such a child may be creative, impulsive, alive and wild but lacks the grounding experience of relationship. Faced with the demands of another person he doesn't know what to do. He's wanted cake for so long that when he gets it he doesn't know how to eat it, he only knows how to want it.

This person's life force is visible but has no centre- Kidney without Spleen - and is therefore terribly insecure. The balloon can easily burst leaving a forlorn, lost soul floating in outer space.

## The Middle Way

Both ways of dealing with conflict lead to disaster because they are based on the idea that opposites can't collaborate. But luckily there is a third path, a middle way between the extremes. This is the function of the Liver:



The Roundabout  
*Two opposites become complementary parts of the same process by finding a common centre. Co-Existence with Contact and Collaboration*

This picture may be more familiar as a more ancient symbol:



This symbol of the Tao, as well as picturing the movement of the roundabout around its centre, incorporates the view that opposites contain each other, are necessary to each other because they only exist in relationship to each other.

So conflict can be resolved by realising that your viewpoint only exists in relationship to other complementary ones. In Gestalt psychology, if an issue is in the foreground of consciousness, it is called the figure. But just as the figure in a drawing cannot exist without the background, so the issue cannot be resolved in isolation. To shift viewpoints so that the background is equally important to the figure is often the key to therapeutic or spiritual transformation.

One particular client taught me this many years ago. Let us call her Ann and change the circumstances slightly to protect her identity. Ann came to me, very stiff, frustrated and stressed. Her boy-friend, for whom she had left everything, had become impotent as soon as she had committed herself to him. She was furious with him and felt powerless to change his fears about intimacy. One session, when we had been working with her own feelings about relationship, she discovered a deep terror of intimacy in herself which she had not been aware of because her boyfriend was doing the job of "keeping the distance". Not only did she understand and feel compassion for him after this session, but the same night her boyfriend lost his impotency and they started a good sexual relationship. She told me afterwards that she had not talked about the session with him before the change took place.

In the foreground of this conflict was her anger, which she felt was justified since she had “left everything to commit herself to him”. In the background was her own fear of closeness which her boyfriend was saving her from feeling by doing the withdrawing for both of them. When she could feel her own shadow feelings, he was no longer trapped in the conflict, no longer felt himself to be the one at fault and could feel close to her. By finding their underlying unity (*the fear of being together!*), they could, paradoxically, come together.

The key to this process in general is what Buddha called compassion. This is more than just mutual understanding or sympathy; it is fully realising that both forces are part of the same unified field and thus necessarily co-exist. In psychosynthesis therapy, the client is encouraged to experience all her different impulses as the actions of subpersonalities, masks which the central Soul-Self (not the Ego) can choose to adopt. By identifying with the Self rather than trying to reconcile all the different subpersonalities, one can find a central place where true choice is possible. The energies behind the different individual impulses can all be used in a mutually chosen direction. The Liver functions in a similar way to this Soul-Self, as a centre through which different directions can integrate, which maybe why the Chinese located the soul in the Liver.

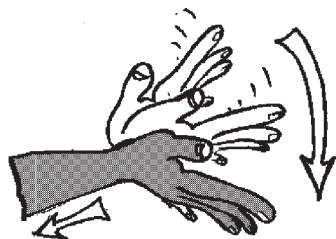
### So how does this apply to Oriental Body Therapies?

Freud said “Anatomy is Destiny”. This expresses the way that the energy patterns occurring in our behaviour and emotions solidify into structures of the body, fixing those tendencies into set habits. They become our sense of self.

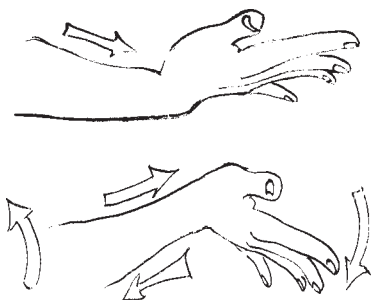
But this is also the key to change. By repatterning the movements and tensions of the body we provide a physical environment in which transformation of energy can take place without being pulled back by the gravitational force of past habits. My experience is that it is through meridians that we can start this repatterning process that involves both Mind and Body.

To see how this applies to the Liver I suggest you try an experiment which will also explain why the Liver and Gall Bladder meridians are where tradition says they are.

Stretch both your hands out in front of you so that your palms face up and your elbows are slightly bent.



- Become aware of the underside of your forearms and feel how, by contracting the muscles in this part of your arm (*Extensor carpi radialis and ulnaris*), the hands are pulled down.
- Do this a few times quickly and experience what is happening in the wrist joints. Also experience what the Mind of the movement is, what are you doing emotionally with this movement?



- Now start in same position and think first of initiating movement by lengthening the muscles along the upper side of the forearm (**Lengthening the Flexor muscles**)
- Repeat this a few time and again notice your wrist joint. What do you feel you are **doing** with this movement? Is the rest of the arm and the body involved in a different way to the first one ?

Most people feel that, in the first movement, the wrist joint is tightened back towards the arm as the hand is pulled down while, in the second, the movement is smoother, the wrist joint feels open and free. In the first they have the emotional feeling of throwing something away or dismissing something. In the second they have the feeling of giving or offering something. Also, the rest of the arm becomes involved in the motion and, more subtly, the whole of the body.

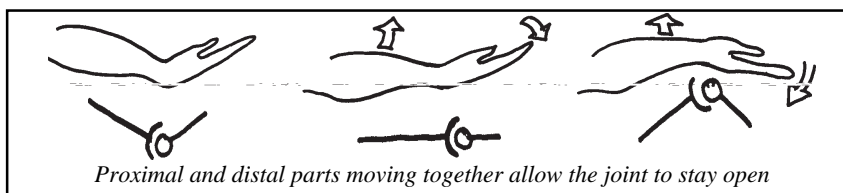
In all movements at a joint, one group of muscles are the *prime movers*, the agonists, and one are the *facilitators*, the antagonists. They are complements which cooperate by the agonists contracting while the antagonists lengthen. The way in which they lengthen is very significant. In this culture we are pre-conditioned to think of the movers as being the only important part. However, this is perpetuating the unintegrated Shoot-Out strategy within our own body. Contraction is dominant and lengthening is perceived as passive. This produces a tense, contracted state of self-experience. If we pay more attention to the allowing side of action then both agonists and antagonists are actively involved and the internal experience is more spacious and harmonious. We are repatterning our muscles to embody the Roundabout Strategy by engaging *both* directions within the act of moving the joint.

To me, this explains why the Liver and Gall-Bladder meridians run along the junction between the Flexor and the Extensor muscle

groups and many points on those meridians like GB 41,40,34, 30, 25, 22, 20, 12, 8, 1 and LIV 2,3,4, 7,8 are pivots for different flexor/extensor movement patterns. They are the body's focus for integrating the back and the front.

However, in working with Liver energy we do not have to explicitly make contact with the meridians. Whenever something is happening in the body or mind in which two things interact, then learning to involve both aspects equally is training our Liver energy. That is why working with joints is so effective in making contact with this function. At a joint not only are the agonists and antagonists complements but also the proximal and distal parts of the joint.

To explain this, recall the experiment with your wrists, you probably noticed that in the first type of movement- that which emphasised contraction- only the hand moved. In the second type of movement, where both agonists and antagonists were equally involved, the forearm moved as well as the hand. In fact, the forearm moved up as the hand moved down and vice versa, like this:



The part of a joint nearest the body centre is called proximal, the part furthest away is called distal. In this case the hand is distal and the forearm is proximal. Moving the proximal part tends to involve the whole body and, as babies, we tend to initiate intentional movement proximally. As we grow up we tend to disconnect the body at the joints and mainly move the distal part. I feel this is physically how we gain the experience of separating ourselves into Mind and Body, into doer and done-with.

The technique of re-engaging both proximal and distal sides of a joint is a good example of Liver work originating in Body Mind Centering. It automatically teaches the muscle groups to collaborate. I find these movements very beautiful and full of grace. They demonstrate a general principle of how to work with complements: whenever two complements are in conflict one is usually dominated by the other. **The general principle is to initiate action with the subordinate complement.** For example, in the case of a joint, it is common for the distal side to dominate the proximal. If this is the case, the principle says to initiate the work from the proximal side.

*To get a taste of it, try holding a partner's arm with one hand either side of the wrist. Move the joint as in the last diagram, consciously moving the forearm up as the hand moves down and vice versa. Following the general principle above, initiate the movement from the forearm since it, being proximal to the wrist, is probably the subordinate complement. Imagine both sides of the joint to be rotating round each other. Move the joint a few times. You should find it melts under your hands and the movement becomes very smooth and easy.*

This physical technique is often effective with chronic arthritic problems, by teaching the joint to remain open and lubricated you can help the person to avoid triggering the acute symptoms of the arthritis and give the joint breathing space for healing to take place.

However, the most important aspect of this work for me is that it is a physical symbol of how to collaborate with ourselves and others. If two complementary aspects of ourselves learn to be mutually engaged, then a clear direction can be chosen. This gives us a feeling of what it's like to act without internal conflict.

## What is Liver Touch?

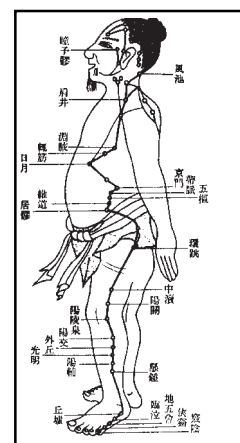
The physical techniques in Liver Touch and Movement Shiatsu such as the joint work described above, bring the whole body together into integrated movement and liberate blockage points where disconnection can occur. Examples of these are the joints and the horizontal structures such as the menisci of the knee, the pelvic floor, the thoracic diaphragm, the vocal diaphragm and the hyoid bone.

But, just as the proximal sides of joints are getting involved in the movement, so is the client is becoming engaged within the therapeutic process.

If you are simply diagnosing and treating meridians, then this magic is inaccessible to a client. If they become active through movement, breathing and dialogue, then they are empowered in their own healing. They become the self-healer and you are the facilitator rather than the initiator of the process. Another way of saying this is that, within a normal doctor - patient relationship, the doctor is the dominant complement. Liver Touch is the form of contact which initiates the therapy from the subordinate complement - the client. This relationship is normal in psychotherapy and in forms of bodywork such as Feldenkrais' and Alexander's Techniques but is unusual within the context of Shiatsu and Chinese Medicine.

This emphasises how the Six Forms of Touch are forms of relationship as well as techniques. Spleen Touch focuses on what *is* rather than what could be. Kidney Touch is the act of encouraging the person to enter their own spontaneous process. Liver Touch is the art of involving the client in what's going on.

Sessions are more like 'lessons' than 'treatments'. You stop being a parent-doctor helping a child-victim and start to become one adult offering a helping hand to another



The Gall Bladder Meridian