

Infant Development & the Three Families

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Meridians and Infant Movement Development

Starting in 1980 and for the next 15 years, I specialised in working with children with various disabilities and collaborated with several physiotherapists and speech therapists. In the process, we made hundreds of hours of video documenting different aspects of infant movement development. I was also privileged to learn from and collaborate with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the founder of Body-Mind Centeringⁱ.

Bonnie's research suggested that specific infant movements influence the development of particular aspects of personality. For example, if a baby learns to move forward in a way that feels efficient and easy then they may develop a personality that takes initiative, forms goals and acts on them. On the other hand, difficulty with moving forward as a baby may develop a more passive personality, whose preference is to ask others to act rather than doing it for themselves.

In our research, I was excited to observe that, in the first year of life, the development of particular movements exactly followed the paths of the traditional Chinese meridians. More general explanations of meridian pathways, such as Masunaga's amoeba model, just gave a poetic reason why the channels were found in a general area. In contrast, we found that the muscles performing particular movements were progressively activated along the detailed track of a meridian. For instance, some of the first movements to develop are all to do with getting nourishment and support from the outer world. Feeding reflexes are stimulated by touching points on the Stomach meridian in the faceⁱⁱ. The processes of sucking and swallowing also follow this meridian down the throat. Then its track down the torso and into the legs follows the line along which the Tonic Labyrinthine Reflex develops which tonifies the parts of the body facing downwards and therefore receives active support from the ground.

When I combined Bonnie's theory with our research I found that, for each developmental movement, **the quality of Mind she associated with it matched the traditional function of the meridian that traced its development**ⁱⁱⁱ. For me, this connection gave a really satisfying validation of and explanation of meridians. The point of this article is to tell the story of how this research led to deeper insights about the Combined Meridians, often called the Six Divisions, and how that led to the development of the theory of the Three Families^{iv}.

Infant Development and the Six Combined Meridians

In general, infant movement develops from the centre out to the periphery and from the head down to the feet. For instance, the ability to push against the ground first develops in the torso, then the arms and then in the legs. The muscles that develop the arm pushing run along the Large Intestine meridian. However, when this pushing movement develops in the torso and legs, the muscles that perform the movement run along the Stomach meridian. So both the Stomach and Large Intestine meridians seem to guide the ability to push and, traditionally, they join to form one of the Combined Channels called the Yang Ming.

These movements also develop the mental capacity to push away things that are not wanted. In the picture, you see the Rejection Gesture which is an archetypal movement performed by muscles along the Large Intestine meridian. But the capacity to *Pushing Away* is learned physically by movements associated with the whole of the Combined Channel, not just the arm part of it.



Similarly, the movements of Reach-and-Pull (or suck) develop along both the Stomach meridian in the head and in the Large Intestine meridian in the arm and hand. So the function of the Stomach Qi, which reaches for nourishment and support and takes it in, is also developed through movements associated with the whole Yang Ming Meridian. This picture shows a “Reach-to-Pull” movement which is an expression of Stomach Qi but the extension is performed by muscles along the Large Intestine meridian.

In summary, the Yang Ming is an energetic collaboration where the Stomach aspect reaches out to contact the outer world and receives support from it while the Large Intestine pushes against this support to individuate, to separate and to push away those parts that are not needed. Putting them together one can see the YangMing has a combined function of “Maintaining Clear Boundaries”, which is a fundamental necessity of all life. If your boundaries are clear then you only reach for what you really need and you can push away or let go of what you don’t need.

The Families

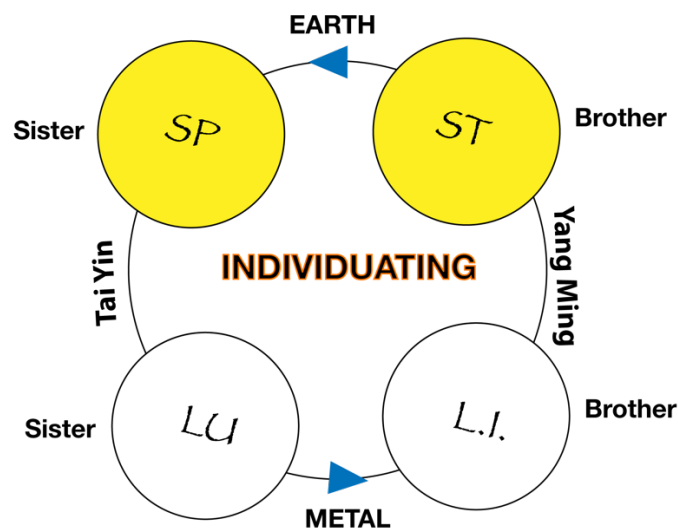
The Yang Ming is yang – meaning that both Stomach and Large Intestine are active functions and their action impinges on the outer world. Each of the traditional Combined Meridians is either a combination of two Yang meridians or two Yin ones. However, the developmental ‘movements’ associated with the Yin pathways are internal processes rather than outer actions.

For instance, the Spleen meridian traces the development of muscle tone (both skeletal and smooth). When standing, tone in one part of the body supports the structures above it and the Spleen meridian traces the path of self-support. If the flesh lacks tone then extra muscles have to be used to hold the body up and there is an internal sense of collapse that may express itself emotionally as depression or tiredness. This ‘flesh toning’ process creates a sense of expansion and spaciousness in the body.

As the body fills, the expansion continues into the space around it and the movement opens the arms, spiralling down the Lung meridian. Traditionally the Spleen and Lung form another of the Combined Meridians called the Tai Yin. So whereas the Yang Ming forms our boundaries, the expansive processes of the Tai Yin fill them. The Spleen filling the body and the Lung filling our personal space.



This twinning of the Yang Ming with the Tai Yin is an example of what has come to be called a Meridian Family and we call this one the **Individuating Family** whose task is to help us BE an individual, clearly defining the difference between Self and Other.



When I first started writing about the relationship between meridians and movement, I used the term 'Team' instead of 'Family' but after attending one of my courses, Peter den Dekker suggested that I use the term 'Family' since it expressed the Yin-Yang complementarity as well as the supportive collaboration. The term stuck and spread and is now used in several styles of Shiatsu but with a very different emphasis to that used in Movement Shiatsu.

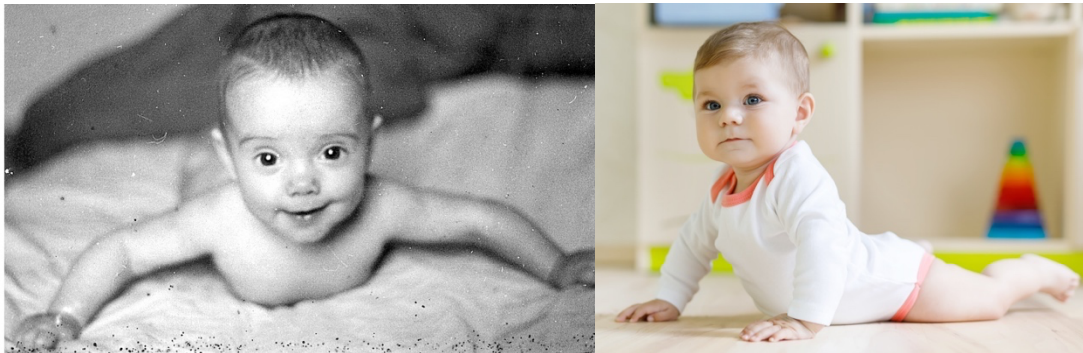
As well as the *Individuating Family* there are two other groups of four meridians which form families in a similar way. The process of development seems to spiral through these families, emphasising one theme at a time with the others in the background. Each Family connects two of the Elements as well as integrating the Yin and Yang Combined Meridians.

The Individuating Family – 0-3 months

In the first three months of life, the baby is gradually learning to use individual groups of muscles to perform 'intentional movement'. The activation of the muscles creates a general muscle tone which fills out the body; you could say that the baby's mind is filling the body,

learning to call it her own. This first phase is about learning to live in the body separated from the mother. Learning to eat, to breath and to excrete. So at a very physical level, the Qi of the Organs in the Individuating Family are dominant in this time.

As we have mentioned before, during this phase the baby starts to push against the ground to start the long journey to standing. At first they use expansion along the Stomach meridian in the torso to lift the head and then use the muscles along the Large Intestine meridian to push with the arms, lifting the chest and abdomen off the ground. These pushing movements also enhance the sensation of the whole body preparing for the next stage.



The Integrating Family – 4-6 months

From about four months the baby starts a new phase where she is joining together individual movements into whole body actions. This phase starts with movements inwards towards the midline. As well as connecting left and right, she develops movements which connect arms and legs so that all four limbs connect through to a central focus in the solar plexus. These connections take place along muscles and fascia which follow the Liver meridian in the legs and the Pericardium meridian in the arms. The Liver and Pericardium meridians form a Combined meridian called the **Jue Yin** whose deeper function is to connect all the parts of the body together and help them form a single organism. One result of this phase is that the baby can sit unassisted.





After this phase is underway, she starts to cross the midline with reaching movements which result in the whole body rolling over. These movements are spirals and the muscles that perform the connections follow the Gall Bladder meridian and, in the arms and head, also follow the Triple Heater meridian. These two form the Combined Meridian called the **Shao Yang**, whose deeper function is to help the body to ACT as a unified organism. In the process the agonists and antagonists learn to

collaborate with each other in performing whole body movements. This is necessary for the next stage which uses this coordination to move through space^v.

The Jue Yin and Shao Yang combine into what we call the **Integrating Family** whose overall function is to facilitate connection, resolve conflict and develop integration.

The Motivation Family

The next phase of early infancy usually takes place between five and nine months. The Integrating Family movements have resulted in a coordination between flexors and extensors, between legs and arms and between left and right sides of the body. One of the side effects of this is that the baby develops stereoscopic vision through the coordination of both eyes and as a result starts to focus her vision on things that are far away.

In this new stage, her curiosity and interest in things outside her reach lead to a desire to move towards them. These urges energise her body like a fountain following the Kidney and Heart meridians which together form the **Shao Yin Combined Meridian**. Its deep meaning is that the primal life energy (represented by the Kidney) transforms into conscious intention, (Consciousness being the domain of the Heart in Chinese Medicine).



The intention is usually accompanied by a reach with the arms towards the object. This reach is very different from the reach and pull movements of the YangMing; the arm is extended by muscles running along the Small Intestine meridian which connects the arms into the spine.

At the same time the eyes lead a reach from the head towards the

object energising the Bladder meridian in the neck and back. The Bladder and Small Intestine together form a Combined Meridian called the **Tai Yang**. For a while, I thought that the function of the movements along TaiYang was to move the baby forward, but I soon realised that the push from the legs and thus the motive power for the movement comes

from the YangMing muscles. However, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's analysis of belly crawling showed me that the muscles along the Bladder meridian **align the skeleton** so that the push from the legs moves the body in the same direction as the reach from the arm and the eyes. So the deep meaning of the TaiYang is to align the Action with the Intention, not to make the movement itself. Together the TaiYang and Shao Yin form a Family which facilitates both the creation of Intention and Aligns the skeleton so that the movement goes in the desired direction^{vi}. So we call it the **Motivation Family**.

The Second Cycle of Development

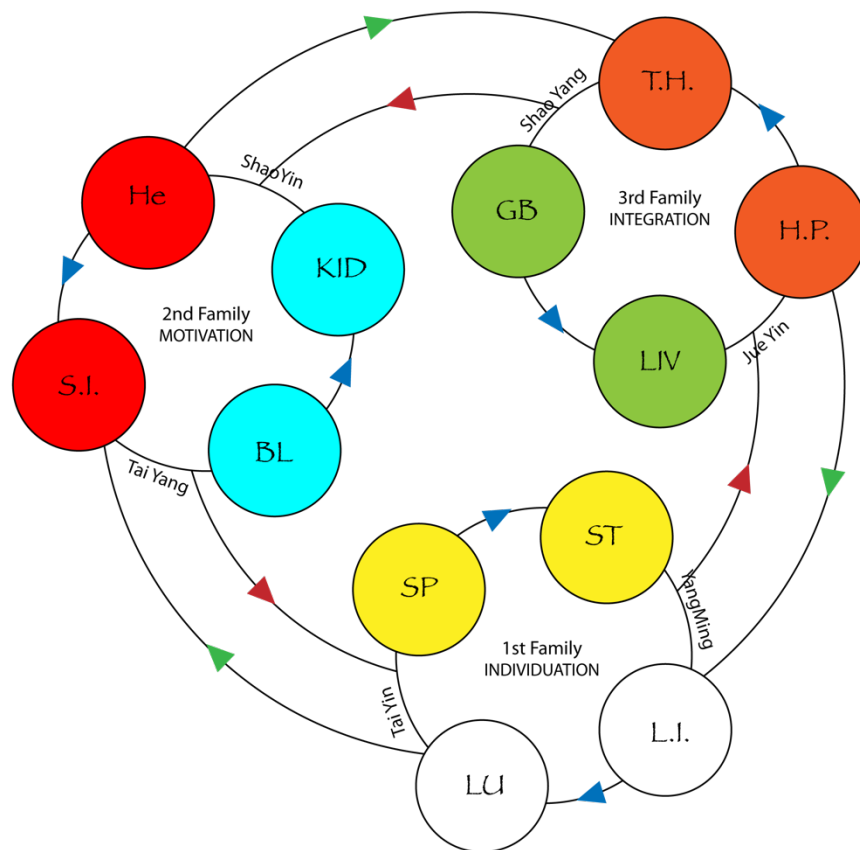
During the first nine months of life, the baby is learning through movement, which gives a physical basis for the development of the more general Qi-functions that span both body and mind. Of course, the baby is developing psychologically as well, but the physical process is in the foreground. After this first 'physical' sequence, development continues both physically and psychologically but the psychological aspect becomes more pronounced. The following phases also cycle through the Families, but in the other direction.

The first phase in the second cycle goes back to the **Individuating Family** which facilitates what Erik Eriksson calls the development of Autonomy^{vii}. Physically this means that the baby's body can support itself in standing and walking, psychologically she is exploring boundaries, pushing against the strictures of the outer world to define the concept of *Other*. However, at this stage she does not seem to have a concept of Self. It seems that her Will develops first, expanding outwards and defining a part of the world which she can control.

Then, usually in the fourth year, between the ages of 3 and 4, she makes the leap into first person self-awareness. The part of the world that she can control, defined by the previous stage, quite suddenly becomes a Self and she starts speaking about herself in the first person. In Eriksson's model she has moved into the phases of Initiative and Industry, where she becomes aware of her own motivations, develops defined intentions and acts on them. This indicates she has moved into the **Motivation Family** again

From about age 7 onwards, she becomes more interested in other children and starts to develop real friendships rather than the type of disinterested playmate relationships of younger children. This culminates during early teenaging into what Eriksson calls the development of **Identity**, where she tries to develop a way of being that integrates personal interests and the pressures of her peer group. Both physically and psychologically the focus is on relationship and integration so, in this phase, she is exploring the **Integration Family** again. This brings us to the end of the Second Cycle of development and the story so far can be pictured in the following diagram.

► Physical Cycle 0-9 months ► Psychological Cycle +9 month ► Meridian Cycles



The Families as Classrooms

I see each Family as expressing human dilemmas that act as challenges through which we learn to develop physically, mentally and spiritually.

The **Individuation Family** challenges us to be authentic, to define clear boundaries between Self and Other and to fully embody our nature. This does not mean that we reject others but we can clearly express our needs without expectation that another must fulfil them and, in reverse, can hear other people's desires without feeling obligated to satisfy them.

The **Motivation Family** challenges us to stay aware of our core spirit, by which I mean those passions and interests that come from deep within us and are not things we feel we *should* do because of other people's expectations. In this culture, the process of becoming adult often squashes this core spirit and we become dominated by how we should behave, losing the source of joy and creativity that comes from spontaneity.

The **Integration Family** challenges us to transcend conflicts and become whole. These conflicts could be internal conflicts such as parts of the body not working together or conflicts between our deeper urges and our social environment.

Defining the Families in this way reveals that they all focus on one essential dilemma in human life – how to be an authentic individual at the same time as being in harmonious relationship with other people and the environment.

In some way, I feel this is the meaning of human life. I have a fantasy that the whole universe is conscious, but that this sea of consciousness cannot learn, cannot experience itself and cannot experience new things without separating from the universal and condensing into an individual. Every individual being is a different way in which the universe plays, learns and develops. Our lifelong development, meeting the challenges of the Families, is contributing to the development of the universe and, when we die, maybe we dissolve back into the sea of consciousness taking what we have learned in our life back into the universal.

Bill Palmer and Teresa Hadland will be teaching three workshops in Australia in January and February 2023 on how to use movement within Shiatsu practice to empower the client and help them to work on themselves. Working with movement as well as with touch helps the client to be an active explorer rather than a passive patient. But also, because movement forms the foundation of the development of Qi, they can use it to revisit developmental stages that they have missed, or forgotten. The third course goes more deeply into working with the Three Families. Contact: info@australianshiatsucollege.com.au for more information

ⁱ Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen – Sensing, Feeling and Action - Contact Editions 1999

ⁱⁱ Grzywinski, C. (2016). "[Role of early-childhood reflexes in the psychomotor development of a child, and in learning](#)". *Acta Neuropsychologica*. **14**

ⁱⁱⁱ Bill Palmer – Meridians as Pathways of Movement Development (Parts 1 & 2) – Journal of Shiatsu and Oriental Body Therapies – Issue 1 and 3

^{iv} Bill Palmer – The Six Combined Channels – Journal of Shiatsu and Oriental Body Therapy – Issue 5 - https://www.seed.org/articles/the_six_channels.pdf

^{vi} Bill Palmer - Riding the Will – Journal of Shiatsu Society - https://www.seed.org/articles/riding_the_will.pdf

^{vii} Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.