

The Three Families

by Bill Palmer

The Six Divisions and Infant Movement Development

In several previous articlesⁱⁱⁱ I have described how research into the development of infant movement gives a really satisfying explanation of the pathway of the twelve Organ meridians. Meridians seem to guide the development of particular archetypal movements that teach the baby physical skills. These form the foundation for developing the personality during childhood. The icing on the cake is that these body-mind capacities correspond extremely closely to the traditional Qi of the meridian.

Although a particular meridian initiates the development of a particular movement skill, the same skill is learned in the other limb guided by a meridian traditionally associated with the first through the Six Divisions. Thus the Six Divisions seem to be the real drivers of development, not the individual meridians.

For instance, the Stomach and the Large Intestine combine to form the Yang Ming Division. In this energetic collaboration the Stomach reaches out to contact the outer world to pull something in to satisfy a need. The Large Intestine movement pushes out, excreting unwanted energy and stopping parts of the outer world entering the organism 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 out or let go of that which you don’t need.

The Families

The subject of this article is the Three Families each of which combine two of the Six Divisions into a collaborating unit. Each Family has a combined purpose which turns out to be a very general life skill. I find that if you are working with a particular life issue, and can relate it to one of the Families, that it is useful and necessary to work with all of the meridians in that Family even if the issue seems to be with just one of them.

When I first started to work with these groupings I used to call them ‘Teams’ but, after attending one of my courses, Peter den Dekker suggested that I call them ‘Families’ because the functions have a sort of brother-sister relationship. The word stuck and started to be used by other teachers in Europe, but they use different names for the groups like Front, Back and Side Families which reflect the area of the body on which the meridians are found.

Movement Shiatsu focuses on activating and developing the full potential of a person, whatever that may be. Instead of seeing problems as difficulties to be removed, it sees chronic issues as opportunities to develop the spirit. Each of the Families deals with a dimension of life: Being, Acting and Relating. Most of the chronic problems for which people come to therapy can be seen as blockages to one of these. But they can also be seen as challenges to be explored and through which one can develop. For instance, a physical disability can be seen as a block to Action, you can feel like a victim to it in that you can’t do certain movements. On the other hand, it provides a challenge which can strengthen the

spirit, finding your unique way of moving, exploring how to express your inner being with the body that you have. If the therapy focuses on the problem then it perpetuates the victim state, but if it, instead, explores how to use your abilities to be best of your potential then it doesn't matter whether the disability remains or not.

I find that the Families provide tools and opportunities for exploration which take people out of their victim state and into their potential. A Family consists of two Yang meridians (one of the Six Divisions) with two Yin ones (the complementary Yin Division) so they combine two Divisions and two of the Elements into one dynamic unit. So if one or two meridian functions are in difficulty, the others in the Family can support them and help them be valued as they are and integrate into the organism.

1: The Individuating Family – Defining Self and Other

The Stomach and Large Intestine, together forming the Yang Ming Division, are both Yang : they facilitate an action in the world. But each has a Yin partner, the Spleen and the Lung. The combination of Spleen and Lung traditionally form the Tai Yin Division.

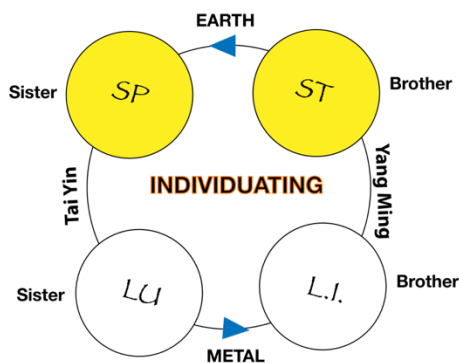
The wellbeing function which is called the Spleen in Chinese Medicine is not obviously connected to the organ of the same name. It is the capacity of the body to receive nourishment and for the flesh to be toned. This 'toning of the flesh' means cells and organs energised and that the nervous system is activating muscles even when they are not being used for movement. 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. But, when this function is working well, it 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. 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 the **Individuating Family** whose task is to help us fully BE ourselves, clearly defining the difference between Self and Other.



Life is special. One of the most fundamental laws of physics says that energy tends to dissipate and its ability to do things diminishes as it turns into random heat. Living organisms (that we know about) all have a dynamic boundary, inside which this tendency is reversed and organisation is created rather than dissipated. The boundary is necessary, otherwise the chaotic nature of the non-living environment would swamp it. But it also needs to allow for communication between self and other.



For us humans, we need emotional and mental boundaries as well as our physical skin. In this culture, we are continually being bombarded by opinions in the media and advertisements telling us what we need, telling us how we should behave. We often find it difficult to know what we really need, to ask for it, to

say no to things that are toxic. This is the challenge of the Individuating Family, to learn to resist those messages, to take charge of our own boundaries but, at the same time, to remain in relationship.

2: The Creative Family – Aligning Intention and Action with the Core Spirit

Where do creative ideas come from? A multitude of artists, academics, writers all say the same thingⁱⁱⁱ. They might spend a long time thinking about something but the creative spark always happens when they relax and let the mind wander. If you watch your mind carefully, you will almost certainly notice that new thoughts don't seem to come from an act of will. They pop up like bubbles. After they bubble up, you might deliberately follow up that idea in a rational manner but the new idea almost always comes by itself. So, as Daniel Kahneman says^{iv}, we operate in at least two different modes. One is the creative and intuitive mode where ideas, feelings and thoughts just pop up. The other is slow, focused and deliberate thinking.

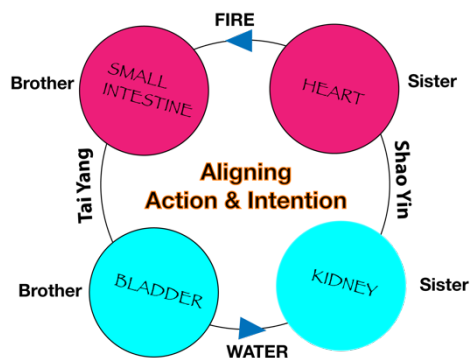
In Movement Shiatsu, we don't just view the self to have two modes, but a multitude – an inner community, each of which has its own intelligence and perception. Our inner organs have intelligence and perception but we are not usually conscious of them. Every cell is continually solving problems and perceiving its environment but they are even deeper in our unconscious. In the other direction, we are like organs and cells in the group-consciousness called Humanity. Maybe Humanity is not aware of us as individuals just as we are not aware of the intelligence of our cells. The unconscious is huge, extending down to the smallest parts of us and up to possibly include the whole universe.

Our normal sense of self is very small and is usually overly concerned with how we are perceived by others. As Ian McGilchrist^v says, the left hemisphere of the brain has grown a sense of self which is looking for previous patterns, asking "What should I do according to my memory of past situations?" or "What did other people do in my position?". This part of ourselves has very little access to the vast creative unconscious and very often, its insistence on looking good to others squashes our spontaneity, our creativity and our core spirit.

The next Family of meridians is concerned with maintaining a channel of communication between the creative unconscious and the social self. In Chinese Medicine, the function they

call the Kidney represents the primal life energy, the unconscious urges which emanate from our DNA and our bodily intelligence. The Shao Yin channel links this to the Heart, which represents our consciousness. So the function of the Shao Yin is to bring the creative unconscious into our awareness and thus to give voice to our core spirit. The Yang part of this family, the Bladder and the Small Intestine, (forming the Tai Yang Division), combine to align our actions with our this core self^{vi}.

I think that the most unremarked role in this family is the function of the Small Intestine meridian. In Chinese medicine, the Small Intestine is the capacity to discriminate between



things we can assimilate and things that we can't.

This is often used to describe the process of extracting nourishment from food. Those parts of the food that we can use are absorbed and those parts that are useless are passed to the Large Intestine to excrete. But I think the Small Intestine is a deeper capacity which is particularly vital for human beings. Humans are social creatures and our big brains are specially adapted to read the desires and expectations of other people. This means that

our actions are stimulated both by inner impulses and by pressure from other people. We can comply with many of those outer demands without a problem, but there are other pressures that are toxic to us and which would squash our core spirit. It is the ability to discriminate between these two that is called the Small Intestine Qi. If it is working well then we can act wholeheartedly and authentically. If it is not then we find ourselves in internal conflict, feeling that we have to inhibit and hide our true self.

So all the four meridians in the **Creative Family** work together to give us access to our full potential energy. We can then act authentically, courageously, creatively and with joy.

3: The Integrating Family – Harmonising the Inner Community

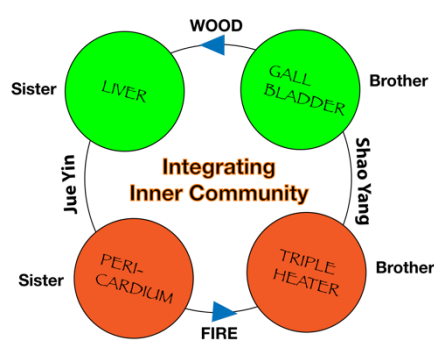
As I said before, we are not just one self. Sometimes we feel vulnerable, sometimes we are full of fun and spontaneity, sometimes serious and responsible. Each part of us can be seen as a separate person. So inevitably there will be clashes between these different members of our multiple self.

In fact, if we are acting authentically, we will inevitably meet some other people head on. They will have different opinions and motivations. Conflict is an inevitable part of life. However, it is also an opportunity for real contact. If you always avoid conflict then no-one sees the real you, so you live a pretend life without real contact with others. So the challenge is how to deal with conflict in a way that creates contact rather than war. This is the job of the four remaining meridians, which form what I call the **Integrating Family**. I view each of the members of this family as being facilitators of the Internal Community and that if we understand how they help to deal with internal conflict, it show us how to deal with external conflict as well.

The Yin side of this family is the Jue Yin, which is the collaboration of the Liver meridian and the Pericardium meridians. The Liver provides a central purpose, around which the different

members of the group can collaborate. With central purpose, differences between people can be seen as diversity rather than opposition. For instance, on a journey, if one person is pushing the group to get to the next destination and another person is focused on supporting and caring for the weaker members, then these two will probably come into conflict. The pusher will tend to tell people to pull their socks up and just keep up with the others, while the carer will be suggesting that we all slow down so that the vulnerable members are included. But in fact, both of these energies are necessary and they can respect each other. It is a mixture of the two energies that will both keep everyone going without breaking the group apart. The Liver is the capacity to sense that each person is valuable and that everyone is collaborating towards a common purpose. The Pericardium, being a central aspect of the fascia, facilitates each member of the group to feel connected to every other member. It's only when everyone feels they can talk to everyone else that a true group feeling can emerge. Otherwise the group often splits into subgroups bitching about each other. So the Jue Yin gives the group a feeling of cohesion and values every member for their individual contribution.

This sense of cohesion doesn't mean that conflict disappears. In fact, there is often more debate, dialogue and difference of opinion when everyone feels safe to express themselves and feels that their viewpoint will be respected. But debate does not mean that people have to fight. There are protocols and procedures which allow differences to be aired and debated without breaking the relationship.



But debate does not mean that people have to fight. There are protocols and procedures which allow differences to be aired and debated without breaking the relationship. This ability to facilitate different energies to 'debate' without one having to 'win' allows them to find a compromise where both views are valued. It is this ability to mediate potential conflict that is called the Gall Bladder and if it is working well then every part of the Internal Community can feel involved in every

decision and included in every action. The ability to act in an inclusive and integrated manner is the function of the Triple Heater, which pulls together all the different parts of the self to act together. The Gall Bladder and the Triple Heater together are traditionally called the Shao Yang.

So the Jue Yin and the Shao Yang together form the **Integrating Family** whose job it is to facilitate the group dynamics of the Internal Community and it is exactly the same skills that are needed for dealing with the interpersonal dynamics in the outer world.

The Families as Life Lessons

I see each Family as expressing a human life lesson from which we could learn to develop spiritually.

The **Individuation Family** challenges us to be authentic, to define clear boundaries between Self and Other and to fully embody our nature.

The **Creative Family** challenges us to be aware of our core spirit, and to align our actions with it rather than yielding to outside pressures that our spirit cannot assimilate.

The **Integration Family** challenges us to transcend conflicts , both internal and external, and to act as a whole.

Defining the Families in this way reveals that they each focus on one essential dilemma in human life – how to be a fully 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, we dissolve back into the sea of consciousness taking what we have learned in our life back into the universal.

ⁱ Bill Palmer: Meridians & the Development of Movement – www.seed.org

ⁱⁱ Bill Palmer: The Six Divisions – www.seed.org

ⁱⁱⁱ John Cleese: Creativity

^{iv} Daniel Kahneman – Thinking Fast and Slow

^v Ian McGilchrist - The Master and his Emissary

^{vi} Bill Palmer –The Joy Divisions – www.seed.org