Palpating the Root - a look at Japanese Abdominal Diagnosis

The importance of the abdomen especially the dantian as an energetic centre, the fundamental source of our qi, is central to acupuncture. The extraordinary vessels originate from this area. The ren, du (internally) and the chong mai flow centrally with the dai mai encircling the whole abdomen. The deep pathways of the twelve main channels all have connections throughout the abdomen. It would seem then, that a method of directly assessing what is happening in this area, must be of tremendous clinical use. A way of diagnosing the centre itself rather than using it only for treatment. To get to the root of the problem one must literally assess the condition of the root itself.

The Yellow Emperor asked, “The pulse can be normal, yet sometimes people die, why is this?”
Qi Bo answered, “Each of the twelve meridians has a relationship to the source of the vital energies [the living qi]. The source of the vital energies is the root origin of the twelve meridians, it is the moving qi between the kidneys. This means that the source of the vital energies is fundamental to the five yin and six yang organs, the root of the twelve meridians, the gate of breathing. It is the source [origin] of the triple warmer. Another name for it is the shen which protects against evil; therefore qi is the root of the person. This is why if the root is dying, the stems and branches [meridians and organs] will be drying [drying-out], yet appear normal. The vital qi is dying on the inside , but is normal on the outside.”

Japanese acupuncture and it's diagnosis of the abdomen gives us a way of directly evaluating what is happening in this vital central area.

It is important to say at this point that there are of course many styles of Japanese acupuncture, not all of which rely on abdominal diagnosis. However, in Japanese culture, a great deal of emphasis is placed on this area, the Hara. There are phrases in the language that refer directly to the hara, a famous example being hara kiri (hara cutting). So schools of acupuncture, shiatsu and even herbal medicine have evolved a tradition of using abdominal diagnosis in place of or in addition to the pulse. One such style is that practised and taught by Kiiko Matsumoto.

Like many Japanese masters Kiiko Matsumoto is a scholar of the classics, so it is no surprise that the foundation for this style is the five element model of the abdomen found in the Nan Jing. Overlaid on top of this classical foundation are other diagnostic areas or reflexes that are the fruit of many years research into modern as well as classical sources, plus direct study with several Japanese masters and more than 20 years clinical experience. This system of abdominal palpation builds into a diagnostic framework capable of discerning the energetic
syndromes present in this central area and therefore throughout the whole body. Because we are diagnosing the centre this can give us a chance to get to the very root of the problem. It can also help detect imbalances that are only discernible to the most skilled pulse diagnostician.

In this style the palpation used to check the reflexes is deep and probing. Confirmation of diagnosis comes from patient feedback eg pain, referred pain, soreness, discomfort; and from the skill of the practitioner to feel what is happening at a specific reflex eg tightness, hardness, flaccidity. Treatment then follows directly from the diagnosis and is, in the first instance entirely geared to releasing any reactive reflexes in the abdomen. Points are selected according to the pattern diagnosed, massaged with the thumb or finger and then the abdominal reflex is rechecked. If there is sufficient release of the reflex this point is selected for needling. If there is little or no change in the abdomen the point location or angle of pressure are adjusted slightly. It must be understood that in this style of treatment there is far less emphasis placed on anatomically precise point location and much more on the skill of practitioner to find the exact location of the point that effectively changes the abdominal findings. After rechecking the point against the abdominal reflex, if there is still no significant change a second point is selected and checked. Only after there has been sufficient change in the abdominal findings are other points chosen specifically for the presenting problem. Practitioners, particularly those who like myself come from a background of bodywork, often find this style very enjoyable as it allows close work with the patients energy. A chance to actually get in there and feel what is happening.

The abdomen is an area very prone to imbalance, be that through such physical processes such as poor diet or digestion or through the energetic blocks caused by emotional turmoil. This treatment is aimed literally at the root, the energetic and physical centre of the body. So as practitioners when we start to release the abdomen in this direct way and actually feel the changes in the abdomen, we can be sure that we are having a deep effect on the energy of that person. There are other areas of the body not just the abdomen that are used for diagnosis, primarily certain areas of the chest and neck plus, points on the back. However, it is always the release of the hara that is at the core of this style. It is considered fundamental to successful treatment.

What many people find particularly interesting about this style of diagnosis and treatment is the blending of ancient energetics with modern knowledge of anatomy and physiology. For example there is of course a diagnostic area for the kidneys, the Nan Jing location of the dantien area itself. However, there is also a reflex corresponding to the adrenal glands, between K15 and 16. This is often very important to treat in those patients that have suffered a severe shock or trauma. Another area which Kiiko Matsumoto has pioneered herself, is the
treatment of poorly healed scars, particularly those found on the abdomen, as a method of releasing long term energy blocks.

For people unfamiliar with Japanese acupuncture wondering whether this style can be used effectively with what they already know, the answer is yes. At the recent seminar we organised, as a support to Kiiko Matsumoto’s yearly seminar, there were people from both Five Element and TCM backgrounds, some of whom had already been using a few of these techniques in combination with their normal protocols. They had found it offered, quite simply, another string to the bow. A different and direct approach to changing what is happening right at the core of a patients energy.

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