

# The Lost Lineage of Acupuncture & Moxibustion

from The Discussion of the Medical Lineage

*By Xu Ling Tai (1693-1771), translated by Allen Tsaur*

The two Classics, Lingshu and Suwen, contain comprehensive discussions of Zang Fu organs, meridians and points. Among the Classics, 7-8 out of 10 discourses are about acupuncture, and 2-3 of them are about herbs and formulas. From this, [we can see that] in the ancient time, acupuncture used to be the prime focus [of the therapeutic arts]. However, studying acupuncture is like [studying] the Dao, [in comparison,] herbs and formulations are relatively easier. In addition, patients are more thrilled to take herbal decoction, meanwhile, they are distressed to receive needle treatments. Thus, later on, the herbal formulation thrived and became mainstream, and acupuncture techniques were no longer discussed.

As of the contemporary acupuncturists, there are the **ten significant losses in the lineage** that require more attention:

According to the Classics, in the twelve meridians, their entry and exit, their beginning and ending, their depth, their left and right are interlacing and uneven. **The points along the meridians should not be located in fixed locations.** Today, people are attached to their [ACI] measurement, measuring and seeing the meridians left and right [as though they are straight lines], not taking into the basic concept that the meridians are winding and curving – thus their [measured] meridians are not the actual meridians, their [measured] points are not the actual points. **This is the first loss.**

According to the Classic, in treatment, it is undeniable that there are various instances where certain illnesses are prescribed certain points; however, **the majority indicate the meridians rather than the points.**

As Lingshu Chapter 9 states, “when Renying (ST-9) pulse is [one time bigger than the wrist pulse], disperse the Leg Shao Yang and supplement the Leg Jue Yin.”

Chapter 24 states, “Jue<sup>1</sup> headache, use Leg Yang Ming and Leg Tai Yin, or use Arm Shao Yang and Leg Shao Yin. For deafness, use Arm Yang Ming. For dry throat, use Leg Shao Yin.”

The above passages never talk about the points. They also contain the treatment principle such as dispersing the son in order to supplement the mother. Today, points are simply prescribed

---

<sup>1</sup> Jue could be the condition where the person loses conscious. Or it could be the apex headache tied to the LR.

for illness (*without the taking into consideration of the meridians themselves and their interactions*). **This is the second loss.**

According to the Classic, in treatment, **Jing-well, Ying-spring, Shu-stream, Jing-river, and He-sea points have the utmost importance.** Needle Jing-well in winter, Ying-spring in spring, Shu-stream in summer, Jing-river in late summer, and He-sea in autumn. Whenever only the meridian is given without the specific points [in the Classics], most of the time it was talking about the Five Transport points. Today, this is not discussed at all. **This is the third loss.**

As for the **supplementing and dispersing technique**, the Classics (Suwen 27) stated:

Insert the needle as the person inhale, thus there will be no disobedience of the Qi. Anchor the needle in stillness, thus the Xie pathogens cannot spread. Turn/manipulate the needle as the person inhale, this way, you will grasp the Qi. Draw the needle outward as the person exhales, and remove the needle when the person exhales completely. The Great Qi will be drawn out, thus it is called dispersing.

Insert the needle when the person exhales completely. Anchor the needle in stillness, so the Qi can be directed to the location. Draw the needle outward as the person inhales, so the Qi cannot exit and simply spread along the site of deficiency. After the needle is removed, seal and massage the needled site to preserve the Shen and Qi. The Great Qi will stay still, thus it is called supplementing.

Also, needling against the meridian direction, thrusting rapidly and lifting slowly, removing without sealing is dispersing. Needling along with the meridian direction, thrusting slowly and lifting rapidly, sealing upon needle removal is supplementing. There are myriads of needle techniques. In today's needle technique, the majority only speaks of lifting as dispersing and thrusting as supplementing. **This is the fourth loss.**

After needle insertion, **one must wait for the Qi to arrive.** When needling excess conditions, remove the needle when the Yin Qi thrives. When needling deficient conditions, remove the needle when the Yang Qi thrives. **If the Qi does not arrive, it does not matter how long it has been (or the number of manipulations has been done), it is not until the Qi arrives that the needle can then be removed. Do not simply re-insert the needle.**

Nan Jing Question 78 states, "(before needle insertion), first apply pressure and press the site about to be needled with the left hand. Massage the site rigorously. Dig in [the flesh] with the nail. When the Qi arrives vigorously like an artery, needle along the appropriate direction. Grasping the Qi and pushing inward is supplementing. Manipulating [the needle] then removing is dispersing."

Today, [practitioners] simply insert the needle, rotate the needles instantaneously until the flesh loosens up, then they remove the needle – never questioning whether the Qi has arrived or not. **This is the fifth loss.**

**The needling depth is different according to the season.** The Qi is at the hair in spring, skin in summer, flesh in autumn, sinews and bones in winter. Thus needle shallowly in spring and summer, needle deeply in autumn and winter. It is detrimental to go against such order. Today, it does not matter about the seasons, the needling depth has already been fixed and set in stone. **This is the sixth loss.**

**The ancient acupuncture can effectively treat malaria, cold damage, fever/chill, coughing, and all illnesses of the Zang Fu organs and seven orifices.** Today, acupuncture is only for illnesses of the meridians, vessels, physical body, Wei-atrophy, Bi-painful obstruction, and muscle/tendon flexibility. **This is the seventh loss.**

**Ancient needling techniques widely utilized bleeding treatment.** Lingshu in particular discusses comprehensively about the treatment of the blood Luo vessels. Whenever there is a headache and back pain, there is an especially need to bleed. Whenever there are pathogens in the blood Luo vessels, they must be cleared completely. When bleeding, if the blood is dark, then the person must be bled until the color turns red before ending the treatment. Or else the illness is not cleared and could actually be detrimental to the person. **Today, whenever people see blood in treatment, both patients and practitioners panic and lose their head for no founded reason.** How is it possible for treat the illness this way? **This is the eighth loss.**

In the Classics, there are the “**Nine Variations and Twelve Orders**” needling techniques and strategies (Lingshu Chapter 7):

The Nine Variations: Shu Needling<sup>2</sup>, Distal Pathway Needling<sup>3</sup>, Meridian Needling<sup>4</sup>, Luo Vessel Needling<sup>5</sup>, Division Needling<sup>6</sup>, Great Dispersing Needling<sup>7</sup>, Hair Needling<sup>8</sup>, Great Needling<sup>9</sup>, Quench Needling<sup>10</sup>.

The Twelve Orders: Couple Needling<sup>11</sup>, Resonance Needling<sup>12</sup>, Restoration Needling<sup>13</sup>, Union Needling<sup>14</sup>, Lifting Needling<sup>15</sup>, Straight Needling<sup>16</sup>, Transport Needling<sup>17</sup>, Slow

---

<sup>2</sup> Shu (Transport Point) Needling – needling the five transport points and AEP

<sup>3</sup> Distal Pathway Needling – needling shu-stream point of the Fu-organ meridians

<sup>4</sup> Meridian Needling – needling wherever there is an obstruction in the primary meridians and Luo meridians.

<sup>5</sup> Luo Vessel Needling – bleeding Luo vessels (spider veins) to disperse blood stasis

<sup>6</sup> Division Needling – needling between the muscles

<sup>7</sup> Great Dispersing Needling – needling abscess with sword needle (Pi-Zhen) to bleed and clear the pus.

<sup>8</sup> Hair Needling – superficial needling on the skin only, not into flesh

<sup>9</sup> Great Needling – needling left when there is an illness on the right, needling right when there is an illness on left

<sup>10</sup> Quench Needling – needling with (tungsten) needle that is burned bright red, to treat Bi painful obstruction.

Sinking Needling<sup>18</sup>, Floating Needling<sup>19</sup>, Yin Needling<sup>20</sup>, Side Needling<sup>21</sup>, Assisting Needling<sup>22</sup> ◦

One should utilize the above 21 methods and treat accordingly to what's appropriate for the patient. The methods are not interchangeable. If one method is lost, then one pattern of illness can no longer be effectively addressed. Today, there is only the Straight Needling left. **This is the ninth loss.**

**The ancients utilized the Nine Needles:** there are the Spade Needle, the Bead Needle, the Lifting Needle, the Sharp Needle, the Sword Needle, the Cylindrical Sharp Needle, the Thin Needle, the Long Needle, and the Big Needle. They are utilized according to the illness. When one of them is lost, then their corresponding illness cannot be effectively addressed. Today we only have the Bead Needle and the Thin Needle, how can we use them to treat deep chronic illnesses or acute fatal illnesses? **This is the tenth loss.**

I have already stated the obvious losses in the tradition. Although, **what's even more important are the focus of the *Spirits* and *Wills*, and the strict discipline and cultivation of one's own techniques.** The Classics state:

(Lingshu 1) [When the practitioner has] his *Spirits* in a [highly refined state] like the (duck/goose) down grown in autumn, with all his intention belonging to the patient, examining closely at the vessels, when he needles, there will be no peril.

(Suwen 54) [After needle insertion,] the meridian Qi has arrived, hold it cautiously and do not lose it. The depth is decided by the *Wills*, the [illusion of] distance becomes as

---

<sup>11</sup> Couple Needling – needle pairing on the yang side and yin side of the body – e.g., CV-12 + BL-21

<sup>12</sup> Resonance Needling – needle wherever the pain appears – e.g. Ashi or Tianying points

<sup>13</sup> Restoration Needling – needle along the sinew channels and manipulate to relax the sinew

<sup>14</sup> Union Needling – needling one in the center and supporting with two more on the sides (in a line), to treat lodged/deep cold pathogenic Qi or Bi obstruction – e.g. Master Tung's Reversing the Horse Needle Technique

<sup>15</sup> Lifting Needling – needle one in the center and supporting with four more in the perimeter, needle shallowly, to lift the yang Qi to the surface and treat major cold pathogenic Qi

<sup>16</sup> Straight Needling – Even insertion without manipulation, penetrate slightly into the flesh, to treat shallow cold pathogen.

<sup>17</sup> Transport Needling – straight in and straight out, insert deeply and remove rapidly, to treat pathogenic heat

<sup>18</sup> Slow Sinking Needling – insert slowly next to the bone, vibrate the needle slightly against the bone, to treat bone Bi syndrome.

<sup>19</sup> Floating Needling – needle at an angle, shallowly at the skin, then lift to treat tense muscle and cold (lifting Wei Qi).

<sup>20</sup> Yin (Groin) Needling – needle KI meridian around the groin area and KI-3 to treat cold counterflow symptom.

<sup>21</sup> Side Needling – needle a point, insert another needle next to it, to treat strongly lodged Bi pathogen

<sup>22</sup> Assisting Needling – a multitude of superficial rapid needling on the surface to bleed, to release localized blood stasis to treat localized swelling and pain.

though there is the Oneness, as though one is near a deep abyss, as though the hand is holding a tiger, the *Spirits* [are open and ] do not dwell in and attach to anything.

(Suwen 25) Stay still like a loaded crossbow, move like pulling its trigger.

This is the cultivated, refined, sensitive, and potent state [of acupuncture]. Today's acupuncturists needle mindlessly without any intention. Even if they still preserve the ancient needle techniques, without the stilling of *Wills*, without conveying the essence [of this medicine], their treatments are most likely ineffective. Haven't they completely neglected the way of this ancient art?

Other than that, one also needs to take into consideration of the treatment progression and sequences, the direct or indirect treatment strategy of the illness, the significant distinction of patient's social class, the difference between those who labor and those who don't, the fat and the lean, the young and old... etc, which cannot be exhausted in description.

If one can truly settle his mind to examine and embody this wisdom, to be harmonious with the sagely decrees, one will definitely achieve immortal achievements. Most people are overwhelmed by the difficulties and choose the easy path, thus they go completely against the ancient teachings. This is the reason why today's people do not care much about acupuncture; this is the reason why its tradition declines.

As for moxibustion, it can only treat 1-2 out of 10 illnesses that can be effectively addressed by acupuncture. If one knows the principles of acupuncture, then moxibustion will be extremely easy.