

On Back Pain

First Two Sections of Su Wen 41

Translated and annotated by Dan Tennenbaum

Overview:

Chapter 41 of the Su Wen describes the various needling or bleeding methods for the treatment of low back pain. The text describes in relative detail the symptoms and signs of back pain associated with the:

- Main channels: Foot tai yang (Bl channel), foot shao yang (GB channel), the foot yang ming (St channel), the foot shao yin (Kd channel) and the foot jue yin (Liv channel)
- Extraordinary channels: Ren mai, Du mai, Dai mai and Yang Wei mai
- A branch of the foot Tai Yang (Bl channel), a branch of the foot shao yin (Kd channel)
- Luo channels of shao yang (Gb channel) and foot shao yin (Sp channel).

Gao Shi Shi (a noted physician and author of the Qing dynasty) stated: "The abdomen is ruled by the Spleen channel while the lower back by the three yang the three yin, the eight extras, which all rise from the lower back; the text discusses the main channels of the foot tai yang, foot shao yang, foot yang ming, foot shao yin, as well as the eight extra channels and luo channels. These all connect with the lower back and hence can cause pain. The tai yin rules the abdomen and it is not mentioned. But the luo of the tai yin can also cause low back pain, hence the text describes the tai yin-related pain and its treatment.

Main Channels

When the foot tai yang (Bl) channel causes back pain, it affects the neck, spine, sacrum and the whole back feels heavy. Prick the cleft (Bl 40), along the main channel of the taiyang to let blood. In spring do not cause any bleeding.

When the foot shao yang (Gb) causes back pain, it feels as if someone was pricked by needles in the skin, the individual hesitatingly and gradually bends down and up, and cannot turn his head (left or right). Prick the shao yang channel at the end of the supporting bone (Gb 34), the supporting bone is the solely protruding area at the side of the knee; do not cause bleeding during summer.

If the back pain is caused by the yang ming (St) channel, the person cannot turn (left or right) if he turns to look back it is as if seeing things, he has a tendency to easily be sad. Prick the area in front of the shin bone along the yang ming channel three times

(area around St 36), balancing up and down (all points in equidistance or St 36, 37, and 39) to let blood. Do not bleed during autumn.

Back pain resulting from the foot shao yin (Kd) channel is (characterized by) pain involving the spinal column itself. Prick the foot shao yin above the medial malleolus with two scars (select two points at Kd 7). Do not let blood in spring. If the point is bled too much, the person cannot recover.

In jue yin (Liv) channel back pain, the person's back will feel taut like a tight string of a bow. Prick the jue yin between the belly of the gastrocnemius and the heel (Liv 5). Look for strings of purple veins to bleed. The condition causes the person to be talkative, but not saying anything that makes sense. Bleed 3 points.

Extra meridians, luo vessels, branch vessels:

Branch vessel:

If the separating vessel (of the Bladder channel, i.e. the outer branch of the Bladder channel) causes back pain, then there is a pulling pain afflicting the shoulder (scapula) and the eyes are blurred. (The person) frequently has to urinate (literally: loses urin). Bleed the separating branch in the parting between sinews and flesh at the outer edge of the cleft (popliteal fossa, approximately UB 39/UB 39) where there is a horizontal blood vessel (dark vein). While bleeding, once the blood changes (from dark to normal color), stop (the bleeding).

If the separating vessel (of the Kidney channel) causes back pain, as if a belt was pulled (tightly), then there is a feeling as if the lower back was broken, (the person) tends to be fearful. Prick the separating vessel at the cleft (popliteal fossa), (look for) a knotted luo vessel (vein) the size of a grain of millet. When pricking some black blood will shoot out, stop (the bleeding) once it appears red.

Extra meridians:

When the Yin paired vessel (Yang Qiao channel) causes back pain, (then there is) a sensation as if a small weight is in the back, accompanied by angry swelling. Bleed the Yin paired vessel with three pricks (just above) the end of the severed bone at the outer ankle (just above the tip of the lateral malleolus).

When the Yang Wei channel causes back pain, then the pain location (displays) an angry swelling. The (course of) the Yang Wei unites with the (course) of the Tai Yang next to the calf muscle; prick about one chi (foot) from the ground (xi cleft / GB 35).

If back pain is caused by the transverse binding vessel (Dai Mai), the individual cannot bend up or down, when he bends up, he is afraid he is going to fall. The injury to the back occurred after lifting something heavy, the flow along the transverse binding vessel is blocked and bad blood resides in it. Bleed in the cleft between the yang sinews;

move up several inches along the cleft to a transverse line (UB 36 area) prick two points to let blood.

When back pain is associated with the Yin meeting vessel (Du Mai), there will be profuse sweating on top of the pain, the sweating causes the person to desire to drink, after the thirst has subsided, he wants to walk (a little). Pierce the straight Yang meridian (Du Mai) above three wounds. (The point is found) above the Qiao (Bl 62) and five inches below the cleft (popliteal fossa) on a transverse line (Bl 57); look for full (blood vessels) to let blood.

When the flying yang vessel (yin wei mai) causes a person to have back pain, there will be an angry swelling at the pain site, in severe cases (the individual) experiences sadness and fear. Pierce the flying yang vessel five inches above the inner ankle bone, in front of the shao yin, at the meeting with the yin wei mai (Kd 9, xi cleft of yin wei)

If the back pain is caused by the brilliant yang vessel (yin qiao mai, some say Kd channel) then there is pain radiating to the chest (breasts) and there is blurry vision; in severe cases the person is bent backwards, the tongue is curled and he cannot talk. Pierce the inner sinews with two pricks, two inches above the inner ankle (Kd 8 xi cleft of yin qiao, some say Kd 7), in front of the large sinew, behind the tai yin.

When the dispersing channel (chong mai, some say luo of the spleen) let's a person's back ache, there will be heat, if the heat is severe it generates vexation, the area below the back feels as if a beam of wood is stuck in it horizontally, in extremis the person loses urin frequently. Pierce the separating channel in front of the knee, in the space separating the bone and the muscle, at the binding vessel of the outer edge (some say Sp 8, others St 36, Gb 34) . Prick three wounds.

If the vessel inside the flesh causes people back pain, (then the person) cannot cough, if he coughs then the sinews contract and tighten. Pierce the vessel inside the flesh with two wounds, at the outside of the tai yang behind the severed bone of the shao yang (GB 38, some say Bl 59)

Conclusive remarks:

When treating low back pain, one cannot solely treat the Bladder or Kidney channels and there is also a misconception that back pain is solely a condition of deficiency. Tao Zhi An (Qing dynasty commenter of the Nei Jing) stated: "The flexing and extending, bending and lifting of the human body all rely solely on the lower back, hence it is often afflicted by pain. Starting with the Bladder channel, to the extraordinary channels and finally the luo vessels, they all may cause back pain. Either the main channel passes by the area, the luo forms a network connection, or the vessels traverse it; it is a mistake when everyone thinks it is only related to the Liver and Kidney." Zhang Zhi Cong also said: "This section records diseases of the channels and collaterals and (describes) fullness conditions of pain affecting the low

back; it differs from vacuity pain attributed to the Liver and Kidney or external injuries to the sinews and bones."

Method: I relied mostly on the "Collection of Expert Annotations to the Su Wen 素问注释汇粹" by Cheng Shi De and Paul Unschuld's translation. The channels and points that made most sense were chosen; if controversial I entered an alternative channel or point.