



Reflections on using Sa'am acupuncture

By Michael Max

Perhaps in acupuncture school you were taught the “four-needle” method. I never understood it other than in a theoretical sense, and was never able to use the theory of energy transfer through the phases to produce tangible clinical results. Recently I’ve started studying and using the Sa’am acupuncture method, and now realise that while I’d learned the theory, I was not introduced to the dynamic of how the five phases (五行) interconnect with the six conformations (六經). And that has changed everything.

ONE OF THE benefits of studying and using the Sa’am system is that it helps me to better understand the physiological dynamics of the herbal medicine I’ve studied over the years and how it connects up with acupuncture.

I had a wonderful opportunity a number of years ago to work with Dr Huang Huang and bring his book *The 10 Key Formula Families in Chinese Medicine* into English. I was especially interested then in his perspective on the *Shang Han Lun* (Discussion of Cold

Damage) and how people tended to fall into certain constitutional types that match up with the functions and actions of certain herbs. I found this to be helpful in orienting myself in clinic; which formula families of herbs most suited a patient seemed like a good place to start as it helped to dial in a prescription that was both safe and effective.

Later I came across the work of Dr Hu Xishu, who had a way of diagnosing by paying attention to which of the six conformations a disease process touched, and then selecting formulas to match the presentation.

More interesting to me was the way he connected up the six conformations. He connected the *taiyang* to *shaoyin* as they were the “outer” aspects of yang and yin, and saw the *shaoyang* and *jueyin* as pivoting into each other.

In my schooling I learned that the *shaoyang* was a pivot between yin and yang, but without a clear indication on where into the yin it pivoted. Likewise, the *jueyin*, the end of yin, is where things were coming apart, and where there was a separation of yin and yang, but it was a bit mysterious as to where all that was going, other than death. There was a structure for the six levels we learned so we could pass the national exam, but

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clinically it seemed like a patchwork quilt in need of patches.

Hu Xishu made it clear that *shaoyang* and *jueyin* were simply the yin and yang aspects of the pivot. They were the half-internal, half-external mirrors of each other that allowed yin and yang to transform into each other. This made a lot of sense to me as an herbalist, but other than treating Liver-Gallbladder in clinic with acupuncture I didn't put this dynamic together until I started working with the Sa'am system.

There are two streams of Sa'am acupuncture. One comes through the lineage of Korean Buddhist monks, and the other, despite tracing its roots to the Buddhist monk Sa'am, is more of a literary and academic tradition. There is quite a lot of Western-style research you can find on the use and clinical results of using this method.

I have been fortunate to dip into the monastic stream through colleague Toby Daly, who learned it from a wandering monk. After using the method in clinic with some spectacularly bad results, Toby helped with some case consultation. As with herbal mistreatment, you find out pretty quickly when people get worse. While this does help to clarify your diagnosis, it always calls for some damage control and repair. I'll share a case that helps to demonstrate the dynamics of the interplay of the five phases and six conformations, and the vital importance of getting the language right. The two main points I want to cover here are that:

- The *fu* organs carry just as much weight and influence as the yin organs; and
- Tonification and sedation are real.

Most of us have been trained with a kind of bias toward thinking the yin organs are more important than yang organs, but in the Sa'am way of working there is no preference of *zang* over *fu*. All are important, all are needed for proper physiological functioning and all play equal roles in the maintenance of health and the treatment of disease.

The five-phase theory to which I was exposed in the early part of training and practice was especially skewed towards the yin organs, so if you do nothing more than give the yang organs equal attention in your clinic, I suspect you'll bring more benefit to your patients.

It helps to know the full names of the channels; this will help you access various characteristics you might otherwise overlook. For example, the Lung is the hand *taiyin* metal channel. The Spleen is the foot *taiyin* earth channel. The Small Intestine is the hand *taiyang* fire channel. The Heart is the hand *shaoyin* fire channel.

Thinking of the channels this way gives you more information and a more nuanced perspective than simply thinking the Lung and Spleen are opposite ends of the *taiyin* channel, or that Heart and Small Intestine are a yin/yang pair of fire. Of course, these correspondences are helpful in clinic, but you'll get a more three-dimensional view of channel and organ function when you consider their full six-conformation and five-phase names, and the physiological and therapeutic functions they provide.

It will also help you to better understand the counterbalanced organ relationships of the Sa'am system. These Sa'am counterbalances are an aspect of our medicine that is not commonly taught in schools, but if you read *Su Wen* (Basic Questions) 68,¹ you'll find these relationships detailed there. Furthermore, this clues us to the proper physiological function and relationships between the conformations and organs.

SA'AM COUNTERBALANCES

Urinary Bladder	<—>	Heart
Large Intestine	<—>	Spleen
Gallbladder	<—>	Pericardium
San Jiao	<—>	Liver
Stomach	<—>	Lung
Small Intestine	<—>	Kidney

Clarity of thought required

A couple of examples from my clinical work can illustrate how the Sa'am counterbalances can be used in a therapeutic way, help us to better understand the proper function of each conformation, and the dangers of crossing TCM thinking with Sa'am thinking.

This first example came from some crossed wires when I first started using the Sa'am method. I caused trouble for my patient when I applied Sa'am methods to a TCM diagnosis without thinking the situation through.

1. See "Qi transformation theory in the Shang Han Lun", *The Lantern*, Vol 6-2.

This patient was your classic “Spleen deficiency” presentation. She was overweight, had a pale tongue with wet, white coating, acid reflux and powerful cravings for sweets and fast carbs. She sweated easily and had moist skin. Her pulses lined up with all my other “Spleen deficiency” signs as they were soggy. TCM thinking clearly identifies this as Spleen deficiency, right? Unfortunately, I tonified her Spleen with the Sa’am method as I was not thinking about “proper physiological function” via the six conformations, instead of treating her Large Intestine to bring dryness from the metal *yangming* into the dampness of earth *taiyin*.

If we look from the perspective of function, we can see this in TCM as well, especially when you think about herbs. We are drying and dispelling damp to improve fluid metabolism. What we actually are doing with formulas like *Si Jun Zi Tang* (Four Gentlemen Decoction) or *Shen Ling Bai Zhu San* (Ginseng, Poria and Atractylodis Powder) is to tonify the function of the *yangming*, so as to treat an abundance of *taiyin* fluid.

In using the Sa’am method to tonify her Spleen, I added dampness to an already waterlogged situation. Worse, I failed to catch it until after she came to the front desk and said, “Am I supposed to feel dizzy and nauseous?”

So, this point is important, and it will help you to safely and effectively use this method. When we say “Spleen deficiency” in TCM, in the Sa’am system it translates to Spleen excess. If the Spleen is excess there is too much earth *taiyin* fluid. And the best way to take care of that is to bring in the parching influence of the metal *yangming* organ to dry it out. The Large Intestine not only has the dryness of the *yangming*, but also the dryness of metal.

So, when using this Sa’am system—especially in the beginning—be careful with your thinking. Your basic TCM will help you get to an accurate diagnosis, but you need to translate that into seeing if there is an excess or deficiency in the organ from the Sa’am perspective. The terms you use in your thinking can take you down the wrong path with treatment. So consider the proper physiological functioning of the organs, phases and conformations, and tonify the ones that naturally will take care of the

problem you’ve identified.

Physiological function also combines with channel trajectory. The *shaoyin* is about fire, and the Kidney is an organ of both water and fire. However, the Small Intestine is used in the Sa’am system to balance the Kidney, in exactly the same way that the Large Intestine is used to balance the Spleen.

Remember, these pairings in Sa’am are functional counterbalances in much the same way the yin/yang aspect of organ pairings is a kind of counterbalance, or the way the hand and foot aspects of the same name meridian are used to balance one another.

The Small Intestine from the Sa’am perspective is a powerful channel and organ for moving qi and blood. It shares a relationship to the Kidney in a number of ways. It has an aspect that is fiery hot because it is the *yang fu* of the *shaoyin* Heart, and it also has an aspect of deep cold, as it is the *taiyang* channel sharing a resonance with the cold water of the Urinary Bladder, the Kidney’s paired yang organ.

This heat/cold creates dynamic motion. Look at the energy generated when hot and cold weather systems meet, or how the warm and cold currents of the oceans set up a dynamic that circulates water through the oceans and drives weather patterns.

If you want to bring some motion to the system, tonify the Small Intestine! And especially if there are issues along the trajectory of the Small Intestine channel, this can work wonders.

I recently had a patient who could not bring her right hand above her shoulder. In fact, she couldn’t get it halfway to her shoulder so that taking off a t-shirt was a study in workarounds and contortions. She had fallen three years previously. Physical therapy made her worse, conventional medicine’s pain management clinics gave her no relief, and she kept her local chiropractor in car payments with multiple weekly visits. She had aspects of blood deficiency and blood stasis.

As the problem was predominantly on the right side, I tonified the Small Intestine on the left. I had her sitting on the table and do some shoulder rolls and gently explore her range of motion on the right side. When I came back into the room 10 minutes later, she could lift her hand above the shoulder

■ Michael Max is an acupuncturist at Yong Kang Clinic in St Louis, Missouri, and the host of qiological.com, a podcast dedicated to conversations on Chinese medicine. He and Toby Daly along with Chris Flanagan are working on a book about the stream of Sa’am acupuncture that Toby learned from his teacher. For more information about Sa’am acupuncture, start with episode 45 of www.qiological.com/saam-acupuncture. And if you are interested in learning this method, classes being offered by Qiological Learning, via qiological.com/qiological-learning.

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without discomfort. In another eight treatments she could raise her hands above her head and easily put on and take off her coat. More importantly, she was able to hold her grandchildren, something she'd been unable to do since her fall three years earlier.

One of the great things about this system is that it just takes four needles: two to tonify and two to disperse. One needle tonifies the horary point of the mother channel, one tonifies the mother point of the channel you are treating. One more needle disperses the horary point of the controlling channel, and finally one disperses the control point on the problem channel.

You'll do this all on one side. And don't make the mistake of thinking just four needles won't do much. It's plenty if you have your diagnosis dialled in.

For example, to tonify the hand *yangming* metal Large Intestine, first tonify *Zusanli* (ST-36), the *yangming* earth point by inserting the needle with the channel flow. Next tonify the earth point on the arm *yangming* metal channel... that's *Quchi* (LI-11). Next shut down the controlling influence of fire on the metal. Disperse *Yanggu* (SI-5), which is the fire point of the hand *taiyang* fire channel, by placing the needle against the channel flow. Finally, disperse *Yangxi* (LI-5), the fire point on the hand *yangming* metal channel.

Sa'am is not a complicated system to learn, and you can quickly see the results of your treatment, for good or worse. And really, if you want to start learning this system, you can do a lot of good with just four needles.

More importantly you will learn more quickly from clinical experience when you treat only one channel.

It helps to start slow and to be meticulous. Keep your treatment variables to a minimum so you can more clearly gauge the results of the treatment.

Tonification and sedation are serious. Tonification and sedation are not just interesting theory — they are real. I did not always think this way. We learn all kinds of things in school about tonification and sedation, but I never really saw it pan out until I started investigating the Sa'am method.

Tonification and sedation are critical aspects of this method. This is a lesson I've

learned because I've mistakenly put needles in the wrong way and a patient's pulse would roughen, or they wouldn't settle and calm down. I've had several instances where I placed the needles in the wrong direction, was curious about why the patient was not reacting the way I expected, and then realised my mistake. Simply removing and reinserting with the correct direction will usually result in the patient sighing deeply, then the eyes fluttering closed. I've made and corrected enough mistakes at this point to know that needle placement and direction is a key element in using Sa'am in a clinically effective way.

One last thing — the idea that acupuncture is inherently harmonising and cannot hurt people just does not hold water here. If it is powerful enough to heal, then it is also powerful enough to harm. These treatments are not harmonising! They are sending a clear and direct signal to the body. We don't seek to create a balanced treatment, but a treatment that brings the body back into balance.

There is plenty in what you've already learned about acupuncture that you will rely on when doing Sa'am acupuncture. You need to rearrange your thinking a little, see the interconnections between the five phases and six conformations, and recognise that in addition to *zang fu* yin/yang pairing of organs there is another set of counterbalances to use from *Su Wen* 68. These provide some profound ways of connecting with the organs and channels of the body.