

CONNECTING TO CENTRE: HEALING BEGINS IN THE HARA

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The notion of *Hara* plays an integral role in every moment of life and, therefore plays a significant part in health and healing. As the middle of the body, Hara is the centre of gravity that carries us through life. As most of the vital organs are situated in or near this region, there are, simultaneously, important internal functions also occurring. The ancient Nan Jing states:

‘Each of the twelve meridians has a relationship to the vital energies, the living qi. The source of the vital energies is the root-origin of the twelve meridians and the moving qi between the kidneys; the Hara...is therefore the root qi of a person’ (Birch & Matsumoto, 1998, p65).

As all organ-meridians pass through, originate or end in the belly, Hara is essential in the diagnosis and treatment of dis-ease¹. This article explores the potential healing capacity of Hara in a Shiatsu treatment. It is divided into two sections depicting: (1) Hara in diagnosis and (2) Hara in treatment.

HARA & DIAGNOSIS

‘The Hara is the basic place of living energy...When you diagnose disease, you must diagnose the Hara’ (Todo Yoshimasu in Teeguarden, 1996, p241).

Traditional Chinese Medicine has long used Hara as a primary diagnostic point as it reads like a map of the body. There are many approaches to Hara diagnosis and, while they are generally based on the same foundational TCM understanding, there is some differentiation in techniques according to different cultural understanding and belief systems. Below are brief outlines of four key Hara diagnostic techniques appropriate for use in Shiatsu:

- **5-element theory:** Perhaps the oldest Hara palpation technique, as the Nan Jing states it, each of the 5 organ-elements is represented in the abdomen (Gardener-Abbate, 2001, p23). In this theory, the cosmological cycle, which shows directions corresponding to the 5 element/organs, is directly transposed onto the abdomen and can be used to diagnose according to the same principles. For example, heart pathologies will be found by palpating the area just below xiphoid process. Spleen/stomach pathologies will be found in the centre around the umbilicus, lung, felt to the right of the umbilicus and liver to the left. This method generally corresponds to the physical location of organ within the abdomen in a Western anatomical system.

¹ I separate ‘dis’ from ‘ease’ to highlight that this is a reference to not being at ease in the body rather than the Western medical terminology of describing specific illnesses as disease.

- **Mu or Alarm points on the abdomen:** These points are used in conjunction with the back Shu points. They are located specifically at organ sites. Mu—which means to accumulate—are the places where qi (of the respective organ) collects. They are most useful to ascertain information on acute dis-ease and reflect states of pathological change in the body.
- **The Ren or Conception channel:** divides the abdomen ascending vertically into three parts along the Conception Vessel. Palpating around CV 6, CV 12 and CV 15 reflects patterns in lower/middle/upper burners respectively. On a healthy Hara they should feel as follows:
 - CV 6 should feel firm and resilient;
 - CV 12 is slightly softer but still resilient,
 - CV 15 is softer in comparison.
 (Jarmey & Mojay, 1991, p206)
- **Zen Shiatsu:** This technique comes from Masunaga’s Zen Shiatsu method. Similar to 5-element theory, these designated areas are located around the abdomen in a circular direction. The Hara is palpated clockwise beginning with the heart (CV 15), under the xiphoid process and moving through stomach, triple warmer, lung, small intestine, Bladder (Kidneys (CV 6) slightly higher), then upwards on the other side; small intestine, large intestine, lung, liver, gall bladder and ending at the spleen on either side of the belly button². There are three methods of palpation:
 1. Deep touch method: used to determine physical pain and state of muscular strength.
 2. Light touch method: with tips of fingers of both hands, scan Hara in a sequence that compares organs together to find most full and most empty. Palpate until you find a reactive state between two organs.
 3. No touch method: requires great sensitivity but is not difficult to do. Holding palms 2-4 inches above the diagnostic area, feel for the force of qi. This method also determines the full/empty state of organs. You may feel hot sensations, indicating fullness; or cold sensations, indicating emptiness. No major sensations represents a healthy Hara.

HARA & TREATMENT

‘Any chronic disease needs stability from the abdomen and digestive functions to provide endurance and strength in the healing process.’ (Gayl Hubatch in Teeguarden, 1996, p240)

Abdominal palpation, from the Japanese ‘*Anpuku*’ has existed in Japan for centuries to primarily to assist in the treatment of stagnation. *Anpuku* creates balance between the organ systems, stimulating flow of qi, blood and digestion. This also effects muscles,

² Refer to <http://londonshiatsu.posterous.com/hara-diagnosis-chart-masunaga-sensei> for a pictorial representation.

bones and joints as nourishment is extracted from food and distributed to organs and tissues. In the last century, Kuzome, a Japanese practitioner, developed his own style of abdominal shiatsu and limited his work almost completely to the Hara (Birch & Matsumoto, 272-279). Kuzome actively empowered his clients by giving them self-*anpuku* exercises between sessions with him. Some of Kuzome's methods include:

- **Strengthening the rectus abdominus:** use the middle three fingers of right hand to palpate around CV12-14. Simultaneously with the fingers of the left hand apply pressure with circular action on rectus abdominus muscle on right side of Hara (ST 25). Then activate with pinching technique. Repeat on left side of Hara. This is good for the intestines and digestion.
- **Technique for drawing qi down:** apply pressure on ST 25 bilaterally with left thumb and forefinger. Simultaneously with right thumb and forefinger apply pressure consecutively to ST 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24 on each exhalation. Repeat several times. This is good for counter-flow qi.
- **Quieting Ren Mai:** with palm of left hand on umbilicus, pressing thumb on CV 9, apply pressure with right thumb on CV 13, 12, 11 and 10 with each exhalation. Repeat several times. This calms the Shen and nourishes Yin.
- **Supporting metabolism of fluids:** with both thumbs, apply pressure repeatedly to ST 19, 20, 21 then K 21, 20, 19 and 18. Follow with downward sliding pressure from CV 18 to CV 10. This is good for fluid retention, especially below sternum.
- **Balancing Jing and shen:** with palms resting on skin without pressure, pull fingers of both hands from spine to sternum (between ribs). Work in a downward motion from first rib to last, then below ribs into CV6. Visualising all qi coming into CV 6.

As well as having diagnostic relevance, the **Mu points** on the abdomen all have functional use in treatment. These points can be used where pain or odd sensations are present by holding and breathing into it until shift occurs, including:

- **CV 14** (heart Mu point) is useful in calming the shen, moving blood stasis or tonifying heart blood deficiency. Also balances stomach.
- **CV 12** (stomach Mu point) represents the middle burner, useful in gastrointestinal and digestive disorders.
- **ST 25** (large intestine Mu point) is a very powerful point that balances the large intestine, regulates stomach qi, tonifies deficient spleen and kidney qi and regulates menstrual flow. Also nourishes the lymphatic system when weak.
- **CV 6** (kidneys) is used for pain in the lower abdomen, 'grounding' psychosomatic and autonomic disorders by nourishing kidney qi and stimulating source qi, nourishes yin and yang.
- **CV 4** (small intestine) is useful in building blood and kidney yang and general tonification of the entire body.

Hara is sensitive. It represents trust and support, so it can be helpful in nourishing chronic deficient patterns. Though beneficial for both men and women, Hara treatment is used more often on women, particularly for gynecological patterns, as it activates the kidneys,

spleen and stomach and in this action is able to nourish blood and Jing. Digestive disorders and obstruction of qi, especially in the middle burner, can be cleared through Hara as the intestines; spleen and stomach are stimulated, moving qi. Gardner-Abbate (2001, p18) observes that Hara is useful in treatment of complex diseases such as deficient Jing (premature menopause, degenerative disease-MS, AIDS, fibromyalgia), long-term stress, viruses, chronic bacterial infection, chronic heat conditions such as sore throat, joint pain and blood stagnation. In its grounding and centering capacity, Hara can be useful in calming the Shen, grounding the client by putting them back in touch with their core.

Finally, focusing on clearing Hara before treating meridians or distal points can be particularly powerful as all disease will respond to Hara treatment.

*This article is extracted from a larger research project completed in 2002 while attending the Australian Shiatsu College.

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