

Bringing the Nan Jing to Life Pulse Taking and Diagnosis from the Classic of Difficulties

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The Classic of Difficulties

The *Nan Jing*, or *Classic of Difficulties*, is a collection of 81 questions and answers that attempts to clarify difficult passages from the *Nei Jing*, or *Yellow Emperor's Internal Cannon*. Hsu Ta Ch'un an eminent author and physician from the early eighteenth century describes the *Nan Jing* as a book which, "investigates the meaning of the original classic (Ching), to elucidate its final principles, to dissolve doubtful aspects and to provide guidance for students of later times." It is thought that the *Nan Jing* was written around 200 AD, however, some scholars assert that there is no one author, but rather the book is a compendium of theories from different scholars over a long expanse of time. Departing from the established tradition in the *Nei Jing*, which focuses on pulse taking of the throat and ankles, the *Nan Jing* relies exclusively on the radial pulses of the left and right hands.

Although much of the information is arranged in a disorderly way, when the *Nan Jing* is considered in tandem with the *Nei Jing* and relevant insights are brought together like parts of a puzzle, comprehensive and practical systems emerge. While it is helpful to explore these two classics together, it should be noted that there are passages from the *Nan Jing* that not only contradict the "Original Classic," but also present concepts simply not found in the *Nei Jing* as we know it.

While past scholars such as Liao Ping, Ting Te Yung and others featured in Paul Unschuld's translation are tremendously helpful, we are still left reconciling some of these conflicting ideas. In particular the two depth system described in Difficulty Fifty Five and the five depths presented in Difficulty Five.

What becomes apparent is that these are two distinct systems. The two depth

system is practically applied for assessing control and generating elemental issues of both the yin and yang organs, while the five depth system remains invaluable for uncovering diseases of the yin organs exclusively. The two depth system will be brought to life in a second article that will be published soon.

This exploration highlights "difficulties" from the *Nan Jing* that are most relevant to pulse diagnosis and focuses on the five depth system. Other important topics include the ideal pulse, the six pulse positions, exclusive use of yin organs, influential points and acupuncture interventions. Once demystified, these modalities become immediately applicable in a modern clinical setting.

Although the five depths are clearly explained in Chapter Five, finding cohesive acupuncture interventions are more strenuous. Most of the needling techniques described in the *Nan Jing* are for rectifying elemental attacks, as opposed to true excesses and deficiencies felt in the five depths. Scouring chapters dedicated to needling techniques, quiet contemplation and clinical experimentation revealed the answer, which will be presented in this paper.

The Ideal Pulse

From various passages in the *Nan Jing* we are told that an ideal pulse should demonstrate a person's constitution, reflect seasonal influences and maintain a stable rate. In the five depths system there is specific amplitude associated with each position. Due to less than healthy lifestyles, pathogenic attack, or inappropriate dynamics between organs, the pulse positions, organs and related meridian systems can become unbalanced and exhibit qualities, or features, foreign to them.

Once understood the simple and elegant methods presented here can facilitate quick assessment of inevitable

irregularities in any of the organs or meridian systems. The application of this system differs from a modern TCM approach where pathological states are often reflexively matched with single points or prescriptions. The methodology here involves a dynamic multi-tiered approach requiring that the pulse be taken a number of times during treatment to confirm efficacy of the selected needles.

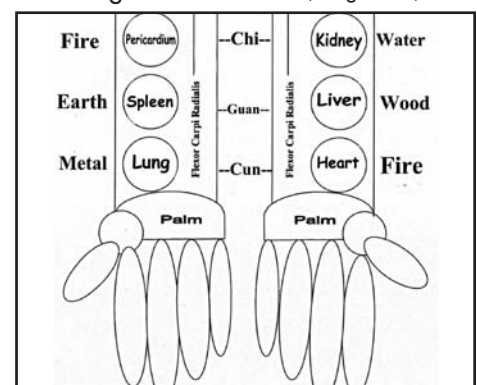
Dissenting voices

There are dissenting voices that have written off pulse taking as a useless tool because it is very difficult even for master practitioners from different backgrounds to agree on what they are feeling. Many times the disparities come about as a result of differing finger placement and pressure, rather than distinct family traditions or inconsistent pulse quality linguistics. The *Nan Jing's* description of the five depths serves to approach these disparities.

Elemental Associations and the six positions

As we explore each of the "difficult" subjects, the original question and answer format from the *Nan Jing* will be highlighted. Before approaching the five depths, it is important to identify the proper pulse positions, related organs and elemental associations (Diagram 1).

Nan Jing Pulse Positions (Diagram 1)



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Assessing the Five Levels (Chapter Five)

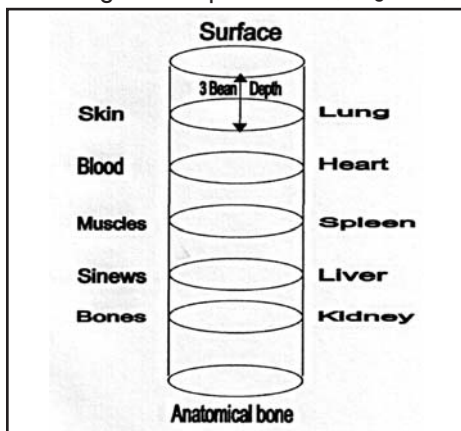
Question: “The pulses have light and heavy. What does this mean?”

Answer: “First, hold the pulse. As heavy as three beans and obtained at the level of the skin and hair, this is the lung section. As heavy as six beans and obtained at the level of the blood vessels, this is the heart section. As heavy as nine beans and obtained at the level of muscles and flesh, this is the spleen section. As heavy as twelve beans and level with the sinews, this is the liver section. If one presses all the way to the bone, and lets up until a fast flowing sensation is felt again, this is the kidney section. Thus one speaks of light and heavy in relation to the pulse.”

Facilitating Cohesion Amongst Pulse Takers

The introduction of beans in Chapter Five is used to describe to fellow practitioners how the correct depth and pressure might be found and analyzed. At the first level or “as heavy as three beans,” then means to use pressure that would cause the fingers to descend to a depth equal to the weight of three beans. The subsequent references to six, nine and twelve beans are an expansion of this idea and describe progressively more pressure being used as one goes deeper through the five levels.

Nan Jing Five Depth Model (Diagram 2)



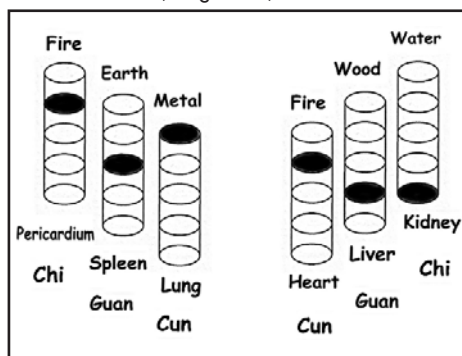
Practically applied, teacher and learner should hold the left and right hand pulses of a patient simultaneously.

The patient will then let them know when they are exerting equal pressure as they press through the five depths. In this way acupuncturists endeavoring to grasp the five depth system, or seeking to have meaningful interactions with practitioners from different camps have a base from which they can share what qualities they are feeling at a particular depth.

Three Dimensional Pulse Matrix

Each level in Diagram 2 is demonstrative of the related tissue and ideal vertical amplitude for each of the six positions from Diagram 1. Except for the pericardium, each of the organ/meridian system’s pulses is represented at a different height. This holds true for the cun, guan, and chi, or first, second and third positions of both left and right hands. Combining the five depths and six positions from Diagrams 1 & 2, we now have horizontal and vertical planes, a five elemental, three-dimensional pulse matrix (Diagram 3).

Pulse Matrix (Diagram 3)



Taking it a step further, the *Nan Jing* description of the second level “As heavy as six beans and obtained at the level of the blood vessels, this is the heart section,” ascribes the designation of fire to the heart and small intestine. This of course holds true for the remaining four elements; spleen and stomach are earth organs, lungs and large intestine are metal, kidney and bladder are water and the liver and gall bladder are wood. The pericardium, which occupies the Chi or third position of the right hand, is also affiliated with fire.

Using the kidney as an example we can see that it is a water element whose pulse is felt at the deepest water/bone level (Diagram 4).

(Diagram 4)

Beans	Level	Organs	Element
3 Beans	Skin	Lung	Metal
6 Beans	Blood	Heart	Fire
9 Beans	Muscle	Spleen	Earth
12 Beans	Sinew	Liver	Wood
Lift up from bone	Bone	Kidney	Water

These elemental designations came about through the observations of Chinese philosophers who recognized the inter-connectedness of our body’s functions to natural phenomena in the world at large. The five elements are a further development of yin and yang theory, and help to explain many of our every day realities.

As described in the introduction, the pulse positions, organs and related meridian systems can become unbalanced and exhibit anomalous qualities. There are a total of sixty “influential points” located between the fingers, elbows, toes and knees used to rectify imbalances. Because the yin organs are exclusively used in this system, only thirty of the influential points are shown (Diagram 5).

Influential Points (Diagram 5)

Yin Organs	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Lu Metal	11	10	9	8	5
Sp Earth	1	2	3	5	9
Ht Fire	9	8	7	4	3
Kid Water	1	2	3	7	10
Pc Fire	9	8	7	5	3
Liv Wood	1	2	3	4	8

Why Exclusively Yin Organs? (Chapter Fifty-Two)

Question: “When illnesses develop in the body’s palaces and depots, are they basically the same?”

Answer: “It is like this. An illness that develops in a depot is static and does not move; such an illness does leave its place. An illness that develops in a palace runs around; it flows up and down and does not stay at any place

permanently. From this one knows that illnesses that develop in the depots and palaces are different.”

In the *Nan Jing*, yin organs are called depots and yang organs are called palaces. The idea in Chapter Fifty Two is that yang organs provide a less viable habitat because fluids and substances move through them much faster. Conversely, yin organs capacity to store fluids and substances gives marauding pathogens a better chance to set up residence. This may give some insight as to why the yin organs are focused on in the five depth system.

Needling Instructions, the Difficulty of Difficulties! (Chapter Sixty-Nine)

Question: “In the case of depletion, fill it. In the case of repletion, drain it. When neither a repletion nor depletion is present, remove the illness from the conduits. What does this mean?”

Answer: “The removal of an illness from the conduits themselves because neither a repletion or depletion is present is appropriate if a regular conduit has fallen ill by itself, rather than being hit by an evil transmitted by another conduit. In this case one must select just this one conduit.”

Here we have the golden key. Repletion is not a condition where the conduit is overly full, but rather an illness that has been transmitted to the conduit by its child element. Similarly, depletion is not an empty feeling, but an illness transmitted by the mother element.

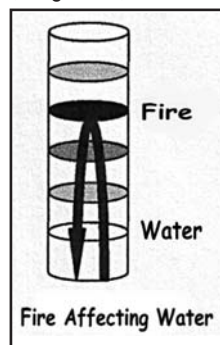
When we experience true fullness or emptiness in the pulse, as is possible with the five depth system, the idea would be to “select just this one conduit.” Practically applied we would substantiate the empty depth and reduce the full depth. This will be made clear in the case below.

The Case—Putting it all together

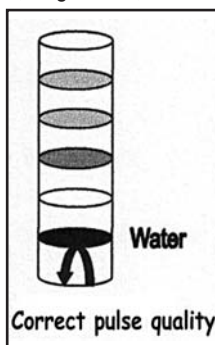
A 38-year-old man presents with chronic low back pain, insomnia and feels hot during the middle of the night. He underwent a partial laminectomy two months ago to relieve low back and right leg pain. The pulse is thin and wiry overall. Making a five depth assessment the left chi/kidney position is

floating and pounding at the blood depth and absent at the water depth. This is indicative of an inappropriate “fire” component in the “water” position (Diagram 6).

Before Treatment (Diagram 6)



After Treatment (Diagram 6a)



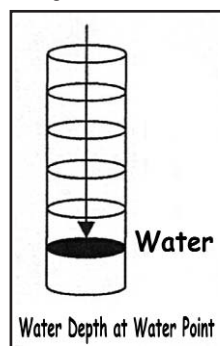
The following treatment should remove the inappropriate fire component, and substantiate the water aspect (Diagram 6a).

1. Needle the fire point on the kidney channel, kidney 2, to reduce fire.
2. Needle the water point on the kidney channel, kidney10, to supplement water.
3. No tonification or sedation techniques are utilized, but rather the homeostatic capacities of a neutral technique are appreciated. Back shu, and source points might be added to consolidate the treatment.

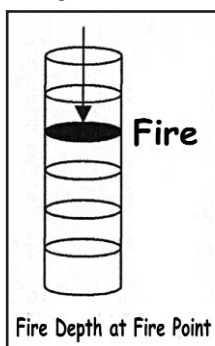
Needle Depth

The five levels can be superimposed onto the body’s acupuncture points, just as they are with the six pulse positions. After selecting water point (kidney10), for instance, needling very deeply would bolster the water essence in an additional way (Diagram 7). Similarly if kidney 2 had been chosen, needling at the fire depth would help reduce the fire, (Diagram 7a). Coordinating needle depth with points can greatly enhance efficacy.

(Diagram 7)



(Diagram 7a)



Checking For Efficacy of Treatment

Following each needle insertion the pulse is then checked to make sure the desired affect has taken place. If not, needle depth can be adjusted or an alternate point might be selected in the ways just described. It is exciting to feel changes in the pulse while treatment is being rendered. This allows for dynamic interaction where the pulse is used much as mechanic depends on his diagnostic equipment to adjust an engine in real time. To simply come up with diagnoses and render treatment without substantiating that the desired affects have taken place is operating on blind faith. With less than a handful of needles, profound harmony can be initiated in a single treatment.

Final Thought

Many people disregard the classical texts as outdated artifacts. I have been delighted to find the *Nan Jing* overflowing with insights that are relevant today. Hopefully this information can bring life to these classical paradigms for others as well. It is only through the clinical application of these theories that we can make qualified judgments about their veracity.

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