

Is There a Role for Post-mortem Acupuncture?

by Jeffrey Dann

Can acupuncture have a role in the rituals and practice of death? Why do I feel that in some cases post-mortem acupuncture may have a role to play in the constellation of practices for the dead person and their surviving ancestors?

This is a report on the most extreme “out of the box” acupuncture experience I have ever had. It happened in 1997 in a cadaver dissection courseⁱ. These experiences were not just the personal imaginings of a deranged mind, but an experience that was shared by other professional participants. Another member on the dissection team journal recorded some of these happenings and I intersperse portions of his journal with my recollection of the events that occurredⁱⁱ.

I had brought my acupuncture needles to this dissection class primarily to experience needle insertion depths. For example, I wanted to see how far it took to reach the brain stem in the forbidden point GV-15, or to pierce the kidney at BL-52, or to cause a pneumothorax at BL-43. I had not the slightest interest or intention of using needles in a mystical or energetic manner in any way.

This cadaver class was different from any others I had taken: we had three complete cadavers, two female and one male. The course was taught by a rolfer who had an anatomically layered approach to the body and a particular interest in the fascial planes and fascial interconnectivity so often neglected in dissection work.

The process for the first two days was so engaging that I totally forgot that I had my needles with me. We approached each cadaver in a holistic way, examining them carefully before any dissection was done. Noticing shape, structure, facial character, and getting an energetic, structural, and even Zang-Fu sense of who they were. We gave them names and thanked them for their gift. Red was a stocky and broad shouldered, an older man who looked like a powerful farmer or laborer. Lucy had a haughty look, like an imperious person used to being obeyed. Eve looked tired, downcast, and depressed. There was an air of unhappiness around her. All appeared to be in their late 70s or early 80s and had been embalmed for at least six months.

Divided into teams of six people to a body we spent three hours meticulously removing the skin, revealing the superficial fascia – adipose layer – seeing it for the first time as an integral

and complete body covering. Few dissections take the time to remove the skin as an entire integral layer. Usually the skin and the superficial fascia are peeled off in thick sheathes down to the muscle layer.

This new layer, a glistening globular body mass of adipose (fat) and loose connective tissue was whole, complete, encasing the entire body like a wet suit. This moist superficial connective tissue is the matrix for the myriad of superficial nerves, blood vessels, capillaries, lymphatics, piloerector skin muscles, a multiplicity of receptors, and other glandular structures.

Staying on this superficial layer caused me immediately to recollect what the classics referred to as the Wei Qi and the Ying Qi level. The Ling Shu says that Wei and Ying come from the same constructive essence of food. While the Ying flows within the vessels, the Wei is “fierce, bold, and uninhibited, unable to be contained by the vessels and therefore flowing outside them.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Ying travels in vessels and is the nutritive source for the flesh. Exploring beneath the skin and above the muscles was this superficial fascial adipose layer, was I looking at the Wei and Ying in the flesh? Was this an anatomic substrate reality described by the ancients or just an energetic metaphor of the Exterior layer of TCM?

The dissection process the second day drew everyone in to his or her own piece of dissection work. Six people with a focused intention but each specifically wrapped into a delicate precise work of dissection. Roger Jordan writes in his journal, “I gladly lose myself in this extremely fine excavation. In 3-4 hours I cover an area maybe nine inches wide by 12 inches long.” I, myself, spent the major part of the day separating and isolating all the muscles of the thigh. And then each team member examined and felt the works performed by the other five members. It was fascinating. So much so that at the end of day two I hadn’t thought to open my needle box at all.

An interesting side note: at the superficial fascia level, each cadaver presented aspects of their individuality and even personality, whereas in the muscle layer all three cadaver forms looked like textbook illustrations of anatomy. When we examined the viscera – the Zang Fu – each revealed again their unique personality in the way they had died. We looked at Eve – imperious grand dame – and her liver was green with cancer.

Farmer Red had shriveled chalky kidneys. Our Lucy with her air of sadness died of a broken heart, literally an aortic aneurism. But I get ahead of myself and need to stay on topic.

Day 3, I looked at the cadavers – open flayed,

cut apart, multiple dissected areas in all levels. I hadn’t used my needles once; I was suddenly frustrated or agitated that I had missed my initial intentions. So I pulled out my needle looking for something, somewhere to test needle depth. I had been working on Lucy for over two full days. We had just discovered that that hard red blob in her chest was congealed blood and we discovered the hole that was the blowout of her aortic aneurism. I was standing on her left side looking into the sad face and broken heart and decided to make my first needle HT-7. My needle depth experiment opportunity had passed, so in empathetic resonance with her body I inserted into her Heart Source point.

As soon as I delicately inserted the needle I felt a flush – something like embarrassment heat. About this Jordan’s journal entry writes, “*Back to the dissection, shortly after lunch, I feel an odd zing run thru my body, I look up to see that Jeffrey has poked an acupuncture into the body. I stand at Lucy’s cranium...I feel something run thru the center of her body, from the chest down maybe. I open my eyes and look at Jeffrey. He holds her left wrist where a silver acupuncture needle sticks out. He says “This is too weird, This is really strange, the tone of his voice conveys concern, doubt, excitement, adventure.” Simultaneously another rolfer on the team said, “I can feel it in my autonomies.”*

All 3 of us have just been rocketed out of convention and the air feels charged with discovery. Jeffrey and his troupe head over to Eve. They direct Divo to place her hands...and close her eyes. Jeffrey places a needle from Liver 3 to Kidney 1 on the sole of Eve’s foot. Divo reports a clear and marked feeling of energy moving. She suddenly feels hot” (R).

By then the third cadaver group has stopped what they’re doing and joined in the air of excitement. Roger continues, “*Things have become so strange and wild at this point.*” John, a skeptical RN-rolfer from group three, challenges us because Red’s kidneys are no longer attached to his body. The journal continues, “*John places his gloved hands on Red’s Kidneys. Jeffrey places a needle at Kidney 1 on the sole of Red’s foot...John says he feels “it” across the room. Doubt and excitement mix in a heady broth. The implications of this stagger us all. Leland suggests we were releasing stored energy in the bones and fascia. “I don’t know” I say. I know this sounds really weird, but it seems as if she, wherever that is, actually carried a charge and its removal has freed her.*”

My own thoughts become questions about the Hun and the Po. The etheric soul that resides in the Liver departs the body upon death. But what

of the Po, the corporeal soul?

This Po that resides in the Lungs, the same source of the superficial Wei Qi. Is the Po retained in the body within the fascia held like a capacitor holding piezo electric charge that the needle stimulation released?

In the succeeding years I have not had the opportunity to re-test these post-mortem acupuncture experiences, but the tantalizing conclusions still haunt my mind. I wonder: is there a place for post-mortem acupuncture for people who have died in trauma or great emotional distress. Can acupuncture release the Po so that hungry ghosts can be freed of fixed place and time? Needling the source points of the organs of death released an energetic discharge that was felt by others than myself. There did seem to be an energetic release and there was a shift in the qualitative energy that surrounded each cadaver. I haven't sought to explore this realm more, but if I were called to help release the trauma of a deceased loved one, I would not hesitate to provide post-mortem acupuncture.

Notes

- i. Gil Hedley's Integral Anatomy courses and DVD's represent the most valuable experiential way to understand and appreciate the layers of the inter-connectedness of the body thru the fascial system.
- ii. Unpublished document "*Dissection*" by Roger Jordan, Rolfer, 1997.
- iii. Wiseman, Nigel and Fe Ye, *A Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*, Paradigm Publications, 1998, p.121.

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