

Conference Feature:

An Extraordinary Interview with Charles (Chip) Chace

by Jan Vanderlinden, MS, LAc

Chip will be presenting Workshops at the Conference on The Extraordinary Vessels and Qi Palpation Saturday and Sunday, September 18 & 19

[On a cool day the spring of 2010 I had the pleasure of interviewing Chip Chace about his new book An Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels: Acupuncture, Alchemy, and Herbal Medicine. He told me about the development of the book, as well as the clinical implications of the Li Shi Zhen's work. He and I have subsequently spent hours refining and clarifying that conversation. It's been a real treat for me, and here is the result. — Jan]



Jan: Chip I want to thank you for taking the time to tell us about the book you just published - Li Shi-Zhen's Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels (Qi jing ba mai kao), and your clinical application of that material. How do you approach this sort of project?

Chip: My fundamental interests are in the intersection of clinical practice, text and palpation. And by text I mean Chinese medical texts in particular and Chinese literature as a whole. With regard to the eight extraordinary vessels, this includes the literature of internal cultivation - which is a virtually untapped source of information for clinicians. So, Miki Shima and I have written a translation and commentary of Li Shi-Zhen's *Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels (Qi jing ba mai kao)*. Its a text written in the late 1500s that's very interesting insofar as it contains information on acupuncture, herbs and internal alchemy - internal cultivation. One thing that I find particularly interesting about this text is that Li Shi-Zhen is clear about the need for acupuncturists to have some familiarity with internal cultivation in order to make use of the eight extraordinary vessels. Similarly, those who would become "transcendents", "immortals", whatever - those who are on this sort of path need some Chinese medical training as well. So that's what the book is about.

Our book approaches this material in a rather unique way. The typical way that people approach the eight extraordinary vessels is to compile an amalgamation of everything that one can find on them. They then place Li Shi-Zhen's contribution to that literature in this larger context. This is the obvious way to begin studying the eight vessels and it's a very sensible way for students to begin working with them. Yet, what happens is that Li-Shi-Zhen's own take on what the extraordinary vessels are about gets lost in that process. Only the stuff that makes sense in the larger context of the extraordinary vessels really comes through. So our primary interest was in presenting Li's own interpretation of the eight extraordinary vessels - not what Giovanni Macciocia says about them - in an effort to present a comprehensive generalization. Or, Elizabeth Rochat de la Valle is perhaps a better example - she quotes Li Shi-Zhen extensively in her very nice overview of the extraordinary vessels, but Li's take on them doesn't stand out. That's not her goal.

Jan: This makes me think about the difference between going to the Museum of Modern Art where

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you see many paintings by different artists, verses going to a show - an in depth show of one artists work where you get to see how an individual master painter processes information and uses pigment to create a painting.

Chip: That's a good analogy. One of the things about Li Shi-Zhen's writing on the eight extraordinary vessels is that many people are fascinated by the Daoist references in the text. This aspect of the text is one of Li Shi-Zhen's core contributions to the extraordinary vessel literature - his integration of these *nei dan*, internal cultivation, or elixir writings. Yet almost none of that makes it into the eight extraordinary vessel information that we use in clinical practice. All stuff all gets set aside because it doesn't make any sense! It doesn't fit this larger picture of the extraordinary vessels we've constructed. We know its supposed to be important and that the eight vessels are somehow "mystical," but it all remains pretty vague.

Jan: Right, I didn't hear about that in my medical training. One of the ways I was taught to work with the extraordinary vessels was by the use of the master couple points. Along with the idea of the extraordinary vessels are reservoirs which can be accessed through the use of these points. People have different ideas about whether that's a good idea or a bad idea - using these extraordinary vessels. Are there specific recommendations about the use of these points or vessels?

Chip: He does indeed cite specific treatments for extraordinary vessel problems. Yet it raises a question as to whether we should understand these prescriptions per se, or as examples of larger principles that can be applied in a larger context.

Li Shi-Zhen writes in a manner that is common for premodern Chinese writers in that he sort of cuts and pastes from other people or other texts to make his point. So what Li himself specifically has to say about the eight extraordinary vessels is actually very limited. At a glance, his book looks like a compilation or sort of anthology of quotes on the eight extraordinary vessels. You have to read it very carefully to see what his point is and see how indeed he edited those quotations.

One example of this kind of editing is that there is no mention of the so-called master couple points. At the time Li was writing, the master couple points had been extant in the literature of the extraordinary vessel for a least a hundred years and Li had famously had access to lots of different kinds of libraries, both imperial libraries and private libraries. So, it is unlikely that he was unaware of his information. He's clearly interested in some other approach to the extraordinary vessels. So, he doesn't have anything in particular to say about whether it is a good idea or a bad idea to use the master couple points, he just omits them.

Jan: What sort of guidance does Li Shi-Zhen give to clinicians? Does he suggest protocols or practices for using these vessels clinically? Or for using them for internal cultivation?

Chip: To me it makes the most sense to understand the treatment protocols in the *qijing bamai kao* as specific examples of more generalized principles. The passages Li cites from the *nei dan* literature are also unquestionably general in their content. But if we do indeed understand these principles, then we can adapt them in whatever manner is most appropriate to a given situation.

Reading premodern texts in this way requires a lot from the reader. It requires a thorough background in the material one is reading, demands patience, and more than a 5 minute attention span. But that's how the best physicians have worked their chops for the past two millennia.

Our goal in writing this book was to help modern readers to more creatively access the text. We

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tried to do as academically rigorous a translation and a commentary of the book as we could, but we were very aware of the fact that clinicians ask different questions of medical texts than academics do. Our analysis of the text focuses on the questions that we think Chinese medical practitioners should ask of the text.

We're not really interested in presenting any answers. Pre-modern medical texts don't give you answers anyway, they give you interesting questions. Those questions are like koans, you chew on them for days, months, or years, and after you live with them for a while you get some insight into what how to apply them clinically.

Li Shi-Zhen isn't giving us any more answers than any other premodern medical writer. So, what we have done is to lay out, in as critical a way as possible what sort of questions a practitioner would want to ask of the text to make his or her own decisions about how to use it. We're not interested in spoon feeding answers to practitioners. We're interested in providing a reliable translation and in helping to clarify the questions inherent in the text, to give readers a range of plausible possibilities as to what it might mean clinically so that they can draw their own conclusions. So this approach is very different from virtually any Chinese medical translation that I'm aware of.

The goal of reading premodern medical literature is not to find answers. It's the questions that are the source of the creative potential. Any time a clinician gives me a definitive answer about anything my warning lights go off. Because you can almost always find some other equally qualified individual who gives you a contradictory answer. In the end it's a function of having to decide these things yourself.

Pulses

Jan: So what sort of questions do get raised in the text?

Chip: Well, for instance, in the book Li Shi-Zhen presents an elaborate and rather idiosyncratic system of extraordinary vessel pulse diagnosis - what are we supposed to do with that? Each of the pulses are linked in that text - he is basically quoting from the appendix of *Mai Jing* - the pulse classic - which goes back to about 200 AD. Each pulse is embedded in a discussion of symptoms, and treatment strategies, so it's a whole complex. You have seizures, "sheep-like bleating," along with a pulse quality and you're supposed to do these points. Now is that a specific example, or this a "for instance," an example of some larger principle that we're supposed to comprehend? That's a good example. There was a Japanese man - Kido Katsuyasu - who took some of this extraordinary vessel pulse information and pared it down and came up with something simple and made it workable for him - he made it accessible to him. A lot of information gets lost in his system but it's a way that HE answered the question. That's not THE answer to the question but it AN answer to the question. So what to do with the extraordinary vessel pulse diagnosis is a really great question.

For instance - is an extraordinary vessel pulse discernible in every individual? Can you say "oh that person's got a *dai mai* pulse and this one a *ren mai* pulse, just as you can say that this person's pulse is wiry and floating and that person's pulse is sinking and slippery?" Or are extraordinary vessel pulses only discernible in certain individuals? The pulse qualities that are described in Li's book based on the *Mai Jing* are pulse qualities that are typically linked with the *guai mai* - the strange pulses - which are death pulses. And this implies something about extraordinary vessel patterns in the *Mai Jing*. They are deep problems and these people are very sick. So that's an example of a whole constellation of questions that come up. There is no one definite answer to that.

Jan: What are the clinical implications of this?

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Chip: Some people claim to routinely be able to discern these pulses in nearly every patient. I think that's a function of what your criteria for an extraordinary vessel pulse is. For instance, a *yin qiao* pulse feels hard in the proximal position, in the 3rd position, in what most of us consider the kidney position. Its oddly hard and pebble-like, and that generally not good. Its not just that it's a little hard, it's really hard. But in the course of treating someone, you might say to yourself "that pulse has just gotten hard and it's rolling in a funny way now." So what are your options? Is that a kidney yang problem? Is it a triple warmer problem? Does that just mean that it is something in the lower jiao that's talking to you me? Or does it mean that maybe an underlying *yin qiao* problem has presented itself just as in meridian therapy, the pathologies in the yang pulses often appear after you've properly treated the yin pulses. Which of those options makes the most sense in the overall context of what you're seeing right then with that particular person, where the arc of the treatment is going and that sort of thing. That is, I think, a creative and effective way to engage the eight extraordinary vessels pulses. But its not easy to teach in that you can't just call up an extraordinary vessel pulse on demand in a seminar setting. .

Jan: I think one of the problems with learning pulse diagnosis of any kind in seminars is that you might identify a quality in the pulse and then after two or three people have palpated the pulse it changes.

Chip: Well, that's certainly true in general but in my experience extraordinary vessel pulses don't tend to change like that. If it flits away it probably wasn't an extraordinary vessel pulse to begin with. I guess that makes it a little easier.

Herbs

Jan: Can you talk a bit about the herbal piece of it - which seems very interesting to me.

Chip: Yes, one of the things that Li Shi-Zhen does, and he does it particularly clearly with the herbal material, is that he takes someone else's idea about something and then he develops it. For instance there is a guy named Zhang Jie Gu. Zhang took the Taiyang cinnamon twig decoction pattern from the *Shang Han Lun* and decided that was consistent with *yang wei mai* problem. So fever and chills with sweating and a floating pulse is a yang wei mai pattern treatable with cinnamon twig decoction. Li Shi-Zhen adopted this kind of thinking and ran with it. One of the things Li actually says is that Zhang didn't work this idea as thoroughly as he could. Li always starts with a core pathodynamic that is largely based on the patterns laid out in the *Nan Jing - The Classic of Difficulties*, 27 and 28. So for instance, the core pathodynamic for the *chong mai* is counterflow, specifically accompanied by abdominal urgency. So from Li's perspective, any time that you have counterflow, and abdominal urgency, you have a *chong mai* problem. And any formula that treats this sort of presentation is potentially a *chong mai* pattern. This is a very interesting idea, and the same principle is applied to all the other vessels. Li draws from a wide range of sources going back to Zhang Zhong-Jing the writer of the *Shang Han Lun*. Li Shi-Zhen's thinking was very influenced by Li Dong Yuan and it figures prominently in his writings, particularly the *Ben Cao Gang Mu* thinking. That's a synopsis of Li's approach to herbal medicine in the *qi jing ba mai kao*.

So the question that comes up next with regard to the eight extraordinary vessels is "why bother?" Why do we need an eight extraordinary vessels diagnosis when we can get along just fine with a *zang fu* or some other form of diagnosis? Saying that something is a *chong mai* problem doesn't eliminate the need to do a more nuanced assessment - you still need to do a precise diagnosis.

One thing that an extraordinary vessel perspective provides is a meta-diagnosis, a larger diagnostic framework for understanding the big picture. So you might say, this individual has heat in the lungs and ascending counterflow to the head and blood stagnation in the lower abdomen and then they

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have some spleen qi deficiency going on all at the same time. Well, another way of looking at that is - yes that's true and oh - look it's a *chong mai* problem! Or they might have low back pain, frequent urination and chronically tense iliotibial bands - wow, I wonder if that's a *yang qiao* problem. You can conceptualize things in a much more general systemic way. That can be helpful in focusing your efforts on the core issues at play and keeps you from getting hung up on secondary issues.

Jan: So can you describe more how this has been used in clinical practice?

Chip: We have a section in the book entitled Legacy - what people have subsequently done with Li Shi-Zhen ideas. Historically, one of the most important persons in this regard is Ye Tian-Shi. He took this idea of looking at the general pattern and seeing it in the context of the eight extraordinary vessels and really ran with it. Of course, he did a lot of other things with it, too. Ye is most famous for adding animal products that nourish essence. All of his herbal formulas can be understood as opening in some way or another and he is always opening the eight vessels. Even when he is tonifying he is opening.

Jan: What does that mean for him? How does he achieve those two aims?

Chip: Well it's very interesting. Sometimes he's using something very overt - he's really moving the qi. Other times it's more subtle - the two most common herbs that Li Shi-Zhen and Ye Tian-Shi prescribes are - oddly enough - *dang gui* and *fu ling*. Now, one's a blood herb and one's a qi herb. We know *dang gui* nourishes the blood and it also moves the blood. *Fu ling* nourishes the spleen and also drains dampness. So it's opening in that sense. And that's a very interesting idea to work that in. His contributions really involve the animal products and the notion of opening. Which incidentally is a fundamental concept involved in the internal cultivation of the eight extraordinary vessels. It is opening the eight extraordinary vessels, that's what you do

Jan: What kind of opening is that?

Chip: Well, that's a whole conversation, but the idea is that it's creating free flow. It's like if you had a straw and you had to blow through it to create free flow - that's what it is. So that's the herbal piece, and there is a whole other set of questions that go with that - when is it useful, how is it useful, in what context is it useful?

Palpation

Jan: I'm really curious about the connection between this work and your own training and work in cranial osteopathy.

Chip: Well for me the cranial osteopathy provides a vocabulary for engaging qi in a more articulate way than most of us engage it. Many practitioners may be very sensitive to qi and have a great capacity for engaging qi, but by and large there is an inarticulate quality about that. And that often translates into "well if you don't understand what I'm talking about then you don't get it - and in twenty years maybe you'll figure it out for yourself".

Jan: So practitioners don't have a precise language that we can share with each other about the work we do. Makes it difficult to discuss cases and get feedback and test our ideas.

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Chip: Very good point. Having a common vocabulary is the first and foremost aspect of my study of osteopathic palpation. Then beyond that, in cranial osteopathy there is an interest in energetic dynamics like tides - mid-tide, long-tide - fluid qualities and mid-lines. All of these things map very well with the kinds of gross energetic dynamics we see in the eight extraordinary vessels. These kind of sensibilities also make some of the *nei dan* aspects of the eight vessels much more comprehensible. They give us a means of working with them in a more sophisticated manner.

Jan: Some practitioners like Kiiko Matsumoto have suggested that there is a relationship between embryological development and the eight extraordinary vessels. What do you think about that?

Chip: Well, Steven Birch and Kiiko were not saying that the eight extraordinary vessels are embryologically based. Their point was that you can see an embryological resonance between the *chong ren* and du with the ectoderm, mesoderm, and endoderm. That's a piece of creative speculation, and there are indeed a number of ways to look at the eight vessels embryologically that do make sense. Because of the former heaven "embryo of the dao" resonances that the eight extraordinary vessels have, that's juicy terrain and it may be very useful to look at. Of course, we have to remember that this is not what the people who invented the eight extraordinary vessels had in mind. We have to realize that this embryological material may be helpful mental construct, but it's a construct just the same. For me, this sort of thing is just a nice thought unless I can hold it in my hands. So if we want to investigate these ideas, test these constructs how do we do that? This is where the osteopathic sensibilities really shine. They have a palpatory vocabulary for working with embryological forces that is readily applicable to acupuncture practice. This helps us make it tangible. It takes some time, but we can learn to feel this stuff in our hands so we're not just talking about it vaguely and theoretically.

Jan: What then is Li's basic underlying message?

Chip: The core lesson that I think Li Shi-Zhen brings from the literature of internal cultivation, is that they are accessed from a place of stillness. And, they are a means towards a deeper and more profound place of stillness. That's his central message. You were asking me earlier if there were any practices advocated by Li Shi-Zhen. In the early stages of our research I was hoping exactly that - to find "Li Shi-Zhen's qi gong." But that's not what we find. Instead, what we find is stillness. So what do we do with that piece of information? As practitioners - what does that mean for us clinically? He's challenging us - he's saying that you've got to understand this *nei dan* stuff. You need to understand that the eight extraordinary vessels are accessed from a place of stillness, and that you as a practitioner are part of this deepening into the one. Does this mean we all have to walk around in some sort of meditative zombie-like trance? [Chip poses as zombie]. I don't think so. I hope not.

Jan: [laughter] Absolutely!

Chip: [pause] I think that to me that's really interesting and it is a place of intersection with my interest in cranial osteopathy and what not.

Jan: It makes me think of my tai chi practice. At the beginning of the form you are in the state of wu ji. Then the form begins and you move, and when you reach the completion of a posture, you are again in a state of wu ji. So you're going back to stillness, an undifferentiated state, every time you complete a move. So it is that practice of being able to access that place, and then moving from that place.

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Chip: I think that certainly is an interpretation that is consistent with what Li Shi-Zhen seems to be telling us. It raises interesting questions. In terms of the pacing, the cadence, the rhythm of an acupuncture treatment, should we just dive right in to treating the eight extraordinary vessels? Some people do. And I can't say that's wrong. But Li Shi-Zhen seems to be telling us that there needs to be some inherent stillness in the system before we really go there and that whatever we do with the eight extraordinary vessels should really facilitate a deepening of that stillness. So that is a very concrete way of thinking about it - do we even go looking for these eight extraordinary vessels dynamics right off the bat?

Jan: And stillness is the access point for cultivating internal changes.

Chip: Absolutely. But he's just saying deal with this information - he's not telling you how to deal with this information. I've been working with the extraordinary vessels in general since the early 1980's and with this *nei dan* stuff for over 10 years now since we started working on our translation. What does it mean? I'm continuing to research the eight vessels in the *nei dan* literature as a whole. What is the real nature of relationship between the eight vessels and internal cultivation. If you open the eight extraordinary vessels does that somehow make you a more spiritual person? That doesn't really seem to be what these texts say. It's really fascinating, partly because different people say different things. My own understanding is continuing to evolve and is now much more nuanced from the position I took when I wrote the alchemy chapter on alchemy in the book. .

Jan: In what way?

Chip: We'll, I think there is ample evidence that there is indeed an order, a certain place in the course of internal cultivation where it's most appropriate to open the eight extraordinary vessels. Historically, the early *neidan* texts start out being very general and very arcane. In the course of 1800 years they become increasingly specific and they will actually begin to tell you what to do. They'll say "ok this is the order that you do this in - first you get a little bit quiet, then you open the water wheel, then you move on. And then you open the heel channel in another way. So does this have meaning for medical practice, or is it just so different that it's irrelevant for us? Li Shi-Zhen certainly thought it was relevant so here I am. It's a mess, but it's an interesting mess. If you think pre-modern Chinese medical literature is a mess, the Daoist canon is a nightmare.

Jan: But you're doing it anyway.

Chip: I'm just trying to take seriously Li Shi-Zhen's admonition that we have to really engage this *neidan* material if we're going to make the best use of the eight vessels. The palpation piece keeps me grounded in a tangible sensory experience and for me, that's the basis for meaningful clinical application.

At the 2010 AAC Conference Charles (Chip) Chace will be speaking on his new book, An Exposition on the Eight Extraordinary Vessels: Acupuncture, Alchemy, and Herbal Medicine based on the translation of Li Shi Zhen's seminal text on the extraordinary vessels. He will follow lectures on Saturday afternoon and Sunday with smaller group workshops on palpation and pulse diagnosis based on this text.

In addition to being an author and translator, Chip maintains a private practice in Boulder and teaches worldwide.