
STEMS AND BRANCHES ACUPUNCTURE · SAMPLE CHAPTERS · FREE

WHY THE SAME POINTS WORK FOR ONE PATIENT AND NOT FOR ANOTHER

Three chapters from the six-volume series
for acupuncturists

SIFTED THROUGH 25 YEARS OF PRACTICE AND 15 YEARS OF TRAINING ACUPUNCTURISTS

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Clinical Acupuncture

Stems and Branches Acupuncture — The Practical Side

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You are welcome to pass this file on to anyone who needs it.

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What this file is

These are real chapters from the six-volume series **Stems and Branches Acupuncture — The Practical Side**: three of them, in full, not shortened and not rewritten. Not a summary, not a teaser — a piece of the book, so that you can judge whether you want the rest.

Who it is for. Acupuncturists and acupuncture students. I assume you needle and you know the meridians. I am not writing for patients.

What you will find here.

1. **Chapter one of volume one** — what a needle actually does, and why ninety-nine per cent of the treatments in my clinic are tonification. Plus the short story of how this system ended up in my practice.
2. **Chapter six of volume one** — why these are tendencies and not determinants, and what the trap of the little tables is. This is the chapter after which it is usually clear whether someone will work with this system honestly.
3. **Chapter fourteen of volume two** — one of the five elements in full: earth. What it is, what it looks for, what helps it. Together with what I say to a patient like that on the couch.

At the end there is a cheat sheet of the whole series on one page, and where to find the rest.

Two technical notes. The chapters come from different volumes, so you will meet references like “as I wrote in volume four” — I have left them as they are. And the second: there is no point selection in these chapters. Not because it is a secret, but because points cannot be handed over without the pulse under your fingers.

Disclaimer

This is an educational publication for acupuncturists and acupuncture students. It is not medical advice, not a diagnosis and not a treatment recommendation in any individual case. **It does not serve to diagnose, treat or prevent any disease and it does not replace a visit to a doctor.** The descriptions of people in this book are tendencies, not determinants — checked on the pulse, not read off a table. What I describe does not work in everyone and does not work every time; when I write that something “works”, I am describing what I have seen in some of my patients, not a rule. Patients and course participants have been altered so that no one can be recognised; the mechanism in each of them is true.

PART I. What a needle actually does

1. A piece of iron and a change you can see at once

Let me start with the question I ask at every training, and which sooner or later everyone who starts needling asks themselves.

How do you explain that we stick a piece of iron into a person's body — one piece, in one point — and something changes?

And not “in a week's time”. Often immediately. Those who have been on my live courses have seen it with their own eyes: the person's appearance changes, their behaviour, the colour of the face. The tongue changes — shape, colour, even the coating can redistribute itself within a few seconds. The pulse changes. Something happens right away.

My answer is this: acupuncture is energy medicine. I cannot explain it any other way and I do not know anyone who can. The needle introduces no substance. It removes nothing mechanically. And yet it works.

The person as an energy cloud

Here is how I approach it: the person who walks into my clinic is a certain energy cloud. A certain vibration comes to me — and something in it is off, something is not working too well. The whole art lies in working out **which** vibration is

not functioning. Not “something is wrong”, but specifically: which one.

That is what this system is for. So that the diagnosis is precise.

You have probably heard that Chinese medicine is individualised medicine, personalised. And then you open a TCM textbook and you get fifteen points to choose from for one syndrome. All of them? One? In turn? I hated that. It was my biggest frustration in my first years of practice — and the reason I started looking further.

The needle adds nothing and takes nothing away

Here is the first thing that resets your thinking.

In our heads we carry a simple picture: excess means too much of something, deficiency means too little of something. So you have to add or subtract. But take a good look at the needle. It adds nothing and it takes nothing away. There is no drug in it, it does not suck anything out of the body.

The needle **changes the vibration**. It reminds that energy cloud of a vibration it had forgotten.

That is why, for the purpose of understanding energy, I prefer to put it differently. **Deficiency** is a weaker contact between the body and some vibration. **Excess** is a situation in which the body over-uses some vibration — and it almost al-

ways does that because it is short of something else. You lean on what is strong in you, because you have no access to what is weak.

Out of that comes something that surprises people coming from TCM: **in my clinic ninety-nine per cent of treatments are tonification.** I do not take away from the body what it has “too much” of, because I know why it has too much — because it is short of something. I find what is missing. When it stops being missing, the body has better contact with that energy, it no longer has to over-use another one, and the symptoms, the syndromes, the complaints pass. Not because I subtracted something. Because I reminded it of something.

FOR THE PRACTITIONER

That sentence about ninety-nine per cent is more important than anything you will read about points. If your reflex when faced with excess is to disperse, this system will seem illogical to you — because it does not ask “what do I subtract” at all. It asks: **what is this person looking for, if it has been flexing that energy so hard?** Excess is the symptom. Deficiency is the cause. We work on the cause.

The second consequence: with this approach you use few needles. For me that is one, two, three, rarely four. The information is then precise, targeted, and it works over the long run. There is a price for that, and I write about it in chapter six — precise information can also be precisely wrong.

A conversation through the pulse

How do I know what the body is looking for? From the pulse.

For an acupuncturist, taking the pulse is critical. Not “useful” — critical. Through the pulse we talk to the patient’s body. We ask: how are things with you, what are you busy with? And the body answers: listen, I am busy with this and that, but somehow it is not working out.

And our job is to find that weak link. We needle a point and say: try this vibration, maybe things will be easier for you with it. The body checks. If we got it right, it answers immediately — and then it no longer has to use this and that energy it had been flexing as a reserve.

That is how it works. It is simple.

Simple — on one condition. That we are able to judge which energies are deficient, and then, among those deficient ones, to pick the ones that are **the most important from the point of view of this particular person**. Because on the pulse you often see deficiency in several places at once. Stomach, large intestine, gall bladder, bladder. All of them? Which one?

This is exactly where Stems and Branches comes in. Knowing a person’s birth tendencies, we see which energies are critical for them — which ones they have good contact with and which ones worse, and that from the very beginning. The chart suggests at which level the disturbance happened. The pulse confirms it or it does not. And then with the ne-

edle we remind the body of the right vibration, and the body says: ah, this is better.

Symptoms are secondary

And the last thing by way of introduction, which is sometimes the hardest to accept.

In this medicine, symptoms are secondary.

Of course they matter. They cause discomfort, they are the reason the patient came, they are what they suffer from, and they are supposed to disappear. But when it comes to **diagnosis**, symptoms can make a real mess. Take a disturbance of wood — there will be a lot about wood in this book. In one person it will be tinnitus, in another migraines, in the next one dizziness, neck stiffness, palpitations. You could go on forever. **Where** the pathology of wood shows up in the energy cloud is secondary. What is primary is that wood is disturbed.

That is why I do not diagnose from the symptoms. I diagnose from the pulse, and the birth chart tells me what to expect. A symptom is information about where to look. It is not the answer.

2. How this system ended up in my clinic

I will say a few words about myself, because without that you will not understand why I write the way I do.

I have been doing acupuncture for twenty-five years. I started, like everyone, with TCM. Then came five-element acupuncture, bagua, various things. Until I met Rani, who turned my practice upside down with a single weekend course — he said that everything we know is untrue, and left us with that. Greetings, Rani.

Later I met his teacher — Joan Duveen, a student of Dr J.D. van Buren. I had the chance to take part in his two-year Stems and Branches acupuncture course. It is called the “basic course”, but it had nothing to do with basics: a huge amount of theory, very intensive. Later I also learned from other students of Joan’s — each of them works a little differently — and from Joan himself. Most of what I know comes from him. That shaped the foundation of my practice as it is today.

And then came five, six years of testing. What holds up and what does not. What is practical and what is beautiful philosophy that sounds lovely in a lecture and cannot be used in the clinic at half past eight in the morning with a patient who has low back pain.

I would not be myself if I had not put all of it through my own filters. So not everything you read here is a one-to-one transmission. I have a motto: **what is true is what holds up.** I do not like theories that tell a beautiful story about something and cannot be used. I focus on what works — so that acupuncture is a pleasure.

Because this is supposed to be fun. What other profession gives you this: the chance to check your own work immediately? You take the pulse, you do the treatment, and you know right away whether you did a good job or not. Not in a month. Now.

Being honest about the limits of this knowledge

And one more thing before we go on. We know a lot. What is more — we know enough to practise effective acupuncture. But we do not know everything.

Energy is one. For the purposes of study we divide it into levels — great movements, stems, branches, divisions — but it interpenetrates and it does not ask our permission. We analyse different levels and even so there remains a margin we do not understand. I regret that very much and I keep looking. If someone one day gets the full revelation and knows everything — I hope they will share it with me.

I write this so that you do not expect a system without gaps from this book. There is no such thing. There is a system that

is enough to help people — and one I check on the pulse myself every day, and have done for fifteen years.

PART II. Tendencies, not determinants

6. Tendencies, not determinants

The energy a person took in with their first inhalation is the net result of many influences. In this system we analyse four basic levels:

- **the Great Movements of Heaven** — that is, the five elements in their active and passive versions, ten variants, a ten-year cycle;
- **the Ten Heavenly Stems** — the inner life, the readiness to act;
- **the Twelve Earthly Branches** — the outer life, the way in which we interact with the world;
- **the Six Divisions**, also called the six layers.

Each level gets its own volume in this series. Here I want to talk about the principle that applies to all of them at once — and without which the rest makes no sense.

Why "tendencies"

The birth energy: tendencies or determinants? Tendencies, obviously.

Someone may have a birth tendency towards weakness in one energy and excess in another — towards better and worse contact. Take me. At the level of the great movements

I have a tendency towards strong earth and weak wood. What we call “revenge” may also come into play — a third element that steps in when the body cannot cope with that basic pair. In my case that would be metal.

And now imagine that Richter walks into the clinic and on the pulse he has **fire**. Something that does not fit the birth puzzle at all.

What might that mean? Perhaps that in the first years of life I was exposed to vibrations of a fire character and the body remembered it. Perhaps something else again. Tendencies are only tendencies. Whether they develop depends on circumstances. What is more: we have tendencies at all the levels we analyse, but they do not all develop at once. It is life that decides whether the more disturbed level will be the stems, the branches or the great movements.

Why I am saying this: the trap of tables

I am saying this for a specific reason. So that you do not use this system — or any chrono-acupuncture, any acupuncture “set by time” — out of a table.

I know what I am talking about, because I did exactly that myself before I met this system. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it did not. Sometimes miracles, sometimes nothing, and sometimes the patient got worse.

Because remember: in acupuncture with a small number of needles the information is precise, targeted and it works in

the long run. That is its strength. And that is its risk. If you make a mistake — if you give the body information it did not need — you can make things worse. A precise mistake is worse than a blurred one.

There is some comfort in this. If you do not treat every day, the body has time to answer. Every treatment is a lesson, a piece of information. The body checks whether it functions better with it. If not — it usually has about five days to undo it. But if week after week you force the same wrong concept on it — you can destabilise it, and not just for a moment. I have come across such cases.

So: no tables. What matters most is the person, the energy cloud and the pulse.

FOR THE PRACTITIONER

The order that protects you from this mistake:

1. The pulse — what the body is busy with today.
2. The chart — which of what I am feeling fits the birth tendencies, and what is acquired.
3. The decision about the level — great movements, stems or branches. That decides the point selection and what you tell the patient.
4. The treatment — few needles, precisely.
5. The reading — the pulse after the treatment, the change on the tongue, in the face. You know straight away.

If you do it in the reverse order — from the chart to the pulse — then you are not examining the patient. You are looking on the pulse for confirmation of a table. You will always find it, and you will always be wrong.

PART III. One of the five elements: earth

14. Earth

What it is

Earth is the vibration of pulsation. The energy of giving and taking, of attraction. The fact that everything pulsates — every cell, the whole universe — is what allows things to be held in their proper place. From the textbooks you know the pathologies of earth: organ prolapse, blood leaving the vessels. That is precisely the loss of what holds things in place.

But earth is above all the energy of **digestion** — the ability to digest life. Not only food. On the intellectual level, the emotional, the mental. It is about the balance between your own centre and the outside world. We show ourselves to the world, we show our ego. The world answers. We take in that reaction and we build a sense of the true self — on the basis of it too. And there is nothing wrong with that: we take part in the event, we create it, so on the basis of other people's reactions we can judge whether our behaviour was appropriate, effective, constructive.

The problem begins when that reaction becomes the only source of the centre.

What it looks for and what it finds

The most common disturbance I see in patients in Poland concerns exactly this, earth. I am repeating it after Joan and there is something in it.

On the mental level it looks like this: a person **becomes dependent on other people's opinions**. That coin has two sides. The first: I look for applause and praise, because when somebody says I am great, in the short term I find a centre — I identify with what others say. But in a moment somebody will say I am hopeless, and that same centre falls apart. I am too far outside myself. I look for the cause of feeling bad outside, and for the solution outside as well — I behave in ways that will gather applause, that will keep a pleasant, sweetness-and-light atmosphere. I am exaggerating, but you know what I mean.

The other side: earth in stagnation, too tightly squeezed. These people could not care less about others. They do their own thing, they go through like a battering ram, they are not in the least interested in what others feel and think. They become egocentric. All they want is to take, take and take.

So it is either too much of me on the outside — I give too much, I put too much energy into relations with my surroundings — or stagnation and nothing but taking.

On top of that comes **competitiveness**. We build our identity on rivalry — with others or with ourselves. I am OK if I am better, faster, more beautiful, cleverer. Or I set the bar for

myself: tomorrow I have to be better than today. Tomorrow, when I am running a training, I have to do it even better. It would give me nothing. I cannot be better than I am — and if I try very hard, it will come out as a caricature.

And sweetness. The simplest substitute for earth is **the sweetness of everyday life**. Sweets, the sweet taste — including the natural, organic sort: root vegetables, spreads, bread. For a moment we feel better, we feel we have fed the earth. But these things are hard to digest, so they deepen the pathology of earth — they push the person even further from what they are looking for. And sweetness in relationships: an atmosphere that cannot stand conflict. I expend a huge amount of energy to improve a relationship that is harming me, because things have to be nice. And that is not always my responsibility — we do not have to answer for every aspect of every relationship.

There is one more symptom, a very Polish one: **diet**. The rise in the popularity of dietary therapy and of interest in dietetics comes, in my view, precisely from a problem with the earth element. People with disturbed earth can be totally fixated on diet — they know everything about it and they are still ill. It is not that one should not have a diet. It is that a person **should not have to focus on it that much**.

A note for therapists: we ourselves often have a disturbance of earth. You can see it as form outweighing content. We try to provide a friendly atmosphere — there is nothing wrong with that — but if the form becomes more important than

the content, the person feels good in our clinic, and that is not what they come for. Partly, maybe. But the point is for them to feel good **with themselves**, to find earth inside themselves — and not solely and exclusively on the therapist’s couch. Natural or unnatural.

Long-term solutions	Short-term solutions
The ability to take responsibility for one’s own life	Egoism, egocentricity, competitiveness
Work without fatigue, conscientiousness	Dependence on other people’s opinions
The ability to present oneself without boasting	Excessive compassion, sycophancy; constantly making sure that other people are OK
Willingness to serve, empathy and compassion	Blaming others: “it’s not my fault”
Awareness, mindfulness, patience	Being lost in the past: “remember how, 45 years ago...”
Repeatability	Nursing a grudge
Intellect, memory	The need for sweetness
	Dogmatism: “THIS is good and that is not”; only my truth counts
	Complete inflexibility, rigidity
	Fixation on diet — they know everything and they are still ill

What helps

What does working on your own ego consist of? It is work on awareness, focus, mindfulness, patience. Those are the key words — but then a patient comes in and key words give him nothing. So I put it more simply.

I tell him that he is probably dependent on the outside world — on praise and on criticism — and that this causes big changes in how he functions. And I ask him to **notice** the situations in which his state of mind changes although nothing in his life has changed: all that has appeared is a person saying he is great, or a person saying he is not. Nothing has happened, and he feels completely different.

The second thing to notice: that he wants to be better. Rivalry — better, faster, cleverer — that is, building a good frame of mind on comparison.

The third: food. Diet matters here, because a person with weak earth — unlike somebody with strong earth — will not digest fast food and will have trouble with transformation, which includes getting rid of toxins. But I do not give a menu. I give a small trick, which I did not invent and which I consider very effective: let him notice **why he wants to eat something**, how he feels while he is eating, and how he feels an hour and two hours later. Let him become aware of the correlation between what he eats and how he feels. And once he has got the hang of that — let him notice the same thing after a meeting with his boss, his partner, his child. How does he feel an hour later? Has he digested it, or

is he flat on his back? Does he feel light, or full and heavy — mentally, emotionally, physically, it makes no difference. **That is, how he digests life.**

And one warning: **do not recommend meditation to these people.** They can have an enormous problem with it — many people “meditate” and it has nothing to do with meditation. What I do encourage is breathing exercises. Wim Hof, Soma Breath, whatever — there are plenty of methods and online access is huge. The only thing that matters is doing them regularly. Focusing on the breath, preferably a guided one, in which the thoughts do not scatter, allows you to focus on the centre. Even if the patient is not aware that through the breath he is raising the vibrations of earth — they appear. In time it will be easier for him to work on earth. And let us not forget: he was in the clinic and with the needle we strengthened exactly that, earth.

What I say to the patient when we are working on earth

Your body has a tendency for your state of mind to depend heavily on what other people say. A compliment — and everything is excellent. Criticism — and it all falls apart. Just notice when that happens. Nothing more.

With food: notice why you want to eat that, and how you feel an hour and two hours later. Then the same after conversations: after whom are you light, and after whom are you full.

Two minutes of breathing a day: in through the nose down into the belly, out through the mouth. No meditation. Just the breath.

FOR THE PRACTITIONER

Those of you who were at the pulse workshops remember the shen-qi-jing examination. Postnatal jing — the springiness of the vessel — is weakened in most cases. That matters for one reason: if a person does not have good earth, does not digest life, then it is also harder for them to **digest the information they receive during the treatment**. In my experience the difference between a patient with good postnatal jing and one without it is roughly two years of therapy. Only once good earth has developed is a person able to work on themselves — because they have contact with the true self. So with weak earth, do not rush the rest of the chart.

PART IV. The whole series on one page

Cheat sheet

This is the last page of volume six: the whole system in one place. Not to learn it from — to have it at hand once you have read the series.

Abbreviations. Lu lung · LI large intestine · St stomach · Sp spleen · Ht heart · SI small intestine · Bl bladder · Kd kidney · Pc pericardium · TB triple burner · Gb gall bladder · Liv liver. Branch names are written in full (Zi, Chou, Yin, Mao, Chen, Si, Wu, Wei, Shen, You, Xu, Hai).

Volume 1 — The Energy Cloud. A person is a cloud, not a collection of organs. The four emanations: yang-yin, activity-experience. We have everything in us; with some things we have a stronger contact. Tendencies, not determinants. The goal: the vertical axis. Treatment + one recommendation.

Volume 2 — The Great Movements. The five elements, the solar year, ten great movements → an active (+) or passive (−) element. **The challenge** = the response to the great movement: active → the element it controls; passive → the element that controls it. **The revenge** = the element that controls the active member of the pair, when the body cannot cope. Deficiency → the same one or the preceding one; excess → the controlling one.

Volume 3 — The Ten Heavenly Stems. The inner life, the “I”. A stem = a meridian in an element (Jia Gb in earth · Yi Liv in metal · Bing SI in water · Ding Ht in wood · Wu St in fire · Ji Sp in earth · Geng LI in metal · Xin Lu in water · Ren Bl in wood · Gui Kd in fire). **Unlike qi** = the stem opposite on the circle (Jia↔Ji · Yi↔Geng · Bing↔Xin · Ding↔Ren · Wu↔Gui). Into a strong energy that has weakened we do not pour more.

Volume 4 — The Twelve Earthly Branches. The outer life, interaction. The organ clock, the hexagrams, the animals; a 12-year cycle (1960 = Zi = gall bladder). **Unlike qi** = the opposite on the clock (Gb↔Ht · Liv↔SI · Lu↔Bl · LI↔Kd · St↔Pc · Sp↔TB). **The background** = the group from the reversed hexagrams (I: Gb Ht Pc St · II: LI Kd SI Liv · III: Sp TB Bl Lu). **Deep energy:** wood

Lu LI · fire Sp Ht · earth Liv St SI Pc · metal Bl Kd · water TB Gb. Background first, then unlike qi. The branches — first in the therapy.

Volume 5 — The Six Divisions. An atmosphere, not a strong side. Branch → division (Zi/Wu shao yin · Chou/Wei tai yin · Yin/Shen shao yang · Mao/You yang ming · Chen/Xu tai yang · Si/Hai jue yin); from 5 August ± 3 steps. Pairs hand + foot. The condition: **the same quality on two positions**. At the end, if at all.

Volume 6 — The Whole Chart. Four levels on one sheet. Empty field, dots, the trap. The pulse decides. Techniques: outside the chart, like qi, stem points, the four possibilities, the trap. Acupuncture does not cure — it releases potential.

Always: one recommendation per visit · a short treatment · tonify first · branches → stems → great movements → divisions · **what is true is what holds up**.

What is in the series

Volume 1 — The Energy Cloud. How to look at a person in this system: the cloud, tendencies, life challenges, the four emanations, the role of the treatment and of the one recommendation. (Two of the three chapters you have just read come from here.)

Volume 2 — The Great Movements. The five elements in their active and passive version. The solar year, the life challenge, the revenge element, the pulse, five descriptions — earth, metal, water, wood, fire. (The chapter on earth comes from here.)

Volume 3 — The Ten Heavenly Stems. The inner life: readiness, unlike qi, the story from the sprout to the thanksgiving mats, ten recommendations, being ill inside your own energy.

Volume 4 — The Twelve Earthly Branches. The outer life: the organ clock, hexagrams, animals, the twelve-year cycle, the background of a meridian, three groups of four, twelve recommendations.

Volume 5 — The Six Divisions. The atmosphere: six divisions, the first and second half of the year, six descriptions, when and how to work on the divisions.

Volume 6 — The Whole Chart. Four levels on one sheet: the notation, five charts read live, from the chart to the pulse.

And the techniques that were not in the earlier volumes: using the system outside the chart, like qi, stem points, the four possibilities, the trap.

The order is not accidental. Each volume assumes you know the previous one.

For the practitioner: what next

The whole series is about eighty-five thousand words and five hundred pages — all of it out of one course, and out of what survived the test of the clinic.

The series deliberately contains no point numbers, no protocols and no training in the twelve pulse positions. That is not secrecy: without the pulse under your fingers, the number of a point is only a number. A book can teach you how to think about a person. It cannot teach you to needle.

Where the rest is

Six volumes — PDF, EPUB and Word. Details: smartacu.io

The course this series came from — twelve hours: four levels, the points for each of them, participants' charts read live against the pulse. The English edition of the course is in preparation; the Polish one runs at michalrichter.pl.

If you want to be told when the English edition is ready — leave your address at smartacu.io.

About the author

Michał Richter — physician and acupuncturist. Twenty-five years of acupuncture practice, fifteen years of training acupuncturists. He sees twenty to thirty patients a day and runs his own clinic in Poland. He has been working with the Stems and Branches system for fifteen years and teaching it for ten.

He started with TCM. He went through five-element acupuncture and bagua until he came upon the students of Joan Duveen — a student of Dr J.D. van Buren — and then upon Joan himself. What he learned there he spent several years checking in the clinic — and out of that checking this series came. His motto: what is true is what holds up.

He is the author of his own methods: The Chain™ (sinew meridian therapy) and Dynamic Acupuncture™ (regulation through the source points). He runs live and online courses in Poland and — under the Clinical Acupuncture by Dr. Michał Richter brand — in English.

Where to go next

Courses and materials in English: smartacu.io

Polish site and the original course: michalrichter.pl