

The *Dai Mai*: Dynamic Structural Flexibility and Spherical Integration

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Introduction

Although the extraordinary vessels relate to the deep, constitutional level of being, their understanding and use seems to remain relatively peripheral in the contemporary practice of TCM. Starting from the source, or lower *dantian*, they are considered to be the source of all creation, yet these vessels lack integration with the primary channel and *zangfu* organ systems. In this paper I examine some of the correspondences and associations of the *dai mai*, or Belt/Girdling Vessel, in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the sphere of energetic function of this extraordinary vessel and its relation to the *zangfu* organs and primary channels. This perspective is primarily based on examining its relation to the dynamic flow of *qi* at the level of humanity, which corresponds to vertical and horizontal integration—connecting above and below and the inside and the outside.

In the Middle of the Trinity

In Chinese cosmology, humans are seen as the connection between heaven and earth and are therefore often referred to as the middle kingdom. Thus the Chinese called their country *Zhōng Guó*, which literally means “Middle Kingdom.” The first character, *zhōng* (中), is written contemporarily as a square bifurcated by a vertical line. This character, which is translated as middle or center, may provide insight into the cosmological place of humanity as the “middle,” and its relation to the dynamic flow of *qi*. Historically, the character was written similarly, except it was a circle instead of a square. If we return to the idea that humans connect heaven above and earth below, then it is likely that the vertical line represents this central connection of vertical integration.¹ Just as some in the Daoist tradition refer to the *zhong* (中) *mai*, or central meridian, which travels from *Huiyin* REN-1 to *Baihui* DU-20 through the center of the body and connects the three *dantian* (our own internal reflections of the macrocosmic heaven, earth, and humanity).² Similarly, one could look at the flow of the yin and yang meridians, flowing from the tips of the fingers (stretching up towards heaven) down to the tips of the toes (reaching down into earth) and vice versa, creating a flow of *qi* between heaven and earth. What then of the square (or circle) through which this central channel of energy passes? It seems quite plausible that if this character corresponds to the dynamic flow of *qi* at the level of humanity, then the circle can be seen as corresponding to the level of horizontal integration and the *dai mai*. The *dai mai* is the one meridian that travels horizontally around the body, and is responsible for binding and connecting all of the vertically-traveling meridians.

The *dai mai*, in binding all of the vertically flowing energy, may play a central role in holding humanity at this “middle” level between heaven and earth by providing a structure/container for the *qi* so that it doesn’t simply dissipate. Without the binding of the *dai mai*, it seems likely that everything would disperse, and the physical body would disintegrate back into the earth and the spirit would ascend into heaven. At the level of humanity there is a coming together of *yin* and *yang*, body and spirit; the *dai mai* assists in this vertical integration of body and spirit by providing dynamic structural flexibility.³ This extraordinary vessel also creates a boundary at

the horizontal level of integration, a boundary that simultaneously connects one to and separates one from everything else present at the level of humanity.

The Wood Element

The *dai mai*, in binding all of the vertically-flowing meridians, has a major impact on astringing/tightening (as well as dispersing/slackening) at the horizontal level and, in so doing, affects/directs the energy towards vertical integration. If humans connect heaven and earth, and it is when the *qi* flows smoothly through the body that one is happy and healthy, what better example is there for us at the level of humanity than the tree? A tree reaches its roots deep into the earth as its branches stretch up into heaven, thus connecting above and below and allowing the *qi* to flow smoothly between heaven and earth. This is a process of vertical integration, connecting above and below, heaven and earth, spirit and body.

In looking at a tree, the trunk is composed of rings, which are reminiscent of the *zhōng* character and the *dai mai*. Just as the trunks of trees are cylindrical, which (by astringing and providing circular integrity) allow the *qi* to flow primarily between heaven and earth, so too may the *dai mai* function similarly for humans. As stated by Claude Larre and Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée, the *dai mai* "...is able to ensure the binding, but with a kind of relaxation. If it is too relaxed there is erratic circulation, congestion and knots. If it is too tight there may be other kinds of blockage and congestion. It must be able to keep a good balance between what is going down and what is coming up." (1997, pp.149) The size of the rings of a tree vary depending on the external conditions, which indicates that there is also a correlation between the size of the ring and the amount that the tree is exchanging/connecting with the external environment at that point in time. Wood grows vertically, but also horizontally—perhaps it is the circular integrity and dynamic structural flexibility provided by the *dai mai* that balances the two.

Within the human body, the Wood element is primarily associated with the Liver and Gall Bladder. Here too we can see that Wood is closely associated to the process of vertical integration as it is the Liver that connects the Water of the Kidneys with the Fire of the Heart in the generating cycle. Sinews and tendons pertain to Wood, and are responsible for maintaining the balance between flexibility and structure—i.e. maintaining a flexible structure for optimal growth and connection between above and below and the inside and the outside; a structure that is stable enough to house the spirit and yet flexible enough to still allow it the freedom to flourish. This is also reflected in the properties of Wood: bamboo is often used in Oriental culture and medicine as a stunning example of the importance of flexibility to achieve growth.

Zulinqi GB-41, confluent point of the *dai mai*, is located on the border of a tendon and is the Wood point of the Gall Bladder channel; this further indicates a close association between the *dai mai*, the Wood element, and the tendons, and how they share this function of balancing flexibility and structure. When one has excessive tension, it impedes one's ability to experience; similarly, if one lacks proper tension/boundaries it will also impede one's ability to stay true to oneself and thus diminish one's capacity for experiential awareness. Thus, the sinews and tendons and the *dai mai* appear to share this function of providing dynamic tension for optimal growth.⁴ *Zulinqi* GB-41 is also the point where the *qi* exits the Gall Bladder channel to connect with the Liver channel, which may be a further indication of the influence of the *dai mai* on

horizontal integration as it shares this connection between two internally-externally related meridians.

Another correlation is seen in the flavor associated with the Wood element: sour. The main property associated with the sour flavor is that it astringes, which is also one of the main functions of the *dai mai*. Astringency plays a significant role in horizontal integration—the degree to which an individual is able to connect to the rest of humanity is dependent upon a strong vertical connection within oneself, which derives in part from the ability to contract and create boundaries. It is also this energy of contracting/astringing which pulls that which is experienced at the level of humanity into the interior to be integrated at the deepest level.

There is also a strong correlation between the *dai mai* and the *shaoyang*. Not only is the confluent point of the *dai mai* located on the Gall Bladder channel of Foot Shaoyang, but it is coupled with a point on the San Jiao channel of Hand Shaoyang in the master-couple system of opening the extraordinary meridians. Another correlation is seen in the way in which the *dai mai* divides and connects above and below and the inside and the outside, while the *shaoyang* level is said to be half interior, half exterior. The San Jiao also shares the function of linking the inside and the outside, and the *ying* and *wei*, and thus works intimately with the *dai mai* to balance horizontal integration.

The Windows of Heaven, Earth, and Human

If the *dai mai* has the function of binding the meridians and providing dynamic structural flexibility, and through these functions affects the free flow of *qi* through the body, we can find this functional aspect of the *dai mai* present at various places throughout the body. In looking at the character “dài” (帶), it is shown as a piece of cloth (a hanging handkerchief or towel) below the pictograph of a belt with three pendants hanging from it. The number three is significant in the Daoist tradition, often used to symbolize the trinity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity as well as the three *dantian* and the three treasures of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*.

In looking at the character from this perspective, it seems plausible that the *dai mai* may be present not only at the level of the lower *dantian*, but at the level of the middle and upper *dantian* as well.⁵ (This also makes sense in that, from one perspective, each of the three *dantian* are reflections of each other.) Thus, each *dantian* may be an energetic meeting point of the vertically flowing energy encircled by another energetic, circular pathway in the horizontal plane, which allows for spherical integrity at these major energy centers.⁶ The “cloth” (巾) radical in the *dai* character may have significance as well—in anchoring all of the vertically flowing energy at this level and thus allowing each individual to be incarnated in a body, the *dai mai* may assist in providing the “cloth” or covering of a body for the spirit while it is here on Earth.

Another way that the *dai mai* seems to be reflected throughout the body is at the three (or five) “windows” – the Windows of Heaven, Earth and Humanity. The neck is well known as the Window of Heaven, as it is the connection between the head (heaven) and the body, thus connecting the Macrocosmic Heaven (as reflected by the upper *dantian*) with the human body. The neck is a major place in the body where the meridians are “bottlenecked”—bound tightly together just as the *dai mai* binds the meridians. Similarly, one could say that there are Windows

of Earth and Humanity, which would correspond to the hips and shoulders (or perhaps even the entirety of the legs and arms), respectively.⁷ These are the connection between the Macrocosmic Earth *qi* and the lower *dantian* and the connection between the middle *dantian* and the rest of humanity.⁸ And, just as the *dai mai* binds all of the meridians flowing vertically within the body, at each of these “windows” all of the meridians are similarly constricted and bound.

This can be extended to include all of the joints, as the meridians are constricted and bound at every joint as they pass through. And, after all, what is the waist (the primary location of the *dai mai*) but the largest “joint” in the body? If we look at the early Chinese anatomical positions (arms stretching up towards Heaven), then the joints line up in a way that allows a horizontal circle to flow around them. Although *Zulinqi* GB-41 is not specifically indicated for pain or problems of the joints, it is interesting to note that *Waiguan* SJ-5, the confluent point of the *yang wei mai* and the couple point of the *dai mai*, is a major point for swelling, pain, and stiffness of the joints, shoulders, and neck. (Deadman 2005)

The Zang

The *dai mai* can also be seen as assisting with the dynamic structural flexibility necessary for the flourishing of the *zang*, or yin organs. The *zang* have the function of storing various vital substances/essences. They must be firm and strong, yet flexible enough to hold and release the vital substances as necessary. This “holding” is often thought of as a function of the Spleen; the Spleen is responsible for holding the Blood in the vessels and the organs in their places. However, it is possible that there is a confluence of the *dai mai* and Spleen energies that carry out this function together. As stated by Larre and Rochat, “The ability of *dai mai* to hold and suspend is also very close to one of the functions of the spleen.” (1997, pp.142) Thus, the *dai mai*’s function of dynamic structural flexibility may help to provide the structure for each individual organ.⁹

Just as we have seen a close association between the Liver and the *dai mai*, we can also see that there appears to be a strong link with the Spleen as well. Besides sharing the function of holding and suspending, we can also look at the point *Zhangmen* LIV-13, which is the Front-*mu* of the Spleen, the *hui*-Meeting of the *zang*, and, according to some sources, the starting point of the *dai mai*. This implies that there is a coalescing of these three energies (Liver, Spleen, and *dai mai*) that, in turn, is responsible in part for the health and well being of all of the *zang* organs. The connection between the *dai mai*, Spleen and Liver is also supported by the classification of a *dai mai* pulse as being when the pulse is largest in both *guan* positions (the positions associated with Liver and Spleen). (See Morris 2004 for further information on the extraordinary vessel pulses.)

This link between the *dai mai*, Spleen and Liver is significant, as it relates to the ability of the *dai mai* to balance vertical and horizontal integration. Amongst the *zang*, the Liver is perhaps the *zang* most strongly related to vertical integration, while the Spleen may be considered the primary *zang* related to horizontal integration—taking in and digesting that which we experience at the human/horizontal level of reality. The *dai mai*, in providing the balance between vertical and horizontal integration, is an integral part of balancing the Liver and Spleen energies. If the vertical connection is strong and clear (with the Liver *qi* flowing smoothly), it becomes easier to take in and process at the horizontal level and to let go of what is not needed.

Returning to the Source

One more aspect of the *dai mai* that is worth examining is its ability to guide the *qi* back to the source. In the cycle of the evolution of consciousness, the one breaks into two, the two into three, and the three into the ten thousand things, before returning to a state of oneness. If the lower *dantian* relates to the source of the extraordinary vessels and the beginning of life, and it is to this source that we must return, then it appears that the *dai mai* has an integral role in bringing us back to this quiescent state.

The *dai mai* travels around the waist and binds the *ren*, *du* and *chong mai* at the level of the lower *dantian*. As stated by Larre and Rochat, the “...*dai mai* also has a close relationship with the common origin of *du mai*, *ren mai* and *chong mai* which is in the *bao zhong* (...) or intimate envelope. Many commentators stress the influence of *dai mai* in making a complete connection with the first four extraordinary meridians in this area of the origin.” (1997, pp. 144) These three meridians (*ren*, *du* and *chong mai*) have been said to be the source of the other extraordinary meridians and the rest of the *zangfu* and primary channels. According to Li Shi Zhen, “*The extraordinary vessels are the root of the Great Avenue of Pre-Heaven, the Governing, Directing and Penetrating Vessels [Du-Ren-Chong Mai] are the Source of Creation.*” (As cited in: Maciocia 2005, pp. 821) But the *dai mai* is not only connected to these meridians, it binds them and renders them whole again. The “...*Dai Mai* is often referred to as the Meridian that maintains the integrity of the First Ancestries, that returns the integrity: the *Chong* in the middle, the *Ren* in the front, and the *Du* in the back.” (Yuen 2005; pp. 46)

If the *dai mai* relates to vertical and horizontal integration, it is likely that it plays a pivotal role in connecting post-heaven and pre-heaven. We saw above the strong correlation between the *dai mai* and Spleen (the source of post-heaven essence), as well as the importance of the astringing function of the *dai mai* in integrating at the deepest level that which is experienced at the level of humanity (transforming and transporting post-heaven to pre-heaven), and here we have a link between the *dai mai* and the extraordinary vessels at the lower dantian (the original pre-heaven). Thus it may be that the *dai mai* plays a role in connecting the post-heaven *qi* and essence of the Spleen with the pre-heaven *qi* and essence of the Kidneys at the source. As stated by Larre and Rochat, the *dai mai* “...conducts the *qi* of the whole organism in the correct direction and to its final destination.” (1997, pp. 148)

Conclusion

In this paper I explored some of the correspondences of the *dai mai* with the *zangfu* and primary channels. The *dai mai* seems to correspond to the circle of the “*zhōng*” (中) character, the circular energy that is present throughout the universe and provides dynamic structural flexibility while allowing for spherical integration. The perfection of the circle and sphere is that all sides, every point, has dynamic tension, with equal energetic pressure both within and without. The *dai mai* is the energetic border (circular/spherical in nature) that keeps the dynamic tension and regulates expansion/contraction, pushing/pulling, and astringing/slackening of the individual in relation to their environment. The *dai mai* also guides the *qi* back to the source, to the three extraordinary vessels that are the source of creation (*ren*, *du*, and *chong mai*).

Dynamic structural flexibility allows each individual to balance vertical and horizontal integration, connecting above and below and the inside and the outside in cycles of continuous

growth and expansion. Trees, compared to other plants, are more firmly rooted and have a stronger vertical connection that enables them to be a greater channel for connecting heaven and earth. This strength enables them to stay true to themselves and to be of greater benefit to everything else around them. The *dai mai*, in providing this same circular/spherical integrity in human beings, assists one in staying true to themselves while connecting to everything else present at the level of humanity.

It is the interaction of heaven and earth that gives rise to the 10,000 things present at the level of humanity; every entity at this level is a coming together of these two polar energies, and thus it may be that everything in existence at the level of humanity is dependent upon a form of dynamic structural flexibility to exist at this level of reality. This spherical integrity of dynamic structural flexibility, which is present in every energetic field, allows each individual to be dynamically balanced in relation to their environment. For it is only through vertical integration that one gains the strength to expand horizontally, and it is only by integrating the inside and the outside that such strength has relevance. In this way, each individual can exist in a state of experiential awareness, staying true to self while experiencing the beautiful perfection of Humanity.

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¹ This is also seen in the Chinese characters 王 (*wáng* - king/emperor) and 功 (*gōng* - work), which also have a vertical line. “King” is three horizontal lines (representing heaven, earth, and humanity) connected by a vertical line, as the Emperor is the one who connects heaven, earth, and humanity. Similarly, the character “gōng” (as in Qi Gong), which is often translated as “work” or “exercise,” is based on a character of two horizontal lines connected by a vertical line, implying that the only real “work” we have is that of connecting heaven and earth.

² It should be noted that Tibetan textbooks and some Daoists call this central channel a branch of the *chong mai*, or the pre-heaven *chong mai*. (See Yuen 2005; Ming-Dao 1990) This then sets up a nice symmetry between the *dai mai* and *chong mai* and their relation to vertical and horizontal integration.

³ Dynamic structural flexibility refers to the energetic aspect that regulates contraction and expansion of an individual’s boundaries in relation to their environment. It allows the qi to flow freely, allowing for a more complete integration of body and spirit at this level, even as one interacts with everything else present at the level of humanity.

⁴ Proper nourishment is also vital - if there is Liver Blood deficiency, often the tendons and sinews become tense, and vice versa – if there is too much tension, it can block the proper flow of blood and lead to malnourishment (and therefore greater tension).

⁵ This is supported in that *Zulingqi* GB-41 is indicated for symptoms such as abdominal cramping, breast distension and tenderness, and headache, all of which correlate to the level of the three *dantian*. Also, in the Ode of the Obstructed River are discussed the ‘Eight Therapeutic Methods’ of using the confluent points of the extraordinary meridians to treat specific areas and symptoms. Here *Zulingqi* GB-41 is indicated for disorders of the eyes, which may offer confirmation of the influence of the *dai mai* at the level of the upper *dantian*. (As cited in: Deadman 2005)

⁶ If dynamic structural flexibility is the energetic aspect of being that allows one to expand and contract in relation to others and their environment (and thus defines the boundaries of one’s energy field and each *dantian*), spherical integration is the aspect that brings integration even as the boundaries are continuously shifting from moment to moment. These two aspects allow for a homeodynamic state of balance within each being.

⁷ Interestingly, one of the English definitions of “girdle” (as in “Girdling” vessel) is the anatomical reference to the parts of the body that unite the upper or lower extremities with the axial skeleton – the shoulder and pelvic girdles. It should also be noted that Jeffrey Yuen refers to this connection between the Earth and the lower *dantian* as the “Doorways to the Earth,” and discusses the relation of the Window of the Sky and Doorways to the Earth to the upper and lower sensory orifices. (Yuen 2006)

⁸ Why are there two Windows of Earth and two Windows of Human, yet only one Window of Heaven? For Earth and Humanity exist in duality, while in Heaven there is unity ☺.

⁹ From one perspective, each of the organs (and especially the Heart) is a microcosmic reflection of the human, and therefore it makes sense that the structure of the individual organ would be provided by the *dai mai*, just as it provides the dynamic structural flexibility for the individual human being.

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