

# Discover the Journey of the Extraordinary Meridians – Part 1

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**H**ow does energy flow through the body? Which hidden pathways connect body and mind? This article invites the reader on a fascinating journey of discovery along the eight Extraordinary Meridians, from their origins in classical Chinese medicine to their role in contemporary Shiatsu practice.

A glimpse behind the curtain: in the next issue, this theory will be brought to life in an evocative 'Dance of Qi'.

## ***The Journey of the Extraordinary Meridians: History, Theory and a Framework for Practice***

When I began my Shiatsu training, sensing energy often felt overwhelming. How can one experience something that cannot be seen or physically grasped? A statement by Gabrielle Roth, founder of the 5Rhythms movement, became a source of inspiration for me:

*'Energy moves in waves. Waves move in patterns. Patterns move in rhythms. A human being is just that: energy, waves, patterns, rhythms. Nothing more. Nothing less... A dance.'*

In this first article of two, I aim to offer a framework for approaching this subtle realm through the eight Extraordinary Meridians (Qi Jing Ba Mai): their history, theoretical foundations, and application in practice. This, however, is only the first step. In the next issue, we will carry these theoretical building blocks into a vivid dance of Qi, in which the Extraordinary Meridians reveal their choreography and energy becomes tangible.

## **The Long Journey of the Extraordinary Meridians: A Historical Overview**

The Extraordinary Meridians (Qi Jing Ba Mai, 奇經八脈) are mentioned in the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic), compiled between approximately the second century BCE and the second century CE. Within this corpus, the *Suwen* (Basic Questions) provides the theoretical foundations, while the *Ling Shu* (Spiritual Pivot) offers practical guidance on meridians and Acupuncture points. However, these texts provide early references rather than a systemised theory of the Extraordinary meridians. Later, the *Nan Jing* (Classic of Difficult Issues), traditionally dated to the first or second century CE, clarified these often cryptic passages, notably by systematising the relationships between meridians, Qi and diagnostic patterns.

In parallel, Daoist External Alchemy (*Waidan*) was developed, establishing a cosmological and energetic framework that later became the foundation of Internal Alchemy (*Neidan*). From around the tenth century onwards, *Neidan* elaborated the Extraordinary Meridians as deep channels connecting body and mind. This vision is clearly illustrated in the wonderful image of the Neijing Tu (Diagram of the Inner Classic). While the most famous version of this diagram dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still it visually synthesises the early classical *Neidan* concepts of internal energy circulation, in which several Extraordinary Meridians are symbolically represented through their trajectories and interconnections.

During the Ming dynasty, Li Shizhen systematised these insights in his *Qi Jing Ba Mai Kao* (Study of the Eight Extraordinary Meridians). Shortly thereafter, the *Zhenjiu Dacheng* (Great Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion, 1601) further consolidated the status of Extraordinary Meridians within the meridian system.

### The Extraordinary Meridians: Deep Reservoirs of Qi

Within classical Chinese medical theory, the eight Extraordinary Meridians function as deep reservoirs or ‘lakes’ of Qi, intimately connected with Jing (Essence). They absorb and redistribute deficiencies or excesses arising in the flowing channels of the twelve primary meridians, thereby maintaining balance throughout the entire energetic system.



*The Cross of Encounter - Where Heaven and Earth Meet*

They do not possess their own independent network of Acupuncture points, with the exception of the *Ren Mai* and *Du Mai*, which do have their own points. Instead, they are accessed through opening points located on the primary meridians. Although classical texts often describe a single directional flow, clinical and experiential practice assumes that Qi within these deep channels can move in both directions, depending on what regulation is required.

Classical sources associate the Extraordinary Meridians with the Extraordinary Fu (Curious Organs) and with major life phases such as growth, maturation, and ageing. They are also understood as supporting the constitutional layer: the underlying pattern that partly determines how a person functions, responds, and recovers.

### The Unfolding Body: Extraordinary Meridians as a Blueprint from Conception

In classical Chinese medical embryology, the Extraordinary Meridians are the first energetic structures of the human body to form during conception and embryonic development. They arise before the twelve primary meridians and lay down a blueprint that underpins growth and development.

Although no single universal sequence appears across all classical texts, the most widely accepted traditional order—according to sources such as the *Nan Jing*, *Ling Shu*, and classical embryological models—is as follows.

The first meridian to emerge is the *Chong Mai*, the central axis of the embryo. It arises from the combined Essence of both parents and forms the ‘Sea of Blood and Meridians’, from which all other meridians originate. From the *Chong Mai*, the *Ren Mai* develops as the anterior midline channel, regulating Yin and reproduction, while the *Du Mai* develops as the posterior midline channel, supporting Yang and the nervous system. Together, these three form the fundamental structure of the body.

Subsequently, the *Dai Mai* emerges as the only horizontal meridian, connecting and stabilising the upper and lower body. This is followed by the *Yin Qiao Mai* and *Yang Qiao Mai*, which regulate movement, balance, and eye function, and finally by the *Yin Wei Mai* and *Yang Wei Mai*, which connect all meridians and integrate the entire energetic system.

In this way, the Extraordinary Meridians form a refined network: core lines for growth, a horizontal stabilising axis, dynamic pathways for balance, and connective lines for coherence. They reveal how the body is energetically organised at an early stage, even before physical structures are fully formed, and they offer insight into the subtle yet essential layers of human development.

### **The Extraordinary Meridians in Shiatsu Practice**

In Shiatsu practice, the Extraordinary Meridians are often addressed when an energetic pattern lies deeper than that which can be directly influenced through the primary meridians, or when regulation is required at a more foundational level. This may be the case during hormonal transitions (such as puberty or menopause), when addressing issues of resilience or sensory clarity, or when seeking greater harmony between body and mind.

The eight Extraordinary Meridians can be stimulated in various ways. Shiatsu and other forms of Acupressure, such as Tui Na, work through specific opening points—for example Sp 4 as the opening point of the *Chong Mai*—as well as through the intersections of meridians. Through gentle pressure, mobilisations, and stretches, blockages are released and deficiencies or excesses in the primary meridians are brought into balance. Acupuncture employs the opening and coupled points to regulate Qi within the Extraordinary Meridians and to distribute it throughout the body. Energetic practices such as Qi Gong, Neigong, and Daoyin activate these meridians through breath, movement, and visualisation, supporting the self-regulation of Qi.

By working through the opening points, the Extraordinary Meridians function as an energetic coordination system that harmonises Yin and Yang flows throughout the body and allows for a deeper level of balance.

### **Yin and Yang Qiao Mai: An Interlude in the Dance of Energy**

Within Internal Alchemy (*Neidan*), the Extraordinary Meridians are regarded as deep reservoirs of energy. Although *Neidan* is not a clinical system in itself, its principles inform

many contemporary energetic frameworks used in Shiatsu. For a safe and harmonious circulation, it is essential to begin by working with the *Yin Qiao Mai* and *Yang Qiao Mai*, the ‘dancers’ of the energetic system.

They stabilise the legs, posture, and eye function, providing a firm foundation for the movement of energy. They open the gates between inward and outward movement, allowing safe access to deeper meridians. Finally, they guide Qi gradually, preventing the body and mind from becoming overwhelmed.

When working with the Extraordinary Meridians, a methodical progression is often followed through three phases – stabilisation, transformation, and integration – a logic rooted in the principles of Internal Alchemy. Typically, the *Yin* and *Yang Qiao Mai* are addressed first, to establish vertical balance, posture, and internal calm. The *Dai Mai* then follows, acting as a horizontal belt that organises the body and connects the upper and lower halves. From this foundation, the *Ren Mai*, *Du Mai*, and *Chong Mai* can be safely addressed as part of the transformational phase. In certain contexts, such as pregnancy support or within specific lineages, work may begin directly with the *Chong Mai*, as this meridian is already strongly activated during pregnancy and plays a natural role in growth and nourishment. Finally, the *Yin Wei Mai* and *Yang Wei Mai* represent the integrative phase, ensuring coherence throughout the entire meridian system.

This progression represents one possible approach and does not replace established treatment protocols; each Shiatsu practitioner adapts their work to the specific needs of the client.

### **The Foundation of the Dance**

By studying the Extraordinary Meridians, we gain insight into the deep energetic layers of the body and into the ways in which Qi flows, regulates, and connects. This knowledge forms the foundation for safe and harmonious practice and prepares the ground for the next step: a dance of energy in which theory comes alive.