

the pivot of nothingness

Penetrating time in the practice of acupuncture

By Charles Chace

The introductory text of the first chapter of the *Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic, Divine Pivot* (*Huangdi Neijing Lingshu* 黄帝内经灵枢, Eastern Han) contains the provocative statement "The crude attend to the articulations and the superior attend to the pivot." (粗守關上守機).¹

THE "PIVOT" HAS BEEN interpreted in various ways by commentators over the centuries and even within the *Ling Shu* itself. One thing, however, is clear. The pivot is the dynamic at the heart of an effective acupuncture intervention. That first chapter of the *Ling Shu* (LS-1) goes on to say, "The movement in the dynamic is not separate from its empty spaces; the dynamic within this empty space is clear, still and subtle" (機之動不離其空, 空中之機清靜而微).²

However else we may define the concept of a pivot in the *Ling Shu*, it is inextricably linked to highly refined states of quiescence and arguably awareness in the person

doing the needling. As the text proceeds, it informs us that to understand the goings and comings of the qi we must "emphasise its periodicity" (要與之期).³ One's timing, or at least some awareness or appreciation of the temporal aspects of one's engagement of qi, is essential to one's efficacy. Finally, the text instructs us that "by means of one's attention, one harmonises [the qi]" (以意和之).⁴ One's attentive presence is the last essential ingredient in this prescription for effective needling that forms the foundation for all needle techniques.

A core message of this introductory passage in LS-1 is that by means of stillness the practitioner becomes an axis for effective intervention; she quite literally becomes a Divine Pivot. As LS-1 itself counsels, this pivotal principle is "easy to explain but difficult to actually engage". To be sure, the requisite level of mindfulness or open awareness necessary to make this principle work is easier to talk about than to actually embody; it takes a fair amount of time and practice.



We must have some capacity to remain attentive to what we are doing even as we allow our mental processes to quiet and simply rest in our experience of becoming the act of needling.

In terms of needle technique, we must first have fully internalised the mechanics of needling to the extent that the technique can be executed competently. Form counts and there is little point in proceeding until one has mastered the nuts and bolts of any needle technique. Next, we must have some capacity to remain attentive to what we are doing even as we allow our mental processes to quiet and simply rest in our experience of becoming the act of needling. To the extent that we can realise this ideal, we become an axis of efficacy.

The role of the pivot in LS-1 has been the topic of previous writings, (Chace C. and Bensky D., 2009; Chace C., 2008, 2006). In this paper I present an approach to needling based on the writings of three influential Zen masters: Takuan Soho, Eihei Dōgen and Dainan Katigiri. Takuan's 17th century essay to master swordsman Yagu Munemori establishes the foundations for mastery of any activity. Dōgen's famous 13th century fascicle, *Uji* (Being-Time 有时) illustrates the depths to which those foundational capacities can take one. Finally Katagiri presents these principles in modern terms that are particularly resonant for acupuncturists. It is not my intention to argue that the writers of the *Divine Pivot* had these particular ideas in mind when they wrote their text. Nevertheless, the perspective presented by these three masters is entirely consistent with the counsel provided in *Ling Shu* One. In this their counsel might be read as a commentary on the text.

It affords us a more nuanced understanding of what it means to become the pivot in acupuncture. Part 2 of this essay considers the clinical implications of these ideas. When fully embodied, they enhance our needling to the extent that they facilitate the phenomena known in cranial osteopathy as "ignition", a systemic quickening of *yuan* (primal 元) qi within the body.

Takuan's The Sword of Zen

Takuan Sōhō (沢庵 宗彭, 1573–1645) was a major figure in the Rinzaï school of Zen Buddhism. Something of a spiritual prodigy, Takuan became abbot of the Daitoku-ji Temple in Kyoto at the very

young age of 36. Throughout his life, he sought to infuse his every activity with Zen and was known for his interest in calligraphy, poetry, gardening and the arts. Takuan moved among a wide range of social circles and was evidently a friend of the swordsman Munemori Yagu. As Musashi Miyamoto's great rival, Munemori may be considered the second greatest swordsman in Japanese history. Takuan wrote a series of essays on the relationship between Zen and swordsmanship that bear directly on the practice of acupuncture. The first, the Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom (*Fudochishinmyoroku*), was written specifically for Munemori and is the source of the material that follows. Takuan Sōhō died in Edo (present-day Tokyo). At the moment before his death, Takuan reportedly painted the Chinese character 夢 "dream", laid down his brush and died.

A hair's breadth of separation

A line from LS-1 tells us "the spirit resides in an autumn hair" (神在秋毛).⁵ In some styles of meridian therapy this line is interpreted as an admonition to focus one's attention on the tip of the needle.⁶ It is more commonly and probably more accurately interpreted as an instruction to attend to the finest details of needling. On the grossest level, those details include the mechanics of needle technique. If we execute those mechanics properly then our needling will be reasonably effective. Of course, this is an essential fundamental of any discipline. As Takuan himself says: "If you do not train in technique but fill your breast with principle, your body and your hands will not function."⁷ Yet training in technique is just the beginning.

The image of a hair's breadth is a common trope throughout Chinese and Japanese literature that is used in a very precise way within the Zen tradition. In his essay written to Munemori, Takuan counsels,

There is such a thing as an interval into which not even a hair can be put... An interval is when two things come upon one another and not even a hair's breath can be slipped between them ... In just the same way, if the mind stops with the sword with which

*a man is going to strike you, there will be an interval and your own action will be lost. But if in the interval between your opponent's striking sword and your own action you cannot introduce even the breadth of a hair, your opponent's sword will become your own.*⁸

The principle holds for needling as well. There cannot be so much as a hair's breadth of separation between the needle and the one needling. In this, the spirit or the divinity of the needle really does lie in the space of an autumn hair. Our capacity to simply attend to what we are doing such that nothing is left of our "selves" is pivotal in creating the optimal environment for a therapeutic shift. This goes beyond the matter of intention. To be sure, one's intention may be expressed in the mechanics of needling. One may think, "finding the point", "inserting the needle", "getting the qi" etc. Or one may have an intention of directing the qi here or there. These rudiments are the foundation of needling and they must be mastered so completely that they become automatic. Beyond this, though, there is simply an attending to and responding to what unfolds moment to moment. This is the ground of *wu wei* (effortless action 無為). Of course, the next question is to what is one attending?

It is common to approach needling as an exercise in focus. As already mentioned, some people advocate placing one's attention at the tip of the needle, and at a certain point in one's training that makes a lot of sense. As we progress, however, a broader field of attention is required. The practice of acupuncture differs from the Zen practice of simply sitting and facing a wall. We are continually receiving sensory input. Although our mind remains attentive in open awareness, attending to and responding to that information, our mind and our qi are never caught by it, but instead flow through it.

Takuan, writing again to Munemori, illustrates this point eloquently:

We say that:

If one puts his mind in the action of his opponent's body, his mind will be taken by the action of his opponent's body.

If he puts his mind in his opponent's sword, his mind will be taken by that sword.

If he puts his mind in thoughts of his opponent's intention to strike him, his mind will be taken by thoughts of his opponent's intention to strike him.

If he puts his mind on his own sword, his mind will be taken by his own sword.

If he puts his mind on his own intention of not being struck, his mind will be taken by his intention of not being struck.

If he puts his mind in the other man's stance, his mind will be taken by the other man's stance.

What this means is that there is no place to put the mind.

No matter where you put it, if you put the mind in one place, the rest of the body will lack its functioning.

If you don't put it anywhere, it will go to all parts of your body and extend throughout its entirety. In this way, when it enters your hand, it will realise the hand's function. When it enters your foot, it will realise the foot's function. When it enters your eye, it will realise the eye's function.

If you should decide on one place and put the mind there, it will be taken by that place and lose its function. If one thinks, he will be taken by his thoughts.

Because this is so, leave aside thoughts and discrimination, do not stop the mind here and there, then when it does visit these various places it will realise function and act without error.

Putting the mind in one place is called falling into one-sidedness. One-sidedness is said to be a bias in one place. Correctness is in moving about anywhere, not biased in any one place.

Not putting the mind anywhere, one can't one use the mind, having it go from place to place, responding to the opponent's movements?

*Keeping the mind tied up like a cat and not allowed to move freely, when you keep it in check within yourself, within yourself it will be detained. Forsaking it within your body, it will go nowhere. Put nowhere it will be everywhere. Even in moving the mind outside the body, if it is sent in one direction, it will be lacking in nine others. If the mind is not restricted to just one direction, it will be in all 10.*⁹

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The entire cosmos is quite literally nothing more or less than time.

The principle holds true regardless of the size and purpose of the instrument we wield.

Once we have embodied the notion of the pivot, we become an axis of stillness around which the patient's system can reorganise itself. Yet this quiescence is really just the first step to becoming an axis of efficacy. We must then cultivate a capacity for open awareness that excludes nothing, not sounds from outside the room or out in the street. And we must do this so completely that the distinction between practitioner, needle and patient is meaningless. Our qi remains our own and we are not blending our qi with that of our patient. Yet, we become single minded, our attention encompassing everything. In this, we express the pivot that much more deeply. We feel this effect in our hands and our bodies; it even pervades the room. Moreover, this capacity is itself the foundation for another step along the path.

Dogen Zenji and being time

Dōgen Zenji (道元禪師; also Dōgen Kigen 道元希玄, or Eihei Dōgen 永平道元, or Koso Joyo Daishi, 1200–1253) was the founder of the *Sōtō* school of Zen in Japan after travelling to China and training under the Chinese *Caodong* (曹洞宗) lineage there. He is known for his extensive writing, both in poetry and prose, the pinnacle of which is his *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma 正法眼藏, 1253), a collection of 95 fascicles concerning Buddhist practice and enlightenment.

A core theme in Dōgen's teaching was that the practice of *zazen* and the experience of enlightenment were one and the same. Dōgen made this point in *Fukan Zazengi* (Universally Recommended Instructions for *Zazen* 普觀坐禪儀, 1225-27). "To practice the Way single-heartedly is, in itself, enlightenment. There is no gap between practice and enlightenment or *zazen* and daily life."¹⁰ For Dōgen even the intention of practising disappears, there is simply sitting, simply daily life, simply needling. When LS-1 instructs us to become pivots of stillness it is saying much the same thing. Our quieting is merely the ground in which we ultimately lose our "selves" in

the process of needling. In echoing Dōgen's statement as acupuncturists, we might say "to practise needling single-heartedly is in itself efficacy. There is no gap between self and practice."

Being there

A prolific writer, Dōgen's essay entitled *Uji* (Being-Time 有時) in his *Shōbōgenzō*, took the principle of a seamless union between one's self and one's activity in the world to a truly mystical level. In this, the definitive statement on the topic in the Zen literature, he presents an understanding of time as the defining feature of both space and existence. The entire cosmos is quite literally nothing more or less than time. All of existence occurs in time and both time and timelessness exist in a single moment. Dōgen asserts:

*Because [real existence] is only this exact moment, all moments of existence-time are the whole of time, and all existent things and all existent phenomena are time. The whole of existence, the whole of universe, exists in individual moments of time.*¹¹

Time is the ground of true being or existence, and being is nothing more or less than fully embodying the moment. This can be most simply understood as the familiar formulation that we should all live in the moment. Yet for Dōgen this principle has truly cosmic ramifications. The entire universe blossoms within those who can fully experience existence as individual moments of time

*Those who fail to experience and to hear the truth of existence-time do so because they understand [time] only as having passed. To grasp the pivot and express it, all that exists throughout the whole universe is lined up in a series and at the same time is individual moments in time.*¹²

A clear perception of reality demands that we embrace this pivot of emptiness that is manifest in everything. Mountains and seas, pine trees and bamboos, are all time.

The mountains are time and the seas are

time. Without time the mountains and seas could not exist: we should not deny that time exists in the mountains and seas here and now. If time decays, the mountains and seas decay. If it is not subject to decay, the mountains and the seas are not subject to decay.¹³

Dōgen's use of language is famously innovative and difficult to grasp intellectually. Though he is considered consummate Zen philosopher, Dōgen often writes more like a ranting Beat poet than a Buddhist logician. His words strive to shake the reader loose from a discursive reading and to convey a meaning beyond the words themselves. It is not surprising then, that an essay as difficult as *Uji* (Being-Time), and yet so central to the Zen tradition has spawned a vast amount of exegesis.

Moments of time

Jikai Dainin Katagiri (片桐 大忍, 1928–1990) was an immensely influential teacher of Zen in the West. His small volume, *Each Moment is the Universe, Zen and the Way of Being-Time* is among the most lucid explanations of *uji* (being-time). Here, Katagiri Roshi develops the idea that in *uji* (being-time) one becomes a “pivot of nothingness”. His eloquent discourse is worth quoting at length.

The past has already gone so it does not exist.

The future has not yet come so it also does not exist. So the past and future are nothing, no-time. Then is it the present that exists? No, even though there is a present, strictly speaking the present is nothing. So the present is nothing also, zero, no time, no present, no form of the present. But that nothingness is very important.

Nothingness means total functioning, just functioning energy. When the present is no-time it is interconnected with all sentient beings in the peace and harmony of timelessness. But when nothingness functions, there is a pivot and becomes the present. That pivot is called the pivot of nothingness. At that precise point – the intersection of time and space, which is called right now, right here – all sentient beings come together into the moment

*and a vast world comes up; past present future, earth, trees, planets, moons and suns. In one moment, every possible aspect of human life, everything we can be, spreads out, unfolds and a huge world comes up. That is called interdependent co-origination. Life is always at the pivot of nothingness: it is always right now, right here. Right now, right here in the eternal moment.*¹⁴

Uji (being-time) and embodying the pivot of nothingness are mystical aspirations to be sure, but they are not merely abstract ideas. If we can grasp them at all, we can begin to manifest them, however imperfectly, from moment to moment. There is quite literally nothing more immediate than being-time and it is simply a matter of refining one's awareness and appreciation of that truth.

Periodicity

When LS-1 tells us that “to understand its goings and comings, emphasise its periodicity”, it is on one level instructing us to attend to the pacing of the qi dynamic. We might experience this as a sense of the flow of qi punctuated by cyclic pauses. Dōgen provides us with another complementary way to think about the periodicity of qi. Being-time requires us to simultaneously appreciate qi as a succession of moments within our experience of that flow.

*We should learn in practice that the momentary passing of time continues without there being any external thing. The momentary passing of spring, for example, inevitably passes moment by moment through spring itself. It is not that the momentary passing of time is spring, rather because spring is the momentary passing of time, passing time has already realised the truth in the here and now of springtime.*¹⁵

For Dōgen, there is the flow of the qi of spring, and within it, the moment-to-moment expression of spring. The flow and the moment are two sides of the same coin. We are at once in the flow of qi and in the individual moments of that flow. *Uji* (being-time) when needling allows us to act



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Ante Babich's
**Tips for running
a successful clinic ...**

Be on time.



When I am able to embody the pivot of nothingness as I am needling, it can catalyse a sense of spacious timelessness expanding from the tip of the needle.

effortlessly at precisely the right moment within the overall flow of qi to achieve our ends.

The pivot of nothingness

The act of using an acupuncture needle takes place in a brief succession of moments. At our best, we execute the mechanics of the technique perfectly in a state of quiet, open awareness. That awareness requires our complete participation in each individual moment where there is no separation between the needle, the one needling, or the one being needled. There are no gaps, we're no longer needling; it's just happening. This is a very simple thing, yet it is the gateway to something both potent and profound.

Because *uji* (being-time) encompasses every aspect of space and time that we can imagine, and even those we can't, we tend to experience being-time as timelessness. Katagiri Roshi explains:

When we say being it means all sentient beings exist in space and occupy the whole of space. Being occupying the whole of space is called timelessness. Timelessness is a sort of energy that links the whole universe without creating any gap.¹⁶

When we lose ourselves in needling, it too can seem timeless. When I am able to embody the pivot of nothingness as I am needling, it can catalyse a sense of spacious timelessness expanding from the tip of the needle. From this springs all of the more tangible criteria that one expects from effective needling including the settling, slowing, suppleness, integration and opening in the qi and pulse (Chace C., 2008). This is another cue for me that I am engaging something real, that I am not just making it all up. The result of that particular needle may not be an immediate ignition but I know that I've done something worthwhile that may create the conditions for one.

Uji (being-time) is also associated with a sense of vividness. An experience of timelessness lies at either end of the spectrum of consciousness. *Uji* (being-time) is not a stupid and insensate, quiescent dullness, where our needle technique is on autopilot.

There is nothing more alive than *uji* (being-time). There is a vivid clarity in each moment. Such a timeless aliveness is not so much a specific palpatory phenomena as it is a generalised sensory experience.

When all this comes together our technique, our awareness, our stillness, our *uji* (being-time), we come into resonance with space and time itself. In becoming a pivot of nothingness, we ignite the primordial within our patients and ourselves. That is to say that we excite some deep creative potential, a particle of transformation with a potency all its own. That is a beautiful thought, but what does it really mean in clinical practice?

Part 2

Palpatory referents and sensory experience

How each of us actually embodies the principles described above is necessarily a very personal and individual thing. There is certainly no single style of practice that best reflects these ideas, though some styles are clearly more compatible with this approach than others.

Over the course of my own career, I have used the palpatory sensibilities of cranial osteopathy to help articulate the experience of different kinds of qi in my acupuncture practice. For instance, from an osteopathic perspective the pulse qualities of settling, slowing, integration, suppleness, and openness that we define as evidence of the body's qi coming into balance are palpable as qi phenomena anywhere in the body (Chace C., 2008, 2006). The cranial rhythm, known as the "cranial rhythmic impulse" (CRI) manifesting in 8-14 cycles per minute, is a palpatory referent for yang qi in general and defence qi in particular. The mid or "fluid" tide manifesting in about 2.5 cycles per minute is a palpatory referent for yin, constructive and to some extent essence qi. Beyond this, things are less clear-cut.

The pivot within us

Dōgen's description of a pivot of nothingness is most easily grasped as an abstract principle that is somehow embodied in a very general way. *Ling Shu* One's counsel that we become divine pivots by becoming

open and still when needling suggests a similarly systemic embodiment. The osteopathic principle of “midline” as the core embryologically driven impulse around which both structure and function are oriented is another more localised expression of the pivot within us.

There is much to be said about the midline in osteopathy and its appearance in the Chinese literature of internal cultivation and medicine (Chace C., 2012). For the purposes of this discussion we will focus on its essential characteristic: it is empty.

The midline is not the spine, or even an energetic structure such as the *du*, the *ren* or the *chong*, it is the spacious void around which these “things” organise. A healthy midline is typically experienced as spacious, coherent, warm and even sweet in the sense of having a quality of loving kindness.¹⁷ By contrast, unhealthy midlines are often experienced in stressed out individuals as wire-like, or may simply be absent.

When we orient to our own midline in needling, it helps to align us from the inside out. It assists us in finding the spacious pivot of emptiness within ourselves. Our patient’s qi in turn, orients itself to this as well. The needle itself is merely an extension of this pivot. The closer one draws to the *xiantian* (pre-cosmic 先天) aspects of qi, the more fully they must be engaged in open awareness. In so far as our practice of open awareness has a starting point, it begins with the midline.

At this point we are no longer sitting on the sidelines as ostensibly objective observers. Ultimately, our interaction with this qi is not so much a palpatory phenomenon as a comprehensive sensory experience that registers in our entire being.

That is not to say that the *ji* (traces 跡) of the primal, as they are sometimes alluded to in Daoist poetry, are not palpable in our patients. In cranial osteopathy one of the traces of the primal is referred to as ignition.

Igniting the primal

Despite their frequent protestations that they are medical scientists, cranial osteopaths often resort to overtly mystical jargon in their efforts to describe their palpatory findings. Franklin Sills defines ignition as:

*A process by which the intentions of the Breath of Life literally ignite within the human experience. The first ignition occurs at conception ... The second ignition process occurs at birth when the potency of the Breath of Life fully ignites within the cerebrospinal fluids as a final empowerment to take form within the human realm.*¹⁸

Sills’s reference to the Breath of Life may be understood in Chinese medical terms as the active expression of the pre-cosmic primal qi in an individual. He also associates the “spiritual ignitions” that occur over the course of one’s life with the larger goals of Chinese internal alchemy.¹⁹

The term *dianhua* 點化 is an analogous idea in internal alchemy which literally means to “transmute by means of a small quantity”.

In the later development of internal and external alchemy the concept of *dianhua* has come to mean a “particle” of pre-cosmic primal qi that circulates in the cosmos along the cycles of time. It is considered to be the essential inaugural spark for personal transformation.

In alchemical terms, *dianhua* allows alchemists to return the ingredients of the outer or inner elixir to their pre-cosmic state. Once this elixir is obtained, the whole human being and the entire cosmos are transmuted.²⁰

Dianhua is a sort of ignition linked to the interplay of primal qi both within the body and the cosmos at large. The term *dianhua* appears in Buddhist writings as well, where it means “touched into activity, or conversion”, in the sense of a fundamental change in consciousness.²¹

Ignition then is both a physio-energetic and a psycho-spiritual phenomenon on a grand scale, though more circumscribed ignitions occur regularly within the course of clinical practice and one can create the optimal conditions for their manifestation. Some osteopaths describe ignition as arising specifically from within the third ventricle in the brain. My own cranial training focused on ignitions along the midline and from within the heart but in my experience ignition may occur from anywhere.



When we orient to our own midline in needling, it helps to align us from the inside out. It assists us in finding the spacious pivot of emptiness within ourselves.

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We define *deqi* 得氣 as the arrival of the qi at the point we are needling. This is something we experience in our hands, specifically the hand holding the needle against the skin. We might describe ignition a “meta *deqi*”. It is an order of magnitude more profound and systemic than a garden-variety *deqi*. An ignition may well up from a particular layer or tissue, or it may seem to arise from out of nowhere but it is an energetic awakening, it pervades the entire organism.

As is the case with so many of these palpatory experiences, there are ignitions and there are *ignitions*. It is a matter of how one chooses to use the term. Some clinicians refer to ignitions occurring within joints or localised areas. I think of these localised ignitions are best understood as expressions of the *deqi* we typically experience when needling and reserve the term ignition for deeper, systemic and integrative awakenings.

In my experience, *deqi* and ignition lie along a continuum. They are species of the same phenomena, but they cannot be engaged in quite the same way. When we routinely administer needle techniques to get (*de* 得) the qi, we are actively working to *induce* an effect.

By contrast, ignition is something that is best approached indirectly. Much as one does not command the Dao, one does not induce an ignition. One creates the conditions for an ignition and lets it happen, although it is possible to become adept at creating those conditions.

Because the phenomenon of ignition is something that we can feel, it is a practical palpatory referent for primal qi. Whenever we experience an ignition in our patient, we can be confident that a significant impulse towards health has been activated. For me, ignition is a way of engaging some of the subtlest ideas in the Chinese literature in a concrete way. In practical terms, however, whether we call that impulse primal qi, Breath of Life, or just a really good *deqi* is immaterial. The bottom line for our patient is that when ignition occurs their self-regulatory mechanisms have rallied at a particularly deep level.²²

A central premise in the osteopathic notion of the Breath of Life is that this extracorporeal primal qi has its own inherent

intelligence. It is the active expression of the Way. Having created the optimal conditions for that primal intelligence to present itself, our job as clinicians is to simply respond to its imperatives. This then becomes a pragmatic expression of *wu wei* (effortless action 無為).

Making it real

It should be apparent that the perspective described here is not a technique so much as an approach that may be engaged in a variety of ways. Yet, in the interest of making it as tangible as possible, it may be helpful to detail it as one would a technique.

We begin with the mechanics. First, we simply ground ourselves in the somatic experience of our feet. Where am I contacting the floor? What does it feel like? This capacity for grounding can take some time to develop, yet with practice one can implement it within the space of a single breath.

Next, we align ourselves to our own midline, appreciating it and ensuring that it is open and spacious along its entire length. Thinking of one's head floating upward, or one's vertex suspended on a string is a well-known and useful cue for aligning one's midline.

In my experience however, it is common to hunch over slightly when needling, and even with this suspensory cue, many of us are still prone to collapse our chest slightly, blocking the midline in this area. So it is helpful to attend to raising our chest up off of our diaphragm as well.²³ With practice these first steps take only a moment. Nevertheless, they cannot be rushed or glossed over or the subsequent steps will be pointless.

We then locate the point and insert the needle. We attend to the experience of settling, slowing, integrating and opening at every step of the process. Along the way we are continuously attentive to our own pivot or midline, insuring it is open and unimpeded.

Often, this slight adjustment makes the difference between a so-so influence and a truly significant one. Our head is up, eyes and all of our sense organs open. Even our mouth is open slightly, though the tip of

the tongue lightly contacts the roof of the mouth just behind the front teeth.

These techniques must become almost automatic, as if they are executing themselves. Though this doesn't mean that we are not attending to them at every moment. Our attention to the process is in fact how we lose ourselves in them. Primal timelessness emerges from this. Attention is focused not at the tip of the needle, but remains open to all the changes occurring in the patient moment to moment, excluding nothing.

Once the needle has reached the proper depth, our hands remaining on the needle, we rest in this place of open awareness, simply appreciating whatever it is we are, or are not, experiencing (Chace C., 2006). Fully present in that moment, we may slip out of time, creating an opening, a potential.

Sooner or later thoughts creep back into our awareness. Lunch; the sound of a cell phone; what time is it? Our small selves return. At this point, don't linger or try to recapture the moment, simply move on.

Needle once, needle again. Listen and respond to the qi as it begins to organise itself. We are not concerned with the next step in a fixed protocol of treatment. We merely attend to each message the system is giving us regarding how to proceed according to the body's inherent treatment plan. We track and respond to changes in all of the measures we have at our disposal for assessing the qi. The pulse, and abdomen improve. The tongue changes, the system quiets and range of motion improves. The changes are systemic and comprehensive.

At some point when the system is ready and completely independent of our own agenda, as we remain present with the needle, expressing the pivot and creating the conditions for that opening, we may experience an ignition of qi, like an unending spring welling up from everywhere at once.

In some styles of meridian therapy, acupuncturists coordinate needling with the waves of qi cycling throughout the system. They try to catch the wave just before it peaks and recedes.

An ignition differs from a garden variety *deqi* in that this wave never recedes. There is an almost impossible sense of continuous upwelling, perfusing the system. This is primal qi.

Conclusion

On some level, the perspective presented here may be construed as little more than a mind game. It is indeed a means of engaging a certain aspect of our consciousness so that we become better acupuncturists. To be sure, it is certainly possible to needle effectively in an entirely mechanistic manner, and ignitions routinely occur in the context of a variety of treatment modalities and clinical circumstances.

Becoming a pivot of nothingness is not the only doorway to the primal but it is a profoundly direct and elegant one that makes every act of needling an exercise in internal cultivation. As Dōgen points out, "We should learn in practice that without the momentary continuance of our own effort in the present, not a single *dharma*, no single thing could ever be realised or could ever continue from one moment to the next."²⁴

Of course, we have an opportunity to practice *uji* (being-time) in every moment of our lives, but the art of needling provides us with an immediate feedback mechanism for refining our engagement of it and that is a truly remarkable gift. That doesn't make it easy.

For me, expressing the pivot of nothingness lies at the far end of a continuum bounded on the other side by those days when it is all I can do to get the needle out of the packaging without dropping it. On any given day, I fall somewhere between these two extremes, though more often than not, the pivot is now a reliably reproducible effect.

However my understanding of this pivot matures and develops, my own teachers assure me that I will never fully plumb its depths, any more than that there is a conclusion to *zazen* practice. There is no final mastery of the pivot, no end point. The only goal is to practise it with every needle, every breath and every moment.

Endnotes

1. LSJS, pg. 7.
2. *ibid*, pg. 8.
3. *ibid*.
4. *ibid*.
5. SLJS, p. 9.
6. Denmei
7. Takuan, p. 37.
8. Takuan, p. 38
9. Takuan, pp. 43-47.
10. Yukoi, p. 47.
11. Dōgen, p. 92
12. *ibid*, p. 95.
13. *Ibid*, p. 97.
14. Katagiri, p.76
15. Dōgen, p. 95.
16. Katagiri, p. 74.
17. The experience of the sweetness of the midline was taught to me by Richard Nuzzi D.C. It came to him through the Jim Jealous D.O. lineage of cranial osteopathy by way of Orianne Evans, D.O.
18. Sills, 2001. p. 70.
19. Sills 2004.
20. EOT, p. 358.
21. Soothill
22. Any discussion of palpatory referents for primal qi must at least acknowledge the phenomenon described by Rollin Becker as long tide. Cranial practitioners wax rhapsodic about the long tide describing it as:
The great organising wind generated by the Breath of Life. The Long Tide functions within a huge field of action. It seems to arise from and return to "somewhere else."
Long tide is understood to be among the expressions of the Breath of Life making it an obvious candidate for a palpatory referent for primal qi. In my experience, the simple presence of a long tide does not necessarily confer a therapeutic benefit. It is quite possible for a long tide to be present and nothing much happens. The presence of a long tide indeed may create an environment that is conducive to ignition but it is not inherently a therapeutic influence on a physiological level. This is admittedly a controversial position but the therapeutic value of the long tide nevertheless remains an open question for me. For this reason, I have focused on ignition, which is an unambiguously therapeutic in nature.
23. For more on the role of the mid-thoracic area in internal cultivation and acupuncture see Chace, 2012.
24. Dōgen. p. 95.