The Great Central Channel
&
the Microcosmic Orbit

Combining Ren and Du to create something even greater

As a cornerstone of daoist practice, the Microcosmic Orbit (or small heavenly cycle) has been known and revered for several thousand years. It has been presented in many different forms by this stage in its development, but the essence is always the same: the flow within the two great central meridians is combined to create a still more powerful and united force.

![Ren Mai, Microcosmic Orbit, Du Mai](image)

When we view Ren Mai (CV) as the "sea of yin" and Du Mai (GV) as the "sea of yang" we see the fundamental nature of their polarity and their communion as a promise of abundant possibilities. The practice has usually been taught in the form of a guided or internal imagery meditation and is viewed by many as the cornerstone, the very essence of daoist practice.

Several years ago, after training by myself for ten years with several variations of the method, I found myself spontaneously using touch to transform the guided meditation into a bodywork treatment. This particular client was a student of shiatsu and presented with few if any physical complaints. What he did have was a passionate interest in the alchemical aspects of shiatsu practice, which is probably the reason I was able to relax and improvise in this way.

When the treatment was over his response was unquiviocal: "This is the real work of shiatsu, not curing headaches!"

When I slowly and somewhat hesitantly began to teach what I had learned in practice, certain students proved somewhat sceptical to the approach. This should not have
surprised me, since outwardly it diverges from the practice of shiatsu quite considerably. However, the essential index of Zen shiatsu (hara diagnosis) was shown to be satisfied with this rather more uniform approach as opposed to the meridian-differential approach most common in shiatsu. This is to say that a hara evaluation yielding two kyo and jitsu (deficiency and excess) meridians at the outset of a treatment was resolved by the end, simply by the uniting of Ren and Du and without recourse to the apparently affected meridians themselves.

How is this possible?

The answer seems to lie in the images embedded in the functional names of the great central meridians: sea of yin and sea of yang. If, as is predicated, all of the yin meridians flow into Ren Mai, then we may expect an exchange of energies between the peripheral yin meridians (Ht, Kid, Lu, Sp, Pc and Liv) and the central yin channel. This exchange should logically involve the overflow of excess energy as well as a topping-up effect in cases of deficiency in both directions.

Exactly the same should apply to the relationship between the more peripheral yang meridians (SI, Bl, Li, St, TH and GB) and Du Mai, their central "sea". When we activate the major points on the two central channels, the treatment principle can thus be envisaged as a gradual "evening out" of flow within the two-as-one great central channel and between all of the main meridians which feed into and out of them.

However, we must not forget that the whole is almost always greater than the sum of its parts! There are additional effects which seem to be the result of the cumulative clearing and gathering effect as the treatment progresses. In practice it feels like a snowball gathering power as it rolls around the central meridian. A snow ball might perhaps not be a suitable image for some - why not a fire ball in that case? Why not both? Or perhaps a giant wave sweeping and gathering all before it.
When we look closely at the meridian charts and descriptions of these two extraordinary meridians we see that not only do they have a much more complicated network than first meets the eye. They also have several meeting points or convergence areas which make the whole thing much more interesting. For example both Ren and Du are said to have branches travelling within the spine and both connect with the eye. Both have branches that travel through the Kidneys and both also pass through the Heart. So that’s: heart, kidneys, eyes and spine, which makes quite an impressive list. We might conclude then that combining the Sea of Yin and the Sea of Yang creates an extra link between the Heart and Kidney, the Shao Yin meridians - themselves the basal elemental axis uniting Jing with Shen - then roots that link into the pillar of the spine and sends it shooting out through the eyes.

The Three Treasures in ascending order: Jing, Qi and Shen
Another seminal formula within traditional daoist thought is the three treasures: Jing, Qi and Shen (see diagram above). It may well be that the microcosmic orbit is indeed the alchemical practice which most efficiently helps us transform the base matter of our physical existence into glowing human spirit.

The Microcosmic Orbit & the 3 Dan Tian