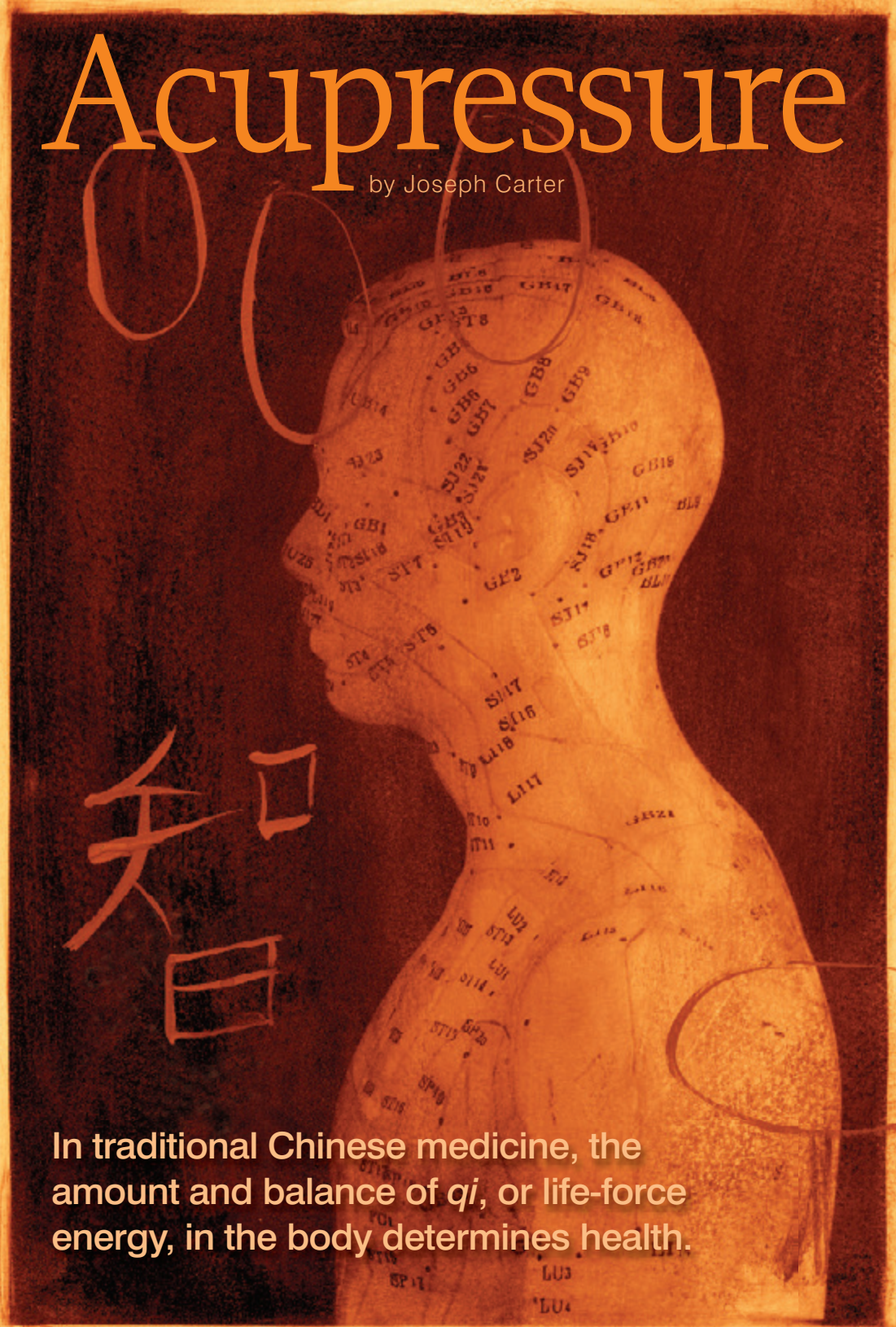


# Acupressure

by Joseph Carter



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## An Ancient Asian Art for Today's Massage Therapist

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**A**dding acupressure techniques to your massage sessions will help you work with less intensity while helping clients achieve quick, long-lasting results.

Science has shown that acu-therapeutics—acupressure and acupuncture—benefit recipients. Effective treatment has been shown for asthma, back pain, infertility, headaches, sprains, strains, neck pain and many other issues, according to *Acupuncture: Review and Analysis of Reports on Controlled Clinical Trials*, published by the World Health Organization. But the mechanism—the how—of acupressure—is still being studied and is much debated.

While no mechanism has been proven, many possibilities—bioelectrical, biochemical, placebo, suggestion, and newer ideas, such as biofield theory—have been suggested. Therefore, it is instructive to look at how acu-therapeutics work according to traditional Chinese medicine.

### The river of health

In traditional Chinese medicine, the amount and balance of *qi*, or life-force energy, in the body determines health. The movement of *qi* guides blood circulation and supports the processes of the body that create and maintain health. Disease comes about because *qi* is either lacking or its proper flow is inhibited or problematic.

Classically, the movement of *qi* is described as analogous to the flow of water in the rivers and

streams of a region. In the language of traditional Chinese medicine, these rivers and streams are the *jing lou*, usually translated as meridians or channels. The region can be an area of the body, such as the low back, upper extremities or head.

In these terms, health is described as a healthy flow of water in a region's rivers and streams; that is, a healthy amount of water—not too much, not too little—flowing in ways that keep the waterways running smoothly and that give the region's soil a healthy level of moisture—not too dry, not too soggy.

In this view, disease is a problem of the river; thus, a problem of the flow of *qi*. While this view of things may at first seem quaint or poetic, a longer look shows that it is surprisingly ecological and provides immediate guidance about what can be done to restore health in a particular situation.

While we cannot do justice to the myriad theories and practices of traditional Chinese medicine in this short article, it is important to note that all traditional Chinese medicine treatments, be they hands-on, as in acupressure, or ingestible, as in Chinese herbology, use these essential understandings and actions to guide practice.

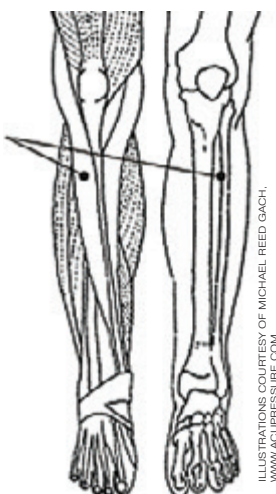
### Acupoints affect flow

Western science has shown that the specific acupoints of traditional Chinese medicine have a higher electrical conductivity than surrounding areas. Sometimes this same fact is stated as the

acupoints having a lower resistance to the flow of electricity. Either way, it is clear that these points allow and respond to the flow of electrical energy; that is, they help energy flow in and throughout the body.

There is also scientific speculation that acupoints and the meridian lines are due to electrochemical properties present in the fascial planes of the body. In the view of traditional Chinese medicine, the acupoints are specific places where one can powerfully affect the flow of the rivers of qi, the jing luo or meridians mentioned above. One can think of a bend in a river, or even of the spring that is the source of a stream: These are specific areas where a small, local action can have a large, systemic effect on the whole river.

## ST-36



Acupoint: stomach 36, or “three miles.” This acupoint is located one hand-width below the patella, and then one finger-width lateral to the crest of the tibia. Key functions: boosts qi, settles the mind and benefits digestion. Major acupoint for immediate energy, for grounding an anxious or worried mind, for relieving nausea and for improving appetite and digestion.

person and provide a map of rivers and regions within which to understand how a part as small as an acupoint can effect the whole, and how the whole can express imbalance through a small, focused area.

The strength of this system is powerfully expressed when an acupoint is used in ways that balance the systemic flow of qi at the same time it balances the local flow of qi. When we take advantage of the connections and wisdom of the system, when we tap into the holism of body, mind and spirit, we can achieve results that happen more quickly, relieve tension longer and allow the body to heal in an integrated and synergistic way.

Here is an example. Acupoint K-27, or “elegant mansion,” is said to relax the chest, open breathing and lift the spirit.

Imagine a client with asthma and the pectoral, shoulder and neck tension that so often accompany that disorder. When interviewing the client you notice his shallow breathing, and you sense the concern that living with asthma weighs down upon his chest and how his breathing problem limits his life. You learn that his use of an inhaler helps, but its side effects make him anxious and sometimes cause insomnia.

Palpating the region near the clavicle and sternum, you find tension and a lack of range in the joint between the two bones. Having studied acupressure, you decide to include light pressure on K-27 during the work on his pectoral girdle. As you do so, you notice your client’s breath shudder for a moment, and then he takes a long, deep breath followed by a relaxing sigh. After you finish the massage session, you take some time to speak with the client, who is noticeably more relaxed and upbeat, and breathing considerably deeper.

You take a few moments to show the client the location of K-27, to teach him that it is said to relax the chest and open breathing and to encourage him to gently massage the point himself for relief. Your client is appreciative, impressed with your knowledge, grateful for your sharing, more relaxed and happy to book his next session. You feel good, for you have not only done good work, but you have also given your client a tool for using the healing in his hands.

## Acupressure benefits MTs

No matter what techniques you practice, some clients and their challenges seem to be unchangeable, or seem like they will take tremendous investments of time and energy to show results. We’ve all met shoulders or hamstrings hard as rocks and nearly impervious to human hands. Often the response is to work harder and deeper, but this tactic can lead to reactive tensions and practitioner burnout.

In situations like this, combining an active style of massage with acupressure energy work encourages the body to relax and open more deeply to the work. The combination of active and energetic styles can provide the synergy necessary for a breakthrough that leads to healing.

This mixing of styles actively guides the client’s body in relieving tension and allows the energetic wisdom of the body to come forward. Together it creates deeper relief and longer-lasting results. Uniting active and energetic work allows technique and experience to blend with sensitivity and intuition in ways that save time and effort for the practitioner, along with more broadly serving the client.

Examples can be as simple as using acupoints near the origin and insertion of a muscle to help relieve muscular tension, or can be more acu-systemic, as in making use of the energetic understandings of traditional Chinese medicine and using the acupoint stomach 36 to relieve fatigue and improve digestion.

## Quick, long-lasting results

In traditional Chinese medicine, body, mind and spirit are seen and treated as interrelated and inseparable. All aspects of our being affect each other and are affected by each other. Traditional Chinese medicine’s energetic understanding (acupoints, meridians, organs, extraordinary vessels, the five elements and more) connect all aspects of a



**K-27**

Acupoint: kidney 27, or “elegant mansion.” This acupoint is located in the subclavicular space next to the manubrium, under the clavicle and above the first

costal cartilage. Key functions: relaxes the chest, opens breathing and lifts the spirit. Major acupoint for addressing difficult breathing and shortness of breath, to relieve chest tension and for calming mind and spirit.

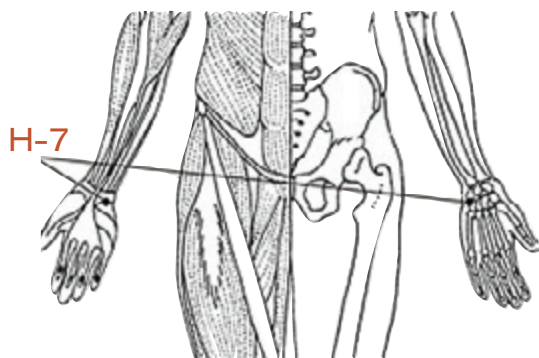
Acupressure allows practitioners to relieve local tension and tap into the power of the integration of mind, body and spirit as acknowledged by traditional Chinese medicine. Using acupressure in this way brings long-lasting results quickly.

## Cultivation and compassion

The core theories of traditional Chinese medicine are steeped in the nature-based philosophy of Taoism. Some of the oldest roots of traditional Chinese medicine speak deeply of the path—the tao—of the practitioner, of the growth and evolution of the person caring for others as she tends to her own cultivation.

From this view, cultivation is a process whereby the challenges of life, and of one’s practice, serve as opportunities to tend to one’s heart and mind, to work with the flow of nature, and to treat oneself and others with care and compassion.

Here’s an example of how acupressure can assist this sort of cultivation: Acupoint heart 7, or “spirit gate,” is said to



**H-7**

Acupoint: heart 7, or “spirit gate.” This acupoint is located in the wrist-crease indentation below the pisiform bone and on the radial side of tendon flexor carpi ulnaris. Key functions: calms the mind, calms the spirit, relieves wrist pain. Major acupoint for calming the mind and relieving palpitations, insomnia and anxiety.

relax the body, calm the mind and lift the spirit. (The word spirit in traditional Chinese medicine refers to the mental-emotional attitude of a person, not to any religion or organized spiritual tradition with which a person might or might not be connected.)

Imagine working with an athlete suffering from a severely sprained ankle. She must miss an important once-a-year competition due to the injury. Her disappointment is palpable; she is, in a word, dispirited.

Imagine that in working with this client you recall a similar disappointing situation you endured in the past. The likelihood that you are stirred up in ways that might interfere with the beneficial effects of your massage is fairly high. As a conscious and conscientious person, you notice your client’s energy, and are aware of your own stirrings. Being versed in acupressure, you choose to take a few moments before beginning the session and massage heart 7 on yourself.

Afterward, you notice that you are more able to focus on the situation at hand, more able to serve the present need of your client. You also choose to include heart 7 in the work you do with your client, and are pleased that as the session ends and she gets off the table, she is more able to focus on her steps forward in tending to her injury.

In this case, heart 7 has provided wonderful energy for practitioner and client alike.

Working with people through the challenges and tribulations of their lives requires both compassionate care and compassionate attendance to one’s own mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. Acupressure makes a wonderful addition to a massage therapy practice, as this philosophy of cultivation is the soil that the art of acupressure has grown in for thousands of years.

## Healing through your hands

I encourage you to explore the benefits acupressure can provide for you, your clients and your practice. When you add acupressure to your set of tools and techniques, you will be rewarded with greater ease in your work, you and your clients will have greater satisfaction with the results of the work, and your work can deepen as a practice of cultivation, enabling you to more fully bring healing through your hands.

Joseph Carter is director of the Acupressure Institute in Berkeley, California ([www.acupressureinstitute.com](http://www.acupressureinstitute.com)). He began practicing Asian healing arts in 1978, began teaching Asian healing arts theory and practice in 1984, and became a licensed acupuncturist in 1987. He maintains a private practice in San Francisco Bay Area, specializing in the treatment of gynecological and immunological concerns. 