

The Hirata Zones

by Oliver Cowmeadow

An ancient system used for diagnosis and treatment, that can be used alongside the meridians for greater effectiveness.

The Hirata Zones are a little known aspect of Oriental medicine, and I'd like to begin by saying how I came across them. In my practice I began to feel the presence of horizontal bands of Ki over the torso. For example Lung Ki seemed not only to be present in the Lung meridian and the back and hara diagnostic areas, but also at the top of the sternum, in the collar bones, and in fact right across the upper chests. I also felt it either side of the back diagnostic area out across the outer classical Bladder meridian and over the upper scapula. This whole region seemed related to Lung Ki, to be empty or full in a similar way to the Lung meridian. Further, that this whole region was nourished by Lung Ki explains the change in physical posture in this whole upper torso region as a result of Lung Ki imbalance.

Below the Lung region, I have long felt that the centre of the sternum around CV17 relates to the Heart ki just as much as the back diagnostic area. With the Zen meridian extensions we have the Heart meridian spreading out horizontally over the chest, and together with the Heart back diagnostic area we have another band all around the torso. Other bands started jumping out too, like the Liver and Gall Bladder extending from their Yu points horizontally over the back explaining why jitsu or stuck Liver and Gall Bladder Ki often creates a band of tension across the middle of the back. The band is also on the front of the body across the lower ribs, explaining why this regions tends to be stiff, overly -sensitive or painful when there is a Liver/Gall Bladder imbalance.

My curiosity well stimulated, I searched through the shiatsu tomes to see what information there was on these horizontal bands, mostly running at right angles to the paths of the meridians. In Hara Diagnosis: Reflections on the Sea' by Matsumoto and Birch. I found a brief description of the 'Hirata Zones', which seemed very similar to the bands I had found. Kurakishi Hirata was a Japanese acupuncturist, who described 12 zones over the torso, and also reflected on the limbs and head. As far as I have been able to ascertain, in acupuncture the zones are primarily used for diagnostic purposes. For example if a zone appears hot or cold, or contains a skin rash, this would indicate an imbalance in a particular organ or meridian, which could then be treated. The exciting thing for us shiatsu practitioners is that we can not only use the zones diagnostically, especially through touch, but can also use them for treatment. If a person is Lung kyo, tonifying the Lung zone as well as the Lung meridian will have a greater effect.

Further investigation revealed that this really very simple zonal theory is quite ancient, and evolved separately to meridian theory as a complete system of diagnosis and treatment. It was largely superseded by meridian

theory as the latter was found to be more useful, but I believe it still offers a very useful adjunct in shiatsu work. As we can now use all the theory of the organs and meridians that we already know to understand, for example Lung Ki, one simply needs to learn the positions of the zones to use this whole system effectively.

Although Hirata used the name 'zones', it is more accurate to think of them as 'slices', not only including the superficial zone on the surface of the body, but also all of the internal body within. Our core Ki lies within and around the spine. It is the ability of this central channel to hold much Ki that has allowed the development of much complexity in the evolution of vertebrates. The vertebrae and surrounding tissues at different levels of the spine hold Ki with different functions. This includes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual functions. This is reflected in the back diagnostic areas, the Yu points and some Bo points, as well as in zonal theory.

There is a good correlation between the zones, the Yu points and back diagnostic areas, and some correlation with Bo points and hara diagnostic areas. For example the kidney zone includes the Kidney back diagnostic area, the Kidney Yu points at BL23, the Kidney Bo points at GB25, as well as part of Kidney hara diagnostic area, GV4 and BL47, other useful tsubo for working with Kidney Ki. Unfortunately the correlations are not perfect. Very frustrating for our minds!

In shiatsu treatment a specific zone can be worked along with the same meridian. As the Ki in a zone is strongest around the spine, this can be the most important and transformative prana to work. One thing I like about the zonal theory is its inclusion of the vertebral column, which so often appreciates being worked on. Within a zone the thumb, elbow or fingers can be used to work not only in the spaces between the vertebrae, but also directly on the spinous processes of the vertebrae. By working directly on the bones one can contact the Ki in the whole vertebrae and surrounding tissues quite powerfully. One can then work to the sides of the spinous process on the Zen Bladder meridian, and also on the classical inner Bladder meridian to have a strong effect on the spinal Ki at that level.

The next most powerful place to work is often on the centre of the front of the body, which has a direct connection to the spine, on the Conception Vessel and classical Kidney meridians. points (not necessarily n any meridian) down the sides of the body can also have a strong connection with the core energy of the body. Beyond these three areas, the whole zone can be given shiatsu to tonify or disperse Ki, release stuck emotional energy, or to raise the receiver's awareness of a part of their body or being. The zones on the torso are reflected over the whole of the rest of the body, so shiatsu to the vertebrae and torso can be supplemented by work on the limbs or head.

I hope this article has given you a good idea of what the Hirata zones are and how they can be a very useful adjunct to meridian treatment. The zones are quite easy to learn. Students seem to pick up on this simple system very quickly, as they make so much sense to one's hands.

References: Matsumoto & Birch (1988) Hara Diagnosis: Reflections on the Sea. Paradigm Publications