

What's left when we die?



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The first time I saw or even touched a dead person was my father, lying on his bed. I remember looking at this small, old body and thinking, that's not my Dad, he's gone, he's not there anymore. I leaned over and kissed the physical form goodbye.

I have thought this over often since, especially as now I am very privileged to see the mortal remains of others in the dissecting rooms of King's College London (KCL). But what is it about dead people that gets people thinking of 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation', or morgues with death by misadventure?

At KCL, metal dissection tables ordered in lines populate the large air-conditioned room, each containing the body parts of real people who have left their bodies to medical science, so that we may learn. They were, and are, very much people, albeit in more than one piece, and usually in more than one place. Since my first visit, I have pondered on the mortal remains of these people. In particular, I wondered if the acupuncture points that I can palpate in the living are also palpable in the dead, and what this might mean.

This has sparked a series of ongoing, probably unanswerable questions: Who are we? What are we made of? What happens to us when we die? I considered the energetics of food, and how our bodies are made: consumed foods create us and we are truly 'what we eat'. When we die, we are still physically here, although inanimate. Given this I asked myself, could it be that I could palpate an acu-point in a cadaver and perceive something? If I could, what would it mean? I set about finding out.

In late 2014, I met one of the senior anatomists at the hospital and was taken to palpate an elderly lady - in my head I named her Mrs Jones - to see what may be revealed. To begin I palpated for points on the forearm: LI 10 shou san li, I thought, a nice easy point to feel in the living. As I palpated, the hairs on the back of my neck rose. I could feel something; a point. Distinct, cold, there, and I was interacting with it. OMG! This was fascinating.

I went further. Was it possible that the points extended beyond the skin and deeper into the channel system? I palpated a partially dissected lower limb. To my

astonishment, I could feel something. There was less to feel at the point, and not only was there less form around it, but it felt smaller. I continued down to the bone where, just palpable, was something I would describe as a small feeling of a point. I tried palpating other points as other cadavers' deeper structures were revealed but there was less to palpate.

In college we are told that the channels go deep to the bone, and here was my personal experience of exactly this; not a diagram in a book, or a drawing on a page, but real 3D. It has truly left me pondering on what we are made of, who we are, and what we leave behind when we die. Just who, or what, was I interacting with? Was it Mrs Jones?

Surely she was no longer living. Although I couldn't deny that I was perceiving something. If we physically exist, surely there is still a part of us here in existence when we die?

As I sat at home over Christmas eating - and putting on a little bit too much of the corporeal - I thought to myself, this is me, all of me. When I die and my spirit is no longer held in my body, I know that my physical body remains here. Therefore, I believe I must exist, at least until all my remains are elsewhere, taken up in other forms and by other beings. The cadavers that I palpate exist, and by extension so must the person ... and the channels, meridians and points.

My body remembers its own traumatic events in its own way. It is energy that seems to be embedded in the tissues themselves. Faithfully, every November, symptoms that took me to hospital 20 years ago return. If my body remembers in this way, then was it possible that I was feeling this lady's energy, embedded in her left-behind form?

The cadavers I palpate exist, and by extension so must the person and the channels, meridians and points. And each time I think of my Dad, who is no longer here, I remind myself that he too still exists.