



DRAGONS TALE

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Treating the Spirit with Acupuncture



Can Acupuncture Treat the Spirit?

ARE WE, AS ACUPUNCTURISTS, TREATING THE SPIRIT? IN DEBATING THIS, WE NOT ONLY HAVE TO DEFINE SPIRIT, BUT ALSO TREATMENT.

I would say that we are not treating the spirit, but by the same token we are also not treating the body. We do not treat in the sense of actively 'curing' or 'making well', and neither does any other type of medical intervention, including allopathic drug therapy. Healing is something that occurs from within – we heal ourselves. All a healer can do, no matter what tool they use, is to set the parameters that allow healing to occur, which can perhaps catalyse a shift towards healing on whatever level is necessary for each individual patient.

Of course there are situations in which the patient's *zheng qi* is overwhelmed by a pathogen and the correct antidote needs to be administered. However, we have seen the simplistic application of this model render antibiotics ineffective and lead to the rise of such problems as MRSA. The art of healing is to find the correct catalyst both for the patient and for the disease in question, be it drugs, herbs, acupuncture, shiatsu, counselling or past life therapy.

Most of us would agree that as acupuncturists we have access to an extraordinary body of knowledge that shows us effective ways to rebalance the *qi*.

This body of knowledge is based on an interrelated system of channel pathways and their related organs on a deep level: internal-external pairing, the six divisions, *ziwu* oppositions, deep channel pathways or connection to the genetic blueprint level of the extraordinary vessels (Pirog 1996). In its use of ear acupuncture, hand acupuncture, or the five element points below the elbow and knee, acupuncture works on the isophasal (Manaka, et al 1995) or fractal concept that each part of the body is a reflection of the whole.

But what is this *qi* that we are rebalancing? Many of us these days recognise that *qi* cannot be

translated simply as vital energy (Soulie de Morant 1994/1931 pp.185-330). It is represented by a character with two parts, the first being to do with breath or movement and the second with matter or the stuff of life. Thus *qi* is simultaneously both the motive force of life and the matter through which this motive force is manifested physically (Unschuld 1985, Zhang and Rose 1999): Matter and movement are inseparable in life. When considering the *qi* of a human being, one must incorporate the physical body and that which moves it. This, I would suggest is the emotions, the consciousness and the spirit.

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This accords with acupuncture theory that sees no separation between body, mind, emotion and spirit, each of which permeates all the others. Consequently an imbalance in one is reflected in the others, and a simple treatment on the physical level if accurately targeted to the aspects of the physical in which imbalances are held, has the potential to catalyse a profound shift not only physically, but also on the levels of consciousness, emotion or spirit.

And here I must define my use of the word spirit. Interpreting the word *shen* is problematic in the extreme, because there are so many different possible interpretations depending on the context of the use of the word (Hsu 1999, Hsu 2000). It seems to refer to all the non-physical aspects of the body: spirit and mind are both common translations that we are familiar with, and ‘calm the *shen*’ is a point action often indicated in case of emotional upset. I would like to propose a definition that I find clinically useful, and which takes into account this close relationship between mind, emotions and spirit.

For me, issues of spirit are specifically to do with the life questions ‘who am I’ and ‘what is my purpose’. We are routinely taught that it is important to have a picture of the aetiology of a disease. A problem could be rooted in diet, in emotion, in addiction, in the way the patient uses their body, in environmental factors, in poisons – all these aetiologies we know and are taught to take into account. However, if a problem is on the level of spirit, it is a problem to do with life choices; I am not being who I am, or I have lost my purpose.

Typically, such a loss of identity or purpose will manifest through the mind and through the emotions: thinking and feeling. This gives rise to psychological and emotional problems, and might explain why the word *shen* is used both for mind and for emotions. On the one hand, our lives are fashioned by our thought processes – we create our own reality.

Our brains, the tool of our thinking, are programmed when we are children by our parents according to their understanding. We need this programming to live in the society we live in, but as adults we have the ability to change our thinking if it is no longer useful to our being and purpose.

On the other hand, our emotions tell us when things are out of balance. Spirit (our sense of being and purpose) will use emotion to try to get us back on track if we have strayed, and thus loss of purpose and identity are flagged by emotion (depression, frustration, sadness, anger, fear), or by lack of emotion (depression, disconnection, emptiness). Lack of emotion is often more serious than emotion, and enabling a patient to connect to emotion can be a powerful healing tool.

Other aetiology, such as addictive behaviour, that may be preventing us achieving our potential or connecting with who we are, can also be an indicator of a problem at the level of spirit, although it may not be. And in the same way, it would be unwise and perhaps wrong to say that all psychological and emotional problems are on the level of spirit. However, we are beings involved in the process of spiritual development, and it is always possible to see problems encountered in life from the perspective of growing towards being who we are and understanding and fulfilling our purpose in life.

As an acupuncturist, I have identified three distinct ingredients that seem to be necessary for healing to occur in a patient. The first is an intervention – in our case a point prescription – that precisely targets the problem. The second is the intention of the practitioner during that intervention, and the third is the readiness of the patient to be healed. The third of

these is the most important – if the patient is not ready to make a change, even if the acupuncturist is accurate and the intention of the acupuncturist impeccable, no change will occur, or if there is a change it will be short lived. We all have the experience of the effect of our acupuncture treatment lasting a couple of days then fading out.

By intention, I do not mean that the practitioner necessarily intends a particular effect, but rather that the focus of the practitioner remains on the needs of the patient, during both consultation and needling and that the practitioner sees the patient clearly. The seeing of the patient by the practitioner is in itself a powerful enabling force for change on the level of spirit, almost as if we need that recognition from outside to help us to see our own direction. If the practitioner then sees the patient’s *qi* during needling – and by sees, I mean is aware of in any way, which might be seeing but often is sensing or feeling – the patient is more likely to be enabled to make the necessary shifts towards health.

I used to think that intention was the primary ingredient for healing, and the point prescription secondary, but over seven years of acupuncture practice I have begun to understand the extraordinary precision of acupuncture as a healing tool. It now seems to me that if the patient is ready, and acupuncture suits them, a point prescription in itself does have the potential to catalyse healing. However, there is a greater chance of good results on a regular basis if both the intention of the practitioner and a precise and relevant point prescription come together.

Because the spirit, mind and emotions permeate the physical, any needling pattern or indeed single point has the potential to connect with the core depths of a patient and catalyse shifts on a non-physical level. This in no way excludes the most simple TCM patterns; indeed, simple messages to the body seem to produce the strongest catalyst for a shift in *qi*, almost as though the body can deal most effectively with one stimulus at a time. Such non-physical shifts can occur even if the practitioner has not addressed this in words with the patient, which is why we can sometimes be surprised by the results of our needling.

However, although any point prescription might catalyse a profound shift on any level, my experience is that there are indeed certain types of prescription that have a greater potential than others to catalyse a shift on the level of spirit. For example, using the *qi jing ba mai* (eight extraordinary vessels) seems to be effective in this respect, perhaps

because the treatment uses channels that connect to or even make up the central core of the patient, and are associated with the genetic blueprint of the body (Magidoff 1999) and linked to cycles of change (Ross 1995 p.111). For this reason some practitioners warn against using these point prescriptions lightly (Pirog 1996 p.157) although others have used them routinely with much reported success (Manaka, et al 1995).

The way we decide on the correct points to use for a specific diagnosis is derived

- from the historical documentation of the theoretical uses of points
- from the documented experience of past doctors in relation to this theory and
- from our own experience.

We easily accept that there are points and point combinations that are recorded as having a greater potential than others to catalyse specific physical shifts in the body – indeed students spend years learning point actions. Why should there not be certain points on the body or ways of combining points that have a recorded greater potential than others to catalyse a shift on the level of spirit? Although non-physical problems can manifest anywhere in the body, perhaps there are particular points that, according to certain doctors, are typically useful in this kind of case?

In current shorthand, that would mean that these points have an action related to the spirit, and this is very interesting and useful information. If a point is said to have this kind of action, this only means that the experience of such use has been documented, just as the experience of a point having the potential to catalyse certain physical shifts has been documented. Just as the needle itself does not do the healing, the point itself does not have an action. It is only a potential stimulus point – the patient must act.

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documented information is coming from. Neither spirit nor emotions were typically talked about in the main body of acupuncture literature in China, because historically those with emotional or psychological problems were sent to the monasteries rather than to acupuncturists (Yuen 2004). Because the monks were the ones who had to deal with this type of problem, the information on this subject is to be found in Daoist texts such as the *Dao Zang Jing*, which is voluminous and not translated into English, although apparently an Italian translation of some of this information is in process (Yuen 2004). Some of the psycho-emotional information we have is of contemporary Western origin, deriving from the work of J.R. Worsley (Eckman 1996) and includes experiential interpretation of classical point names (Jarrett 2003).

The relationship between my concept of spirit as identity and purpose, and the Chinese concept of *shen* is one that needs research. Given the needs of our patient demographic, study of the potential to catalyse shifts on the psycho-emotional and spiritual levels attributed to points is of the utmost importance to current acupuncture practice. Further work both to bring source material to light and to evaluate contemporary clinical practice in this area is to be whole heartedly welcomed.

Clearly acupuncture cannot give a patient a sense of being or a purpose in life. However it can help remove the static, provide a moment of clarity, an opportunity for a shift in the *qi* dynamic, so that life choices can be seen more clearly. It can help a patient connect to and express an emotion that is flagging a problem with spirit, so paving the way for growth.

If acupuncture treatment in any way helps me to connect to my core such that I begin to be able both to understand and to connect emotionally with the problems that I face around my identity and life's purpose, then did that acupuncture treat my spirit?

In one sense, no, as I suggested at the start of this article, acupuncture does not treat the spirit, the patient treats the spirit. But in another sense, acupuncture did help catalyse a shift that allowed me to heal on the level of spirit, and if that is what is meant by treating the spirit, and I would argue that this is the case, then yes, acupuncture does have the capacity to treat the spirit.

Acupuncture is a wonderful tool that can work on many levels. To consciously work on the level of spirit in this way is a choice. It is a valid choice that can be made. ■

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