

# From Technician to Master

## THE PROCESS OF THE TCM STUDENT

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I have recently been drawn to remember how I felt about TCM when I first entered the program. I remember being so idealistic about what a TCM practitioner did, how they developed themselves to the best of their ability, and how they deeply penetrated into the nature of *qi* and the deepest layers of the human experience.

When I first began my TCM education, I remember attending an open house at my school. I naively asked "Do you feel that your *qigong* practice has assisted in your becoming a more refined practitioner?" I distinctly remember the faces, the drawn, blank faces. *What is he talking about?* they probably thought. *What qigong practice?* It was at that precise moment my conceptions began to be rattled, for before that, with all that I had read, with all that I had experienced, I had always held that the ideal of an acupuncturist was to know and manipulate *qi*. I began to learn that for the majority of TCM practitioners, it was the needle that manipulated the *qi*. Somehow the filiform steel was conscious of what/how it should tonify or sedate. Further, that same needle knew exactly where to move the *qi*, how far, in what direction, and how deep. This is pretty impressive, to say the least. What was I to believe at this point? Should I just accept that somehow steel is impregnated with omniscient curative powers, and therefore, like most practitioners, I don't have to worry about my own development or my intentions, however muddled they may be?

We should remember that the concept Wind (*Feng*) was thought to be malevolent in ancient Chinese culture. Disease was a force against the source *qi*, and the practitioner's obligation, not too distant from the shamans of old, was to correct the Blood and *qi*, either by banishing the invader or boosting the system such that the body/spirit would rid the Evil (*Xie*) *qi* of its own accord. Did the needle do this on its own? I daresay not. Are we so entranced into thinking that there is something other than our own focused intention at work here? Is it just abject laziness that sets us against what could be a truly revolutionary healing of the soul?

I apologize for saying the word "soul," but we must work with the soul; we must start there, otherwise we are no better than any physician who simply administers drugs with no regard to true healing; and who collects their paycheck without taking responsibility for symptomatic relief that they call medicine. There is no true healing that is not soul healing; there is no effect that is long-lasting but doesn't get to the core of the sense of isolation and separation that is the beginning of all illness. We have to look at what our education is offering us and we have to realize that this is without doubt the beginning of our scholarship. When we graduate with our degrees, it has to be more than: For *shen* disturbance, use Du 20, Li 4, Lv 3, and *tian wang bu xin wan*. We have to ask ourselves, as students, Is this enough? Is simply following a point/formula protocol enough to truly treat our patients? Perhaps in the short run, but I daresay that any technician can follow a protocol. In the end, don't we want to be more than just technicians?

The opportunity that we as practitioners (and students are practitioners) have is that when patients come to us, they are at least implicitly expecting that the treatment will have as its base an energetic foundation. Many patients come to us because they feel there is more than physiology in their symptoms. When we ruminate on this, we will realize what a tremendous opportunity it is to actually address what often goes ignored by other forms of medicine.

I feel this deep focus on the soul is a requirement to become a true practitioner of TCM, and to demonstrate this, I would ask you to consider the image of a master of TCM. The visual image is someone who quietly and deftly appraises a situation, sees it through to the deepest level of dysfunction, and with solemnity and focus realigns the patient with his or her destiny. This commitment was not achieved overnight; it is only through training and discipline that anyone has achieved a level of mastery. So, can this be gained in the four years or so that we as students apply ourselves to the study of TCM? Again, I would think not, though we certainly can set the foundation for a career in the pursuit of the nature of health and illness. It is simply not the body that creates the Spirit, and every *qigong* practice reminds us of this simple fact. The world, however, will try and sway us into thinking that it is somehow nerves, chemicals or a myriad of other elements that are the foundation of our experience. But if you have ever treated someone for heartache (or experienced it, for that matter), you know that the body is just doing what it's told. An ancient Chinese scholar once said, "The Heart (*Shen*) speaks its own language." It is as true today as it was a thousand years ago.

The discipline to know the deeper aspects of medicine and life is not that difficult. The essentials are there for us: the True Yin, the True Yang, the Source and the Essence. From the *Nei Jing* on down, we are instructed to develop ourselves, to move the Thought (*Yi*) to Will (*Zhi*), and perhaps most importantly, to have control of our personal *qi*. It is exciting to realize that I am not the only one striving for this ideal, but conversely, it is saddening to see how few are devoted to becoming the best they can be. Let us not rely on our schools as our sole source of information, but continue to meditate on Nature and her secrets. She has much to teach us if we consistently apply ourselves to becoming more than mere technicians.

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