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On acupuncture: Conversation between an acupuncturist and a curious friend  
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[76-78]

Q: How do you cure the emotional conditions that wound you?

A: First of all you should try to understand. The classics were quite accurate; they analyzed the factors correlated with emotional disorders very precisely. They incorporated the social and economic aspects, described the characteristics of pathogenic processes, and observed the individual differences in the response. For example, the “Suwen”, in chapter 17, encourages an accurate anamnesis, which must take social and emotional events in the patient's life into consideration too: “He who diagnoses the illness must understand the beginning and the arrival point, understand its roots and branches. When he takes the pulse and asks about the symptoms, he must take into account the differences between a man and a woman. Sorrow due to the distance and separation of a loved one cause accumulations and constraints of emotions; worries, fear, euphoria, and anger empty the five *zang*-organs; qi and blood are no longer contained. The unrefined doctor cannot understand these processes, in this case how can we speak of true medical art?”

Q: Yes, how can we?

A: Space for listening, both of words and of whatever may emerge, should be present: “During the treatment one should withdraw to a quiet and secluded place, and ask the patient in an ample and complete manner about all aspects of the illness in order to understand its meaning. He who manages to grasp the *shen* is successful; he who lets it go, is lost”, the “Suwen” says in chapter 13. In order to let the needle produce an event, the doctor defines a shielded space in which to be, relate with the patient, condense energies: “When he treats with needles, the doctor must be in a state of deep calm, must come and go only together with *shen*, act as though he had doors and windows closed, *hun* and *po* are not dispersed, *yi* and *shen* are concentrated, *jing* and *qi* are not divided, the voices of the people around him are not heard, so that *jing*-essence is collected, *shen* is united, and intention is directed onto the needle”. This passage appears in chapter 9 of the “Lingshu.” The terms *hun*, *po*, *yi* refer to specific psychic aspects, too complex to be discussed in these pages.

Q: This attention to the treatment space reminds me of the setting concept in psychoanalysis.

A: Yes, in fact all the psychotherapeutic treatments, also the healing rites of the various traditions, regulate their timing, places, procedures. What happens in these spaces has a different quality and density from daily life and this “happening” is facilitated by taking place in a separate space, that keeps some things inside and leaves others outside.

The “setting” is the container where the work is structured and has the function of regulating and holding what moves during the therapeutic encounter. It has some concrete aspects, but it essentially

is a mental attitude.

Q: There is attention to very subtle elements.

A: Yes, for instance, we find an awareness of how necessary a deep cooperation with the patient is. In chapter 11 of “Suwen” we read: “Talking of the power of medicine with those who believe in ghosts and demons is useless. Speaking of needles with words of praise to those who detest them is worthless. Imposing a treatment on one who does not wish to be cured is useless, he will not heal despite all the doctor's efforts”. Ghosts and demons relate to an animistic-shamanic perspective, but they also refer to an ascription of illness to forces considered as external and independent from us. Healing is not possible if the patient considers ill health as a pure external accident. The doctor is not omnipotent.

We also find considerations regarding projective aspects of our mind, for example in the “Classic of categories”, “Leijing”, we read: “If *shen*-spirit and *zhi*-mind are unbalanced, the pathogens establish themselves, then ghosts-*gui* 鬼 are generated in the heart. Therefore, he who has aversion inside sees aversion, he who has envy sees envy, he who has suspicion will see suspicion, he who has fear will see fear, and this not only in illnesses, but also in the dreams of sleep. This means that if *zhi*-mind志 has aversion for something it comes to think of it on the outside, qi and blood internally are disordered and it is as if there were spirits and ghosts”.

Q: And the doctor?

A: I think that an awareness of the importance of elements such as empathy and attention to the therapeutic relationship had always been there. Yu Chang wrote in 1658: “Medicine-*yi* 医 is intention-*yi* 意 when one has a patient in front of him he must use intention for evaluating. I do not have great ability in this sense, but always, from my youth to old age, when I see sick people I calm the qi, contain the heart, share the breath and start to transform my body into that of the patient.” Here there is also a wordplay between medicine-*yi* 医 is intention-*yi* 意, and Chinese love wordplays.