Some Frequently Asked Questions about Oriental Medicine

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Contents

Chapter 1

Oriental Medicine and Acupuncture

1.1 What is Oriental Medicine?

Oriental medicine is a very broad term covering the traditional medicines of China, Korea, Japan, Viet Nam, Tibet, and other Asian and Oriental countries. In general, the techniques of Oriental medicine are acupuncture, moxibustion, herbology, massage, cupping, gwa sha (scraping), breath work (Qi Gong, aka Chi Kung) and exercise (Tai Ji, aka Tai Chi). To find out more about Oriental medicine in general, I would recommend a few books which are widely available:

- *Asian Health Secrets*, Letha Hadady, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1996
- *Between Heaven and Earth*, Harriet Beinfield and Efrem Korngold, Ballentine Books, New York, 1991
- *The Web That Has No Weaver*, Ted Kaptchuk, Congdon and

Weed, New York, 1983

- *Survey of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Claude Larre, Jean Schatz and Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee, Traditional Acupuncture Institute, Columbia, MD, 1986

To quote a few others on this question of definitions:

> Chinese medicine is a coherent and independent system of thought and practice that has been developed over two millennia. Based on ancient texts, it is the result of a continuous process of critical thinking, as well as extensive clinical observation and testing. It represents a thorough reformulation of material by respected clinicians and theoreticians. It is also, however, rooted in the philosophy, logic, sensibility, and habits of a civilization entirely foreign to our own. — *Ted Kaptchuk, The Web That Has No Weaver*

> Eastern philosophy is based on the premise that all life occurs within the circle of nature. Things within this matrix are connected and mutually dependent upon each other. Nature is one unified system, the Tao, with polar and complimentary aspects: *Yin* and *Yang*....When the elements of nature are in balance, life is harmonic and flourishes...When people are like gardens, then doctors are like gardeners. The role of the Chinese doctor is to cultivate life. — *Harriet Beinfield and Efrem Korngold, Between Heaven and Earth*

> Traditional Acupuncture is a healing art and science which teaches how to see the entire human being in body-

> mindspirit, how to recognize the process of health and illness, and how to go about the restoration of lost health in an individual. The main difference between Western medicine and Oriental Medicine is the basic theory of the Chinese that there is a Life Force, called Ch'i Energy, and that this Life Force flows within us in a harmonious, balanced way. This harmony and balance is health. If the Life Force is not flowing properly, then there is disharmony and imbalance. This is illness. — *Dianne Connelly, Traditional Acupuncture: The Law of The Five Elements, Centre for Traditional Acupuncture, Columbia, MD, 1979*

> Health is the natural state of the universe. It makes no sound. Healthy beings are those who are healthy without consciously knowing it or understanding why...This is the starting point of Chinese medicine, whose focus is the movement of energy through the collective network of pathways that surround and penetrate all living beings. — *Claude Larre, SJ, Survey of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Traditional Acupuncture Institute, Columbia, MD, 1986*

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. — *William Shakespeare, "Hamlet"*

1.2 What is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the technique of inserting thin, metal needles into specific points on the body for therapeutic effect. It has a long lineage of use in China, with references to its practice dating back over 2500 years. These points are arranged in lines and patterns on the surface of the body, following energetic pathways of *Qi* (also rendered as Chi or Ki). These pathways are called Meridians or Channels (*Mai* in Chinese). These points, though located on the surface of the body, connect to deep flows and patterns of *Qi* within the body. Through insertion and manipulation of the needles, an art form in itself, disharmonies in this flow of *Qi* may be influenced and changed.

There are many schools of thought concerning the specific technique of acupuncture. Among the more popular are modern Traditional Chinese Medicine[1] (TCM), Chinese Five Phase, Japanese Meridian Therapy (a Five Phase school of thought), the French systems and British (Worsley, aka Traditional Acupuncture) schools of thought. Each has its own sophisticated approach to the concept of treatment, but the basic principles of classical Chinese medicine are shared by all. This is a medicine which developed over a vast area and a very long time by many people who each, in their own way, had a piece of the puzzle. We are only now beginning to realize that there is a puzzle; one day, we may begin putting it together.[2]

No particular approach has been shown superior to another, though

[1] This term is often mistaken as referring to the full range of Oriental medicine. TCM is actually a more narrow terminology, referring specifically to a style of Chinese medicine designed and so named in the earlier part of this century. Writers and practitioners who wish to discuss or write about styles of Chinese medicine other than TCM have used many terms such as Oriental medicine, classical Chinese medicine, pre-TCM Chinese medicine, and others. The distinction is important to anyone who will be reading widely in this field. TCM is a *style* of herbal medicine and acupuncture, not the entirety of Chinese medicine.

[2] In the meantime we bicker. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Western and other practitioners argue constantly about which holds the “authentic” historical keys and most effective diagnostic and treatment styles.

some styles have advantages in treating some types of disorders. The skill and talents of the practitioner are usually the determining factor for successful treatment whatever school of thought they might follow, though consistency within a given model is important.

1.3 How Does Acupuncture Work?

In the Chinese framework, the human body is seen as an energetic construct of functions in contrast to the Western view of the body as a mechanistic collection of parts. As mentioned above, acupuncture is based on the concept of *Qi* (of which energy and function are two of the most commonly understood aspects) flowing throughout the body. When this flow is balanced, smooth and freely moving, health is maintained. When the flow is absent, deficient, interrupted, excessive or blocked in an area, illness or pain results. By stimulating appropriate acupuncture points along the affected channels, the energy is again balanced and allowed to flow freely.

This is, of course, a gross simplification of the whole issue, which can be further explored in books such as *The Web That Has No Weaver* and *Between Heaven and Earth*. The latter book, especially, has a wonderful discussion of the human body as a garden and the acupuncturist as a gardener, carefully tending, watering and feeding the garden.

Another approach to describing the function of acupuncture that I often use when teaching is derived from my own undergraduate studies in math. Chaos mathematics and systems theory were born of the quest to understand massive, unpredictable processes such as the weather and out of the frustration of lacking a workable scientific model to predict something as simple as the path of a column of smoke from an incense stick.

The problem, in each case, is that the smoke and the weather are not "things" at all, but rather integral parts of greater systems of incomprehensible complexity. Thus if a butterfly takes to flight from a flowering plant in Japan, its movements have some (if infinitesimally small) effect on the weather in California, and the movements of that column of smoke from the incense in your living room. Moreover, we know that our planet and our solar system are inextricably linked into the dance of the galaxy and the movements of other planets and solar systems and, ultimately, the movements of the galaxy itself.

We should never consider the human body as somehow separate from these processes. Every action we take has a measurable effect on our environment and, to some degree, changes the very fabric of the universe. The same is true *in reverse*.

It is a fundamental concept to many philosophical and religious systems that we are complex beings deeply interconnected to and part of our environment and each other. The Chinese philosophies which gave rise to Oriental medicine are wholly in this line of thought. Every day this viewpoint becomes more the basis of Western physics as well.

So, how *does* acupuncture work?

Imagine, for a moment, our solar system. Each planet calmly following its appointed path, the system as a whole quietly moving through the blackness of space. Now let's say that a planet sized finger came into our solar system and gave Mars a little push. That push would change the orbit of Mars around the sun. It would also change the orbits of the other planets and of the moons that orbit them.

The change to our orbit, and our moon, cause a change in the tides here on Earth which causes a change in the weather, which affects crops in the American Midwest. This affects produce prices in the supermarket which affect your purchasing patterns, changing your diet and perhaps impacting your health. (Depending on which direction the push went, however, such change could be very good for either winter coat manufacturers or swimming suit designers.)

What has happened is that this giant finger has introduced change into the system and this change has made itself part of the complex interactions around it, and altered the system in ways which we could never have predicted. A similar push in another solar system would have quite different effects.

Now let's say that the finger gives Mars just the right push in just the right direction, with maybe a little push on Venus and corrects the spin of one of Saturn's moons, setting everything back into its normal orbit and movement. Weather and crops are restored to normal, eventually supermarket prices return to normal and fishermen can happily use their tide tables to predict the ebb and flow of the oceans again. Harmony (such as it is) is restored.

In Oriental medicine, we see your body as a system of functions and movements not unlike that of the planetary system considered above. Once in a while the harmony of your system is disturbed and this results in what we call illness. Acupuncture is the science and art of causing change in this system; of giving just the right push to set things back to normal. It has developed over time by giving lots of right and wrong pushes to millions upon millions of systems and recording the results, until we have some pretty good maps from which to design our modern-day treatments.

This is why there can be no really effective sets of points which treat a given condition in every person. Each person starts with a unique system which reacts and interacts differently with the influences upon it. Acupuncture points and needle techniques must be selected not only for the symptoms but also for how those symptoms are expressed within the whole person. No acupuncture student likes to hear this, but there really are no "best points" for sinus congestion or for a headache or high blood pressure. Such symptoms must be seen in their relationship to the entire person, and in relation to that person's world.

Can we "prove" that acupuncture works? Probably we cannot to the extent that we can prove an apple falls when we drop it and explain why. We cannot "prove" current ideas in physics either, within the usual meaning of proof in the biomedical fields, yet these ideas appear to work quite well in practice. Quantum mechanics, game theory, systems theory, chaos mathematics: none are measurable in the double blind study nor will they ever be, yet they are clearly fields of accepted science. Many systems are simply too large, too complex, too chaotic to be measured in a conventional sense, or "proven." The measure of these kind of systems relies on subtle observation and a certain amount of intuition.

The body, in all its functions, movements, thoughts, emotions, structures and interrelationships is a system far too complex for us to ever fully understand despite our arrogant insistence that we can. We are not machines, we are life! Yet because something like acupuncture has some mystery about its workings or is beyond our present scientific reach, does this mean that it doesn't work? Of course not, as we have seen century after century in the treatment of millions upon millions of patients around the world.

1.4 Is There Western Research on the Use of Acupuncture?

There is considerable research confirming the efficacy of some aspects of acupuncture. Initial studies in the West centered primarily on the use of acupuncture for pain control, since this fit most easily into the Western model. Research has shown that acupuncture is very effective in pain control, perhaps through the release of powerful endorphins in the brain. Research has also shown that acupuncture can affect sugar, cholesterol and triglyceride levels in the blood, the functioning of the gastrointestinal system and the activity of the endocrine system. Recently, in an article published in *Discover* magazine [3], stimulation of points on the foot traditionally used in treatment of eye diseases were shown to increase activity in the part of the brain given to vision though no nerve pathway exists between the points and the eyes. This comes as no surprise to acupuncturists, but represents an advance in the Western understanding of acupuncture through combining radiophysics with biomedicine to examine the workings of traditional acupuncture points.

Other research has confirmed the efficacy of acupuncture in a number of Western disease definitions. For a good overview of this research from a Western scientist, I'd recommend *The Scientific Bases of Acupuncture* by Bruce Pomerantz. It is written at a fairly technical level, but is quite readable. He regularly publishes journal articles as well as he continues his research in this field. I would especially recommend this book to those with a background in biomedicine. Other compilations of acupuncture research are available as well

[3] In *Discover* (September, 1998, pages 58-62) Catherine Dold reviewed the work of physicist Zang-Hee Cho toward radio-imaging the workings of acupuncture.

with more soon to be published. It is difficult to keep track of it all as the years pass: a recent Medline search for research reports on any aspect of acupuncture returned over 700 matches.

1.5 What Should I Expect During a Treatment?

When you go to a practitioner of Oriental medicine do not expect it to be like a visit to a Western doctor. Oriental medicine practitioners depend highly on what they see, feel, smell and hear during your meeting with them, and use little or no modern medical equipment. Practitioners are more interested in the overall picture of you than the complaint that brought you there.

In the course of your first interview, which may take anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour or more, the practitioner will ask detailed questions about your health, diet and lifestyle while she or he tries to learn more about who you are and what influences are at work in your life and upon your body. They will take your pulse at your wrist, at three places on each side. They will look at your tongue. They may press on some acupuncture points on your body to test for tenderness, or press gently on your abdomen. When they are done, they'll make a working diagnosis and begin your treatment with acupuncture, herbs, moxibustion, cupping or all of these. Most commonly, treatments will include at least some acupuncture with herbs used to support the treatments between appointments. Some practitioners see it the other way around, with herbs as the primary therapy and acupuncture supportive. In most cases the working diagnosis originally arrived at will be refined as the practitioner evaluates the results of the treatments over time.

Most people find acupuncture treatment very relaxing and many report feelings of well-being, sleepiness and even mild euphoria. On the other hand some people have emotional releases during acupuncture and some find it makes them angry or sad at first. Others say that treatments are energizing and practically dance out of the room. Some are inspired to poetry, others to boredom. In short, there are as many responses to acupuncture as there are patients and all these responses are completely normal, expected and part of the healing process.

To understand why acupuncture has an impact on our emotions, keep in mind that Chinese never did develop the mind/body split that we take for granted here in the West. In Oriental medicine the mind, body, emotions and spirit are all one thing. No process, be it disease or healing, may affect one without affecting the others.

People often ask if acupuncture will hurt. Many practitioners quickly answer “No, of course not!” I suppose if Western MD’s can get away with calling some of their procedures “a bit uncomfortable,” we can be excused for saying that acupuncture is painless. In reality, the answer to the question is both no and yes. In general, people expect that they will feel the needles being inserted through the skin, but most of the time you don’t feel this at all, especially if you are relaxed. What initial discomfort that may accompany a needle insertion is quite small and usually passes within seconds.

On the other hand acupuncture is not without sensations. Once needles are placed you may feel a dull, distending, heavy feeling around one or more of the needles. You may feel some undefinable energy or temperature sensation moving in a limb or through your body. One of the needles may feel warm, while another feels cool. When the first needles are inserted you may feel a wave of warmth rising up in your body. There are all sorts of mild sensations that can be expected during a treatment. They are subtle, many people don't notice them at all and they're nothing to fear. They are the effects of what the Chinese call *Qi*. Acupuncture is an energetic medicine and treatment is an energetic process.

Take some time to get to know this process in your body. Feel where and how the energy moves and how it affects you. This is the stuff that started a 5,000 year mystery and still inspires every student and practitioner of acupuncture. There is no better place or time to feel *Qi* and gain some understanding of it than during an acupuncture treatment.[4]

If you want to play a part in your own healing process during a treatment, move beyond the localized sensation of acupuncture and consider how that local sensation changes you on a larger scale. For example, if you are being treated for a painful sore throat the practitioner may insert a needle into your hand. The needle may cause a variety of sensations in the local area of your hand but after noticing these pay attention to the rest of your body and your thoughts. You might find that you are perspiring slightly, but that your throat feels cooler, that it doesn't hurt as much. You may find yourself sitting differently or you may have sensations in the other hand or feel a sudden sense of relaxation.

No two people feel exactly the same thing during acupuncture. What you feel is part of what makes you a unique individual in this universe and those feelings are uniquely yours. As such they can help you to understand yourself and your body better.

The needles used for acupuncture are much thinner than those

[4]Martial artists benefit greatly from acupuncture treatments, not only to enhance athletic performance and treat injuries, but to further acquaint one with this *Qi* that lies at the heart of both healing and martial systems.

used for injections or blood drawing. Usually even needle-phobic people are surprised at how easily the needles are placed. [5] Acupuncture needles are solid and do not inject or remove anything from your body. The vast majority of practitioners here and in the Orient and Asia use disposable needles so that you are getting brand new, prepackaged sterile needles each time.

Moxibustion is the process of burning an herb over specific acupuncture points, or over a needle inserted in an acupuncture point to warm the area. It is an art and science in itself, brought to its heights in Korea and Japan. You are not burned in this process and most people find moxa very warming and relaxing. Many people do this for themselves at home, supporting their treatments between visits. Ask your practitioner if there are points you can moxa at home; usually there are. Get involved in your treatment whenever you can.

1.6 How Many Treatments are Necessary?

This is always a tough question asked about the treatments in any medical tradition. “How long will I have to take this drug before I feel better?” we ask our family practice Western physician. “How many acupuncture treatments will it take before I feel better?” we ask our acupuncturist. In both cases each person is unique and will respond to treatment differently. The length of treatment depends on the type, severity and duration of the condition.

In general you should notice some change in your condition, even if just a small one, within eight to ten acupuncture treatments for

[5] As students, we once managed to insert several acupuncture needles inside the hole in the middle of a blood drawing needle.

chronic conditions and two to four treatments for acute conditions. If you do not experience a change in that time frame, don't give up on acupuncture.[6] Instead discuss this with your practitioner. It may be that your condition is unusually tenacious or it may be time to change some aspect of the treatment. Always talk to your practitioner about your concerns. There are many tools at hand for any practitioner of Oriental medicine, and with your input you can work together to find the best treatment for you.

Another way to look at this question of treatment duration is to think of acupuncture treatments as being rather like hearing a song on the radio. The first time you hear it you might like it, even tap your foot a bit. The next time you might be able to hum along, even sing the chorus. Eventually, you can sing along with the entire song and one day even sing the song on your own without the radio. This is very much like what happens to you over a course of treatments. With our needles we "sing" to your body until it begins to pick up the song. When your body begins to sing back to us, we know that our needles have connected with you. When you can carry the tune without our help, acupuncture has done its work.

[6]People sometimes give up on acupuncture when it fails to give quick and complete results, but this comes from a simple misunderstanding. After all, if you go to your family physician and he or she gives you a drug that fails to quickly and completely cure your condition, do you give up on Western medicine?

Chapter 2

Chinese Herbal Medicine

2.1 What is Chinese Herbal Medicine?

In the last 1500 years the Chinese and others developed very logical, sophisticated and effective models for using herbs in the treatment of disease and promotion of health. Chinese herbal medical theory and practice is much more developed and sophisticated than most Western herbal traditions, and relies on carefully balanced formulas.

These formulas are combined in ways that are simple in principle yet show a remarkable sophistication behind their construction methods. Formulas are made up of individual herbal substances with complementary (or sometimes antagonistic) properties to achieve what are often complex therapeutic goals. Great care is taken in formula development to avoid the side effects that can result from the use of single herbs. While classical formulas are often modified to suit a particular patient's needs, the base formulas have stood the test of use over hundreds of years and millions of patients and there are hundreds upon hundreds of these base formulas from which a practitioner may select.

Selection of a base formula is only the beginning of the process. One truly artful aspect of Chinese herbal medicine is the process of formula modification. This is when the practitioner starts with a base formula and adds, subtracts or changes herbs to more closely fit your particular needs. This process requires the practitioner to be intimately familiar with the principles behind the construction of the starting formula, and to posses sufficient knowledge of individual herbs to understand how each will impact the balance of the formula as a whole. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Chinese medicine and the real point of departure from Western herbal and pharmaceutical traditions.

Chinese herbal medicine is a safe, powerful and effective therapy. For further information, these are a few good books to get you started:

- Asian Health Secrets, cited earlier
- Chinese Herbal Medicine by Daniel Reid
- The Way of Herbs by Michael Tierra

Asian Health Secrets in particular is an excellent book discussing the herbal traditions of Chinese medicine in a way that the average person will understand and find useful. If you live in New York, look at her chapter “A Walk Through Chinatown.”

2.2 What About Chinese Herbal Patents? Do They Work?

Chinese patent formulas are pills, powders, syrups, plasters and other preparations sold prepackaged in Chinese pharmacies, groceries and sometimes in your local health food store.[1] Most of these are based on classic Chinese herbal formulas which have proven especially useful over time. They are the equivalent, in some ways, to over-the-counter drugs in the West. Patent formulas are generally milder in action than other forms of herb formula administration, yet are effective and economical for the treatment of many conditions.

The "bible," so to speak, of patent medicines as they are used in the U.S. is *Chinese Herbal Patent Formulas* by Jake Fratkin. There is also an excellent section on the use of patent formulas in *Between Heaven and Earth* (referenced above) for those new to the subject, and Letha Hadady's *Asian Health Secrets* covers this topic as well.

[1] At significantly higher prices. Buy patent formulas from Chinese herbal pharmacies where you'll usually find the best prices coupled with knowledgable people behind the counter.

Chapter 3

General Questions

3.1 Is Oriental Medicine Safe?

In general anything with the power to heal has the power to do harm. Oriental medicine, however, is a very conservative treatment approach that has been proven quite safe. In fact, as compared to the risks of many Western medical procedures, Oriental medicine is the most conservative option and should be considered among first-line approaches to problems which are not immediately life threatening.

One of the great advantages of acupuncture has been the usual absence of serious side effects. While accidents can happen in the course of any invasive therapy, acupuncture has shown itself to be very safe. Still, one must be aware that acupuncture is an invasive therapy and has the potential to do harm to internal organs and vital areas of the body. For this reason it is best to leave acupuncture to those professionally trained in it.

Chinese herbs are a different matter. There is a dangerous myth that herbs are so gentle and natural that they could never harm you. If herbs are strong enough to treat serious medical conditions they also have the potential to do serious harm.

When prescribed by a knowledgeable professional Chinese herbs have few, if any, side effects and are powerful tools for improving and maintaining your health. In many American states in-depth herbal training and clinical internship is a required part of the training for a practitioner of Oriental medicine (in California it makes up nearly half the program). Those trained in the use of Chinese herbs rarely encounter serious side effects in their use. Most of the problems with herbs we read about in American newspapers are due to self-prescribed misuse and overuse of herbal medicines. Even counting misuse and overuse of herbs by the public, there are far fewer reported problems with herbs than there are for over-the-counter Western drugs. Far, far fewer. More people die from aspirin each year than have died as a result of taking herbs in the last ten years.

Chinese patent medicines are somewhat more gentle in action and it's more difficult to get in trouble with them. Still, consider patent medicines the way you would any other medicine. Be sure to only take them according to the directions, usually found on a sheet of paper inside the box, and only for the conditions indicated. *Chinese Herbal Patent Formulas* by Jake Fratkin is an good guide. Also read the boxes very carefully.[1] Some Chinese patents have been appearing in this country adulterated with Western drugs. Thus, in a patent frequently used for the onset of flu one might find various decongestants, aspirin-like substances, cough suppressants and who knows what else. Avoid these.

[1]If you can. Many boxes are labeled exclusively in Chinese these days.

3.2 Does *Qi* Really Exist?

Ask this question of one hundred practitioners of Oriental medicine, martial arts or philosophy and you will get one hundred and fifty answers. My own perspective comes from over 25 years of practicing martial arts, my college studies into Eastern philosophy and my current practice and education in Oriental medicine. Not that any of that adds the weight of authority when talking about something as close to the edge of unknowability as *Qi*. In fact, sometimes I think I know less about it now than I did before I started all of that education.

Great debates have taken place throughout Chinese history about whether *Qi* really exists, whether there really are channels in the body, and if the needles really do what we think they do. Similar arguments rage even now in the West, especially between practitioners of modern biomedicine and practitioners of Oriental medicine. I have often found that these are primarily the result of mutual misunderstandings between camps as to how the idea of *Qi* is used in Oriental medicine.

The Chinese were not attempting to make a precise material and mechanical description of health and illness. Oriental medicine is rather a map of the body's functional aspects and a proven, reliable guide for diagnosis and treatment. Oriental medicine is eminently practical: the entire theory is based on observation and practice. Throughout its long history, if a particular illness was effectively treated with a particular acupuncture point or herb, the map was updated to reflect the new knowledge.

All in all whether or not *Qi* "exists" in the Western sense has never really concerned me. Practitioners of Oriental medicine do not draw a syringe of *Qi* for lab tests. It may exist in terms of some energy particle, light wave or physical substance that can be measured in a lab, but probably it does not. What is important is that the principals of *Qi*, *Yin* and *Yang* are the basis of a reliable and effective model for a concept of health and the diagnosis and treatment of illness. Some take *Qi* to be a material or energetic substance. I tend to take it as an aspect of function and movement. It is probably both of those things and a great deal more. It is difficult for us in the West, with our material and reductionist tendencies, to ever fully comprehend what the Chinese are talking about when they speak of *Qi*.

None of that is the real issue, however. The map is reliable, it works, and it gets the practitioner and the patient where we need to go. I can ask little more than that.

To quote one favorite writer, Claude Larre, on this:

> The question is not whether this term meridian or acupuncture point is right or not, this is just a convention...The problem is that thousands and thousands of Chinese characters and expressions are not grounded in our minds as they are in the Chinese mind. Notwithstanding the differences of appreciation the Chinese may have from one text to another, from one author to another, or from one main text to a commentator, they all belong to the same family of minds...[The] differences of views expressed in Western textbooks of Chinese medicine are just unreconcilable contradictions, if not pure nonsense. They stem from the imagination of people of different origins not sharing the same approach to life. If it is not necessary to know what *Qi* is, it is at least neces-

sary to be conscious of one's own life.

Whenever we find an acupuncturist, whether a student, practitioner or teacher, who knows through bodily consciousness, that he or she is a permanent product of the universe, and has the feeling of something on the move, he needs a word for expressing this, and the word is *Qi*. — *from The Secret Treatise of the Spiritual Orchid, Monkey Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1992*

3.3 What Can Be Treated with Oriental Medicine?

That's a big question. When comparing Oriental medicine's efficacy in treating a condition described by Western terms it must be understood that personalized therapy is the hallmark of Oriental medicine. Five people with stomach ulcer may well receive five completely different treatments depending on other facets of their overall condition. As such, it is difficult to state comprehensively that Oriental medicine can treat ulcer, per se, though we may effectively treat all five of the people in the example I've given. It all boils down to terminology.

Some folks have tried to do this sort of West-East correspondence and have compiled various lists of Western diagnostic categories that are effectively treated by Oriental medicine. The World Health Organization is one of these, often quoted in articles and brochures about Oriental medicine.

Some years ago, the WHO conducted a series of studies and literature reviews to compile a list of conditions their research indicated were effectively treated by Oriental medicine. The list is comprised of over 30 Western conditions, though it is by no means meant to express the entire scope of what may be treated by acupuncture. Oriental medicine has a much wider range of therapies available, such as herbs, which broaden the scope of treatable conditions considerably. This taken into account, the WHO list is a good beginning for understanding the breadth of Oriental medicine as an effective and lost cost health care modality.

The WHO List

- Respiratory System
  - Acute sinusitis
  - Acute bronchitis
  - Acute rhinitis
  - Bronchial asthma
  - Common cold
  - Acute tonsillitis

- Disorders of the Eye
  - Acute conjuctivitis
  - Central retinitis
  - Myopia (in children)
  - Cataract (without complications)

- Disorders of the Mouth
  - Toothaches
  - Post-extraction pain
  - Gingivitis
  - Pharyngitis

- Gastrointenstinal Disorders
  - Hiccough
  - Acute and Chronic gastritis
  - Gastric hyperacidity
  - Chronic duodenal ulcer (pain relief)
  - Acute duodenal ulcer (without complications)
  - Acute and chronic colitis
  - Acute bacillary dysentery
  - Constipation
  - Diarrhea

- Neurological and Musculoskeletal Disoders
  - Headache and migraine
  - Trigeminal neuralgia
  - Facial palsy (early stage, within 3-6 months)
  - Paresis following stroke

- Peripheral neuropathies
- Sequelae to poliomyelitis
- Meniere's Disease
- Neurogenic bladder dysfunction
- Nocturnal enuresis
- Intercostal neuralgia
- Cervicobrachial syndrome
- "Frozen shoulder" and "tennis elbow"
- Sciatica
- Low back pain
- Osteoarthritis

Beyond such compilations, Oriental medicine can effectively treat almost a very wide range of conditions and is perhaps at its best in treating functional and chronic conditions. While mechanical and acute conditions are treated very effectively with Oriental medicine, as seen in Chinese hospitals, conditions that are immediately life threatening belong in a hospital here in the West. We cannot afford to become parochial about our health-care choices. No system of medicine is "better" than another. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and we should take advantage of the strengths in each system available to us.

Though Western practitioners of Oriental medicine usually do not treat critical care cases in the United States, in China there are Traditional Chinese Medicine hospitals and other hospitals where traditional and scientific medicine is combined. There, one will see acupuncture and herbs being used even in emergency departments, during surgeries, and in maternity wards. We Westerners must keep in mind that for thousands of years traditional medicine was the only medicine in Asia and the Orient. In some places it is still the only medicine even today, and works successfully, helping many who would not otherwise have access to health care. Western practitioners generally do not have the training or facilities to do critical care with Oriental medicine, but I always find it interesting and inspiring to know that millions of patients in China and other places are seeing the full range of what Oriental medicine has to offer.

In the West, practitioners of Oriental medicine treat about 80-85% (an estimate arrived at by myself and several physicians with whom I work) of the same ailments a Western MD specializing in internal medicine or family practice would see.

3.4 What Are L.Ac, C.A., and All Those Other Letters?

L.Ac., Lic.Ac, C.A., Dipl.Ac.: Lic. Ac. and L.Ac. are the abbreviations for Licensed Acupuncturist, but only in those U.S. states which license, as opposed to certifying, acupuncturists. In other states the professional designation may be C.Ac., C.A., R.Ac., or some other version of Certified or Registered Acupuncturist. In some states certification is still used though the national move is toward licensure of acupuncturists as primary health care providers. In some states, acupuncturists may only practice under a physician, in others only by reference from a physician, but in most U.S. states acupuncturists are independent primary care providers. In a few states acupuncture is still illegal, although happily these states can now be counted on one hand.

One may occasionally see L.Ac. outside the United States as well, but usually this is not licensure but a designation associated with a diploma of some sort issued by a school (usually a Licentiate in Acupuncture). This can be very confusing, but those running schools outside the U.S. don't always understand or care what our national designation standards are all about.

Another designation you might see following someone's name is **Dipl.Ac.** meaning that the practitioner is a Diplomate of the national NCCAOM exam. This is an acupuncture-only exam used by most American states to qualify practitioners. Compared to state-specific exams such as the recent problems with the California exam, the NCCAOM examination is a model of a well run professional licensing examination. At one time I didn't think much of the NCCAOM exam, but they have greatly improved it over the years while other examination boards have declined in quality and competence. The NCCAOM examination should be the standard for qualifying acupuncture practitioners, but a very few states are still clinging to their own often troubled exams.

There is now also an herbal exam offered by the NCCAOM. It's value is still somewhat questionable, as only one American state (Texas) requires it for practice thus far. though one other may soon adopt the herbal exam as well. Required or not, many practitioners like to have the letters after their name: **Dipl.Ch.**

OMD: One has to be careful when making statements about OMD (also spelled DOM) degrees. OMD (Doctor of Oriental Medicine) can indeed be a meaningful degree on top of a 3-4 year program of study in Oriental medicine. On the other hand, there were schools practically giving them away for a few weekends of work and a book report in the 1970's and 1980's. OMD is also the degree awarded by many Chinese schools to graduates of their 4-6 year programs, which more closely follow the pattern and intensity of Western medical schools than what we generally see here in America.[2] In two or three U.S. states, after becoming licensed in acupuncture, the license gives the practitioner the right to use the letters OMD after their name though in these cases OMD has no academic meaning. There are also those who argue that OMD is simply a title, not a degree, and anyone legally practicing Chinese medicine has a right to use it; after all, if we are independent care providers taking professional responsibility for the health and welfare of our patients, is that not the definition of a doctor?

In short OMD can be anything from a fine academic degree to a piece of paper of little value, a state document, or a political statement. In general I'm fairly suspicious about OMD degrees awarded by American acupuncture schools in the 70's and 80's. No American school is currently offering OMD degrees due to the poor reputation given to the degree in earlier times. An accredited OMD/DOM program has recently been developed and will be appearing in schools in the near future.

MTOM: Most of the practitioners graduating from American acupuncture schools these days do so with MTOM (Master of Traditional Oriental Medicine) degrees. A few are awarded MS (Master of Science) degrees. Others get a DTOM (Diploma of Traditional Oriental Medicine) in states which have still not agreed to allow acupuncture schools to issue academic degrees.

[2]Oddly, the Master's degree *follows* the OMD in China and only a few practitioners go on to obtain it.

In some states the study of Chinese herbology is not required for licensure, and students may graduate with a M.Ac. (Master of Acupuncture) degree or a D.Ac. (Diploma of Acupuncture).

Most schools in the United States have met the standards of a national accreditation board and offer similar programs. These are three to four year degree programs providing anything from 2350 to over 3000 hours of education in Chinese medicine, Western medicine, acupuncture, herbs and as much as one thousand hours of clinical education. Programs which do not include herbal studies are generally shorter in duration as herb classes can comprise as much as 50% of the full curriculum. At this time, the masters degree is the entry level degree for professional practice in America.

How good are American degrees in Oriental medicine? In general, the old-time practitioners and acupuncture educators I know say that today's MTOM is better trained with greater knowledge than the OMD's of the 80's. To understand this, one must remember that many of those OMD's came after initial training programs of just 1000 hours, which was all the schooling one needed to practice in the 1980's. Those who graduate from the new accredited OMD programs will have in excess of 4200 hours of education behind their degrees between the masters level and doctoral work. This is roughly the number of hours required in many MD, DO and DC programs.

All that is rather over-complicated, however. Below is a summary of the education received by a representative accredited MTOM program today, one which includes both acupuncture and herbs[3]:

[3]Figures taken from the 1998 curriculum of Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego, CA and New York, NY.

Oriental Medical Theory	406 Hours
Treatment Technique and Theory	406 Hours
Western Biomedicine	616 Hours
Personal Development	203 Hours
Clinical Training	1032 Hours
Herbal Medicine	413 Hours

Taken together this represents over 3000 hours of classroom and clinical training, with most schools requiring a minimum of 250 patient treatments before graduation.

A representative 2300 hour program from an accredited acupuncture-only school yields the following breakdown[4]:

Oriental Medical Theory	880 Hours
Treatment Technique and Theory	500 Hours
Western Biomedicine	200 Hours
Personal Development	130 Hours
Clinical Training	604 Hours

European schools of Oriental medicine generally offer equivalent training, though many offer fewer hours of training. European schools award a variety of degrees such as the British B.Ac. (Bachelors in Acupuncture), the entry level professional degree in that country. England, Australia and the U.S. are generally recognized as having the best schools in the Western world. Chinese schools are excellent, but only those with fluency in Chinese get much out of the programs. Moreover, as many Chinese acupuncturists in America will attest, Chinese patients are very different from Western patients and the transition is not an easy one.

[4]Figures calculated from the Tri-State Institute of Traditional Chinese Acupuncture 1997-1999 catalog. Apologies to Tri-State if I have categorized some of the classes in the following table inappropriately

None of this is meant to criticize or belittle anyone's educational background or credentials. Personally, I think that practitioners of Oriental medicine in this country have blown all out of proportion the importance of trailing letters after their name. This is all part of the inferiority complex that many in our field suffer when they look at the Western medical profession.

What counts is what happens in the treatment room. A good practitioner is a good practitioner, regardless of what certifications they hold. Some of the finest practitioners I've known have nothing more than L.Ac. after their name. I've also known some outstanding practitioners who learned their art through apprenticeship and hold no degrees, licenses or certifications whatsoever. There's much more to the practice of Oriental medicine than meets the letterhead or provides tax income for the government.

3.5 Where Are The Western Schools of Oriental Medicine?

Once upon a time, a reader of this FAQ wrote to me pointing out that for all of my discussion of Oriental medicine and educational standards and whatnot, I had left out information about how to contact schools.

I once maintained a list of acupuncture schools in this document, but as the field is growing and changing so quickly it became very difficult to keep the list current. A site that has done a good job of this and which keeps a current list of acupuncture schools (and a lot of other good information) may be found at `http://www.acupuncture.com`.

In general, a discussion of the pros and cons of any given school is far beyond the scope of this document. If you are considering the study of Oriental medicine, I encourage you to evaluate schools as you would any other graduate educational opportunity. Schools of Oriental medicine vary widely in teaching methods, atmosphere, length of program, faculty and emphasis. Call as many schools as you can, get their catalogs and read them, visit the schools which appeal to you and ask lots and lots of questions. Be demanding in getting satisfactory answers. It is your money, time, effort and future career that are on the line in making the decision of which school to attend.

3.6 Where Can I Get More Information?

The best way to find out about Oriental medicine is to speak with a practitioner. Go in for a check-up, ask many questions.

The second best way is to read up on the subject. The books referenced throughout this document are a good start. *Between Heaven and Earth* is a good beginning and available widely, covering both acupuncture and herbal medicine. The excellent *Asian Health Secrets* is a fine introduction to Oriental theory, herbs and diet, with ventures into other traditional medical systems as well. *The Web That Has No Weaver* is a standard in the field, though less user-friendly (it was originally written to serve as a textbook in schools of Oriental medicine). All are well written texts by authors who clearly love this form of medicine.

An excellent source for books covering nearly every aspect of Oriental medicine is the Redwing Book Company catalog. Redwing specializes in Oriental medicine, and has a large and comprehensive catalog. You may reach them by mail, phone or on the internet as below:

Redwing Book Company
44 Linden Street
Brookline, Mass. 02146
(617) 738-4664
(800) 873-3926 (orders)
`http://www.redwingbooks.com`

Another good source of high quality books for both professionals and the general public, with a somewhat smaller catalog, is Blue Poppy Press. You can reach them at:

Blue Poppy Press
1775 Linden Ave.
Boulder, CO 80304
(800) 487-9296

The Author

Si post fata venit gloria non propero

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Mr. Kraft has taught numerous classes and tutorials on oriental medicine, bioethics and world religions. In the 1990's, he worked on research projects exploring the psychiatric problems of AIDS and for over nine years he volunteered time to AIDS organizations in San Diego, specializing in death and dying counseling.

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