

10 APRIL 2010

The Placebo Effect

Concise Oxford Dictionary definition: ‘Medicine given to humour, rather than cure, the patient’ (from the Latin verb ‘to please’).

How I hate the word placebo and all the baggage of negativity it brings with it! Not only does it patronize the treatment to which it is applied, but, unforgivably, in my view, it also appears to patronize patients by ‘humouring’ them, as if it does not matter if wool is pulled over their eyes in this way.

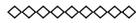
Something which is called a placebo treatment is given this name because in some way it is thought that it makes a patient feel better. But is not that the aim of any treatment? It certainly can’t be to make them feel worse. If a patient feels better we should applaud this rather than mock it. Hidden somewhere behind the use of the word is the implication that helping people to better health must somehow involve unpleasantness, an attitude which may well be a legacy of our strange Western Calvinistic upbringing, where what is pleasant is seen as wicked. I also see it as evidence of the Western mind-set determined to mock what it doesn’t understand. This is nowhere more evident than in comments like these directed at complementary medicine.

Why, then, I ask, are some orthodox treatments, such as sleeping pills or antidepressants, not also labelled as placebo treatments? Surely these, too, could be said to fall under the definition of humouring, rather than curing, the patient!

Since the main impetus for this blog is my thoughts about my acupuncture practice, many of the blogs reflect new insights into my understanding of the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water) which form the foundation of my work. The complexities of human behaviour have always fascinated me, and since the elements within each of us are expressions of our individuality, any new manifestation of an element’s work in my patients, in famous people or in me is grist to the mill. Hence

many of these blogs are dedicated to an ever deeper exploration of the elements' role in the expression of human behaviour.

For more detailed discussion of the five elements, I would direct you to my other books, particularly *Keepers of the Soul*.



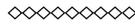
4 MAY 2010

Allow the elements to surprise us

It is only human to long for a time when we are so secure in our knowledge of something that we no longer need to think about it because it has become so self-evident. I think most of us would like this to be true of our understanding of the elements. We would like to be able to place each in a tightly sealed box, labelled Wood or Water, and think no more about it. It would be comforting to think that, locked in these boxes, are all the different signs, sensory and emotional, by which we recognize Wood or Water in people, and that there is nothing out there in the world at large to cast a different light upon what these boxes contain. In this way we would have built up for ourselves fixed templates by which we learn to recognize the elements: such and such a tone of voice represents Wood's voice, such and such an emotion imprints itself upon all Water people.

Unfortunately things are not as simple as that. We cannot capture the essence of an element so easily. It will slip past such clear-cut categorizations, often surprising us by showing us characteristics we might well have thought belonged to another element, almost as though forcing us to re-adjust our thinking. This is why I say being a five element acupuncturist is not for the faint-hearted, because it requires courage to

adapt to the challenges of acknowledging that each of us is much too complex to be boxed into the black-and-white categories traditionally ascribed to an element. Rather than being daunted by the difficulties we have in tracing the elements, we should instead be pleased with their capacity constantly to surprise us.



28 MAY 2010

New thoughts on Aggressive Energy

I have just been asked a question by a student doing a research project on what we call Aggressive Energy in five element acupuncture. I had written something in my *Handbook* about the fact that there are two ways of draining aggressive energy, one through the Associated Effect (*back shu*) points, as five element acupuncturists do, and another by using a dispersal technique on all needling. This was something I had heard in a lecture by Peter Eckman, author of *In the Footsteps of the Yellow Emperor*, many years ago. In other words, five element acupuncture mainly disperses excess energy through its initial Aggressive Energy (AE) drain, whilst other forms of acupuncture disperse energy over a longer period of time by leaving needles in at every treatment.

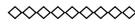
This set me thinking about this a little more than I had done before (it shows how teaching helps us learn something new each time). I realized that the fundamental difference between the two systems of approach must stem from a deeper fundamental difference than that of simply being a matter of a difference in technique. In five element acupuncture, apart from in the case of specific protocols, such as the AE drain

or treating the dragons (what we call possession treatment), dispersing energy (which we call sedation) is much more rarely used than boosting energy (which we call tonification). In the last 15 years of my observing JR Worsley's selection of treatments, I cannot remember a single occasion when he suggested we sedate a patient's guardian element, although sedation is a technique taught all five element students as a matter of course. I have a feeling that as his attention concentrated more and more upon treating the spirit within the body, as I felt it did over my time with him, so he understood more clearly that the element's spirit which bears so much of the weight of the other elements upon it is overburdened rather than gifted with excess energy. Since five element acupuncture addresses the guardian element predominantly at every treatment in an attempt to strengthen it, it is therefore unlikely, seen from a five element perspective, that this element will have any excess energy left to disperse to other elements.

What does happen though, I find, is that an apparently excess pulse on the guardian element will collapse completely after the AE drain and show its true weakness. Apparent initial overexuberance of energy can often mask a level of deep depletion in this way. This may well explain the fact that I have only had to sedate the guardian element in the case of one patient over the past ten years. The remainder of my practice has concentrated on tonifying, on strengthening, this element's energy.

So much that has happened to me in the past three years of this blog has become focused on the invitation for me to teach five element acupuncture in China to Chinese acupuncturists, with all the profound ramifications for five element acupuncture which

have stemmed from this, that there will be many mentions of my experiences in China. Below I describe the first step in this exciting journey.



1 JUNE 2010

Five element acupuncture comes full circle

Some things come full circle, and it's nice when this is unexpected. One such occasion was a few days ago at a seminar I gave in the Netherlands. It was a fruitful experience for me because I was there to talk to a group of acupuncturists who came together to learn five element skills from a practitioner, Koos van Kooten, who had in turn come to our courses at the School of Five Element Acupuncture (SOFEA). From there he has moved on, developing his own insights and his own approach, and has drawn in his wake an increasing number of Dutch practitioners devoted to deepening their five element skills. All this is very satisfying to me, and provides just the kind of justification for my work at SOFEA that I appreciate.

Amongst his group was a Chinese-trained acupuncturist, Mei Long, who told me that after much exploration she had come across five element acupuncture and recognized it immediately as representing a calling for her. As part of this calling, she had felt driven to get in touch with a well-established contact of hers in the world of Chinese medicine in China, who still has links to its traditional roots and wishes to strengthen them. As a result of her approach he has asked her to run a week's course on five element acupuncture for acupuncturists in Guangxi College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Nanning, China.

This person turned out to be Liu Lihong, whose name I had come across whilst looking at the work of Arnaud Versluys. Liu Lihong is said to be ‘at the forefront of a Chinese renaissance movement that aims at reviving the depth and the core values of classical Chinese medicine’. This is where things come full circle, for JR Worsley said to an acupuncturist friend of mine, Sarah Matheson, some years ago that ‘the Chinese will be asking us to bring five element acupuncture back to China’, and it appears that they have indeed at last come calling.



17 JUNE 2010

*A little lesson in the difference between the
Earth and Fire elements from today's practice*

It is in small differences, and with our ability to pick them up, that much of the secret of our capacity to understand the distinctions between the characteristics of the different elements lies. When we realize this, we can use this knowledge to test ourselves and widen our understanding.

I will give an example of this from my practice today. An Earth patient told me of the feeling of mental confusion she often experiences. As she did so, she lifted her hand and pressed it close to her head as if trying to still the thoughts she said churned around inside her. I asked myself whether this gesture could be considered significant as pointing to something particular to Earth. Would I, of the Fire element, ever make a similar movement with my hand? I tried to mimic this movement and realized that I was using a gesture

which was totally alien to me. I wondered why this was, and came to the conclusion that, even if my thoughts become confused, which they often do, I clear my mind by talking, as if translating them into a verbal form is what I need to do before I can develop my thinking. By contrast, what my Earth patient apparently cannot do when she is out of balance is put her thoughts into words. Her hand movement was in effect telling me that her thoughts had somehow got stuck inside her head, and the movement could therefore be seen as an attempt to dislodge them.

When I translated this into the kind of treatment that might help her, I came up with the lovely point, XI (St) 8 (Head Tied), located on her head exactly where she had placed her hand, and with a function we could say perfectly fitted what she needed, which was to disentangle the thoughts tied up in her head. Whereas these thoughts of hers had not yet been processed sufficiently to emerge as words, mine, by contrast, never seem to need this kind of help. Rather it is the words I speak themselves which have to act as sieves for my thoughts, a completely different process, which highlights one of the differences between Fire and Earth.

Such distinctions may seem very slight, but they are significant as pointing to one element or another, as everything is that we do. And one of the best things to do is to mimic the words or the movements of another person to see how far the feeling this mimicry evokes in us can lead us to some new discovery about a particular element. Certainly my experience with my Earth patient today has taught me something both about her and about myself, and thus at a subtle level helped me to a deeper understanding of the contrasting thought processes employed by Earth and Fire.