

Simple vs Complex

I think a good deal about the role of the simple. I suppose this is because I find I no longer have a mind that can deal with complexity as it could when I was younger. In college I studied math and logic and had the sort of Mr. Spock mind that was comfortable with sophisticated ideas and theories. That is no longer the case however. For better or worse I simply can no longer proceed that way in life.

Chinese Medicine contains simple principles, but there can be no doubt it is also quite a sophisticated study. Yin-yang theory is relatively simple, at least at first glance. We divide phenomena into two inter-complementary forces. Twoness is simple in a universe where we often speak of the infinite. But then in the practice, there is yang within yin and yin within yang, and things manage to get a bit more sophisticated. Even five phase theory (fivefoldness) is comparatively basic when laid alongside modern scientific theories.

There is of course a danger in pretending things are simpler than they actually are. I recall Heiner Fruehauf, Ph.D., pointing out to me one day that in the Shan Ren Dao (Path of the Virtuous Human) system of Wang Fengyi that desiring things to be simpler than they are is seen as a pathology of Earth. There has to be flip side to that coin though, it seems to me. What about wanting things to be more complex than they actually are or failing to acknowledge the simplicity that is there?

Jesus and Buddha, it might be pointed out, had relatively simple messages, once one boils them down to their basics. A few “noble truths” and a path to follow for the Buddha; for Jesus it seems to boil down primarily to two commandments: Love God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself. Once the theologians and other scholars got involved, of course, it became endlessly sophisticated, so much so that people have for centuries gone to war over differences of interpretation. I have often wondered if the wars could have been avoided if the simple messages of the founders had remained front and center.

When I was in my master’s program I saw no hope for a simple approach to practice Chinese Medicine, and no one seemed to talk about it. I actually had no clue that there were radically different styles of treatment that had been developed in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. And there was the Worsley style as well. I operated under the illusion that everyone in Chinese Medicine was practicing TCM. Slowly I became aware that there were numerous other styles. Some of these styles were conceptually a lot simpler than TCM, and I began to investigate. I remember a conversation with one senior Worsley-style practitioner who maintained he could almost practice his work if he had dementia, i.e., that it did call on his logical mind but rather an elevation of his perception.

There is a story of a great master practitioner in Japan who was asked many times to come to this or that conference to give a talk, since everyone heard from his patients how helpful his treatments were. He always refused. People assumed it was because he wanted to protect his proprietary techniques and ideas, but he always maintained he had nothing of

value to share with an audience. Finally, after some badgering he agreed to give a talk. He got up in front of the expectant crowd to explain his philosophy of treatment. What he said was surprisingly brief: “When you find deficiency tonify, and when you find excess sedate.” Then he sat down. That is one simple approach. He could be accused of being a bit too cute, but I think he viewed his practice exactly as he described.

Of course, it sounds simple to explain it in this way, but in the execution, it is quite a challenge to practice in this sort of manner. One’s hands and perception have to be highly refined, so that they can detect subtle shifts in excess and deficiency findings. And one’s needle and moxa techniques also have to be up to the task. This really is a way of practicing that is essentially yin-yang; excess as yang, and deficiency as yin.

The best treatment I ever gave (it was just last year) was also perhaps my simplest, and I have often reflected on this. I did contact needling in the abdomen, treated the Du mai with moxa on SI 3 and BL 62, the ST Qi line treatment with a teishin, light teishin sedating in the SCM and scalenes, and finished with just a little qigong tuina on the left ankle. Maybe it took 20 minutes at the most. The changes in the patient took my breath away. If I could do that every treatment, I’d be a millionaire by now (just joking). It showed me the possibility of gentle and simple (yet again).

Simplicity and self-cultivation are underappreciated in our instant-consumer-culture, so it is no surprise that in how Chinese Medicine is practiced in the US sophistication is king. I understand this cultural momentum, but I find it unfortunate that little role is left for the simple. I invite you to explore this in your own practices and I invite feedback.

Best wishes to all,
Bob Quinn