

The Role of the Heart in Needling Within the Treatment Process

By Skya Abbate, DOM

With this article, I conclude my sixth year as the "Needle Techniques" columnist for *Acupuncture Today*. This has been a wonderful period of professional growth, as I tried to codify some of my more valuable clinical experiences of over 20 years for students and practitioners in the simple format of the short article. During this time, I have received numerous letters from patients, students, acupuncturists and medical doctors throughout the United States and Europe, and have been inspired by your scholarship and your commitment to your patients in the form of your questions, your letters of support and your clinical success.

In looking over the 36 articles I have written since 1995, along with my four technique books (*Holding the Tiger's Tail: An Acupuncture Techniques Manual in the Treatment of Disease*; *The Art of Palpatory Diagnosis in Oriental Medicine* [*Palpazione Diagnostica in Medicina Orientale* in Italian]; *Chinese Auricular Acupuncture*; and the forthcoming *Taming the Tiger: Advanced Techniques in Oriental Medicine*), I have tried to present students and practitioners with clear, accurate, and amazingly effective clinical strategies about treating patients with both Chinese and Japanese medicine.

In addition to writing these texts, I have taught most of this material to hundreds of students at the Albuquerque campus of Southwest Acupuncture College, of which I am the executive director, for five years, and the Santa Fe campus for over 17 years. Repeatedly the students have enthusiastically adopted these proven techniques and carefully practiced them on thousands of patients with great success.

As beginners just learning these approaches for the first time in class, their diagnoses could always have been more precise, their point locations more accurate, and their needle techniques more defined. Yet the compassion, caring and purity of heart with which they applied these techniques more than compensated for any technical deficiency - for indeed, the spirit is more powerful than the physical.

As presented in my fifth book, *The Spiritual Practice of Clinical Medicine*, my premise is simple: effective treatment and healing is delivered, more than any other variable, through the loving, compassionate spirit of the practitioner. Personally, the most effective treatment I have ever received, in any realm of medicine - allopathic, chiropractic, massage or acupuncture - has been when the practitioner was kind, sensitive and caring. Even if their technique was not that great, or even if they did not do anything apart from listening and offering a thoughtful word in their helplessness or bewilderment, I was surely healed in those simple moments when another human being reached out to me with an open heart. Likewise, the times when indeed I was most injured and suffered incalculably was not with a needle or an herbal formula, a misdiagnosis or a supplement (although all these things did happen), but when someone simply could not open their heart even enough to ask how I was feeling when it was obvious I was ill.

The *Lingshu* posits, "If you should want to treat illness, there is nothing so good as the needle," and certainly it is a marvelous instrument. Acupuncture is most effective when it is coordinated with the spirit of the practitioner, in concert with the practitioner distilling the essence of the diagnosis (what one could call the spirit of the patient), and the essence or physiology of the points (or their spirit). Remember that the heart in Chinese medicine pertains to our boundaries, our eyes, our mind, our consciousness, and our spirit, so it encompasses the highest level of our being.

An open heart is part of the "spirit connection" the *Neijing* refers to as the essence of healing. As practitioners and human beings, that love expressed in compassion, the willingness to listen, or simply be present, may be the greatest gift we can give one another. Even with technical weaknesses in diagnosis, treatment plans, modalities, point location, and needle technique, healing can still occur when it comes from the heart. This is certainly not to say that all of the components of executing treatment mentioned above are not important, for they surely are, and there is no excuse for never doing the best that we can.

A consistent ethic, which supports life and encourages its existence, is conveyed through your words, your gestures and your demeanor. Prayer, thought, hope and touch are all powerful vehicles that impact healing, for they are positive energy that affirms the life force. The integrated body-mind-spirit responds quickly and adeptly to the energy expressed through the heart.

So, in your practice, don't neglect to pay full attention to your patient and to respond genuinely to the fullness of their presence, even if it is simply to proffer a tissue or to say, in a heartfelt way, "That must be awful" or "I am so sorry for your pain." Don't let all of the paperwork, time constraints, feelings you are

experiencing that day, or anything else be more important than the patients you are dedicated to treating in this most noble of professions. When you put on your clinic coat, remind yourself to open your heart at the same time.

"Comfort always, cure rarely," is a Western adage that I find as a practitioner to be a good guiding principle, for while we may not be able to cure every disorder, it is always within our reach to extend comfort with the most subtle of tools - the needle and the heart.

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