

'Mr Evil Bone Water': An Interview with Mark Brinson

Mark Brinson & Daniel Maxwell

Abstract

This article is an edited transcript of an interview with Mark Brinson, Chinese medicine physician and originator of *Evil Bone Water*, a product which has become beloved by many acupuncture practitioners across the USA and internationally for its clinical effectiveness.

Keywords

Evil Bone Water, Zheng Gu Shui, external therapy, acupuncture, liniment, bodywork, topicals



DM: Can you tell us about your background and how you came to practise traditional East Asian medicine?

MB: I came to it in a roundabout way. I was going to do professional sports, but I had some injuries so I ended up joining the army. I got lucky and ended up in the Old Guard in Washington DC doing ceremonies, parades, funerals, the White House, the wigs and muskets. It was a very good, very precise unit. After that, and because of my injuries, I fell in love with corrective exercise and worked out that by doing what we now call neuro-ortho testing I could find specific exercises that would correct my imbalances. So I started as a massage therapist specialising in rehab and then became a physical therapist while I saved money to become an osteopath. I took over 800 hours of internships with osteopathic physicians - amazing practitioners who trained in the late sixties and early seventies - and did a bunch of chiropractic internships. All the osteopathic colleges in the United States were offering MD programmes, which were 70 to 80 per cent focused on drugs and drug interactions with only about five or six holistic classes and no manipulation at all. I was shocked. So I asked myself, what do I want to do? What do I want to offer my patients? What do I want my office to look like? How many days a week do I want to work? How much money do I want to make? What do I want my life to see be like when I'm actually practising? And the answers to these questions meant I looked all over for the most inclusive licence that I

could find. The licence in America for naturopath seemed pretty good, but it was only in a few states. In Florida, where I am, the licence for 'Acupuncture Physician, Doctor of Oriental Medicine' was fantastic. You can do everything except for prescription drugs and surgery, and I had no real desire to do them, so off I went and started training, having never even received acupuncture. I was actually horribly phobic of needles - like really bad, sweaty-scared of them. And at the time I didn't really even believe in the herbal portion of the programme, which was significant. But when I got out I realised how amazing herbal medicine is, because my experience had always been that when I tried nutraceuticals or herbs they hadn't worked. Chinese medicine explained to me why the things that I had tried in the past had brought limited results. It was just the wrong substances for the wrong person.

DM: Were there any special teachers who had a big effect on you?

MB: The school that I went to had 18 brilliant doctors from China. They were all MDs and DOMs who had been heads of their departments and had written books, like my paediatric teacher who wrote an important book on paediatrics and was head of the department at a hospital in Shanghai. They were the best of the best. Sometimes when they first got to America, their lecturing wasn't the best because they were just reading from the textbook. And

they wouldn't teach you anything outside of the textbooks unless you showed extra effort. This frustrated the heck out of some people. But the teachers noticed that I was really trying to my best to speak Chinese as much as I could, and I was already teaching hands-on type seminars; they respected that, and that got me a lot of inside information.

DM: What about since you left college - have you followed any specific teachers?

MB: Not specifically. I really like the Japanese distal style. So I've done some study in that area. I'm old-school. I believe most things can be accomplished with about 12 needles. Being a needle-phobe, I use a painless technique. And with Japanese, if you practise enough, it gets really good results. Also in terms of compliance, if acupuncture is an unpleasant experience people just aren't going to come back for it. So I've never used heavy-handed styles - I've never really found it necessary. Obviously all this alongside the full range of *tuina* and osteopathic techniques.

DM: By 'Japanese distal' do you mean like Meridian Therapy, where you're identifying and treating the root first and then dealing with the branch?

MB: No, I mean more the needle technique. All the stuff that I do is really traditional Chinese medicine - old-school acupuncture, *tuina* and herbs put together the way that they're supposed to be put together. Honestly a lot of my point combinations, while exceedingly effective, they're not really esoteric. I probably use about 30 main points and their basic combinations have done well for me. But again, they are used alongside the full spectrum of Chinese medicine interventions. So when a patient comes in, I'm carefully weighing up acupuncture, hands-on treatment and herbs and what's going to get them better. In the beginning hands-on may take priority, and then herbs come in later, and then it may switch after that. But it's those three pillars in varying proportions. But I don't just set it and forget it and use the same points for 10 sessions before re-evaluating. I always tell patients that if nothing has changed after two or three sessions, then we're doing something wrong.

DM: Why would you focus more on herbs for one person - for deficiency? And acupuncture more for musculoskeletal problems?

MB: Well, if somebody comes in with an orthopaedic problem, sometimes I might hold herbs back for a few sessions, or not even use them initially. They will get topicals, of course, but I consider treatment as being as diagnostic as anything else, so after the first couple of treatments I'll switch gears and add herbs if necessary. Many of the people that I treat around here have concurrent dampness and blood deficiency, which you don't hear a lot about in school where these patterns tend to be talked about separately. But we see it all the time. It is rare these days that somebody doesn't want to take herbs. It used to happen in the South when I was first starting out. But if I have all the tools available to me, I know 95 per cent that I'm going to be able to get them better or significantly impact them fairly quickly and with some permanency too. But there are very few people who escape clinic without me doing some cupping or *guasha* or realigning a vertebra - almost everybody gets a little hands-on work.

DM: Lucky patients - that's a nice thing to experience in the clinic.

MB: Yeah, it gets them a little spoiled. I really want to help the profession start to understand that you can integrate hands-on work into an efficient treatment. I find if I do that then the acupuncture 'takes' better. You can do very effective hands-on osteopathic or *tuina* treatment in just 15 minutes.

That's going to be one of my missions in the next few years: teaching intensive courses that show practitioners how to get that atlas back into place or how to get the carpals or the tarsals realigned. Not with actual adjustments, but in the osteopathic way where you basically take care of everything that pulled something out of place. So then, when you go to actually help it in place, it's really gentle and just slides right back to where it's supposed to be, and stays there.

DM: Of course the great majority of acupuncturists don't have this perspective on the skeletal system. It sounds as if you didn't have those skills there'd be a big part missing from what you do in clinic?

MB: Well, for me it's very condition dependent. Say if somebody comes in for fertility, I can treat that with acupuncture and herbs - I've seen the herbs improve the quality of eggs and the motility and the form of sperm unbelievably well. But if somebody comes in with migraines,



I would usually need to correct their atlas, which sometimes involves correcting old stuff in the upper thoracics. Or if someone comes in with severe low back pain and pain into their leg - until that disk and vertebra gets back into place they are not going to start getting better. It's going to keep producing inflammation. But you don't need to use manipulation to do this - you can use cupping or E-stim, you can provide a home stretching routine along with topicals or even some internals.

DM: So how does your clinic day look? Do you go in and out of different rooms treating several people at once?

MB: Actually I've just recently sold my practice after many years. Gosh ... it's weird after so long. My practice is on a small barrier island off the coast of Georgia - smack in between Jacksonville, Florida and Savannah, Georgia. There's a little barrier island called St Simon's Island. I came here when I realised I'm just not a big city-type doc. I guess there are 15,000 people on the island. I am more of a small town family doc. I see everyone and everything, from kids' sniffles to car accidents. I love having a clinic like that because if you do good work, you never have to advertise. We didn't even have a sign for many years. Now I'm there every three weeks for three days and see 50 people. There's a waiting list for months. All you have to do is do good, honest work and patients will beat a path to your door. This is different to the big cities with millions of people, where it doesn't matter how bad you are, as long as you advertise you stay busy.

There used to be no herb sales on that island. This place is mainly old-school Southern conservatives. I gave away so many herbs in the beginning. I would give them three-day's worth free and I knew that with the old Southern hospitality if I gave them something free it would be very hard for them not to use it. And now our walk-in herb sales are 20 to 30 per cent of the income of the clinic. Patients know they can walk in - and we've got a full patent pharmacy, probably 400 formulas and teas and all sorts of things - and pick up an extra bottle or ask us what is appropriate. Ultimately what you want is a lifelong relationship with your patient. There are acupuncture mills now as well as there are chiropractic mills. But you want somebody that's going to come back - because of your honesty and because of the work that you put in, and your belief in it, next time they're unwell, they're coming back.

So circling back to the what you asked me. My typical clinic day is 10am to 4pm. Because you really don't want me

at 8am, but I'm cranking by the time we get to 10 o'clock and then I see two to three patients an hour. I've got three treatment rooms and a helper. I've got my front desk person who checks everybody in and also changes the rooms over. I'll spend 15 to 20 minutes with each person and then bounce and go pick up the next person and have 15 to 20 minutes with them. Then I'll go back and take the first person out, and so on. It always feels like there's hardly anybody in the clinic as it's kind of quiet but in reality I'm moving continually throughout the whole day.

DM: That brings us on to *Evil Bone Water*. Can you share the story of how that came about?

MB: I've used *Zheng Gu Shui* in my clinic forever. It was introduced to me by the Chinese doctors that taught at my school. Not only did we have a supply in every treatment room, we also sold it in the clinic. People would come in and ask 'Do you have any of that stuff in the red box?' So I really loved the stuff, but I do remember distinctly in 1999 when

all of a sudden the makers removed the San Qi from the export product. You know San Qi is a magical herb. Somehow it stops bleeding, but also dissolves clots and stops pain. So when they did that, I was a little bummed, but it was still a good product. They

made some more changes in the early two thousands - maybe some more herbs taken out for export. The Chinese version stayed the same as it had always been, but anything that was exported was different. I think perhaps they were embracing capitalism. Many people still don't realise there are vast differences between the quality of, say, a tasty cheap culinary cinnamon and something that's medicinal. They did the same with 701 Patches. They just changed overnight and became almost useless. So with *Zheng Gu Shui* they were getting away with it and then they started raising prices. So the price was jacked up but the medicine itself was dumbed down, to the point where it was just six herbs ... it was a shadow of what it had been. It still worked for some things, but not the broad range of things as when it had the other herbs in it. I was also noticing other differences, like a bit of food colouring in it; with an organic product, consistency of colour is difficult to achieve as crops vary. But I didn't want to raise my prices for my patients, so I thought, let me see if I can actually make it. So I spent about six months researching the herbs that should be in it, going back to the original formula from hundreds of years ago as well as when it was first being produced commercially.

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DM: Where did you find that information? Somewhere online, or you went to the library?

MB: Oh I was talking to people, messaging people, looking up genus and species. A couple of the herbs were tricky. For example, Inula Cappa, which is in the lemongrass family. We were getting all kinds of different things sent from different suppliers. The Chinese for it is Ba Nui Dan.

DM: Is that in the Bensky *materia medica*?

MB: No, it's not. It was the hardest for us to source. And it took time to find the right one until we started using imperial grade herbs. They are on a whole other level. The suppliers are under a microscope half the week looking at genus, species, medicinal density ...

Botanical Biohacking is the parent company. The minimum order is quite high - two kilos per herb, and 75 kilos per order. The first month that I was producing commercially, all the American suppliers were running out of what we needed. Imperial Herbs were like, you've got to buy 75 kilos. And I was like all right, let's do it. We did everything on pre-sales. We've never borrowed a dime for *Evil Bone Water*. It's been built by the community. And the reports from patients ... I was astounded, and that's putting it mildly. I was dancing around the clinic, showing people these herbs; even if you didn't know

herbs, you could tell they were special - their size, colour and taste. Then I found out that American wholesalers are only allowed to buy grade B and C herbs. In America we don't see the A, the double A, the triple A grades. Now I'm getting sheets of cinnamon the size of my torso that come from the mountains of Guangzhong from 30-year-old trees. Normally that stuff just doesn't make it here. I've been a herbalist for 30 years, and I didn't realise that the Chinese save this stuff for their own people. They don't allow it to be exported. But I wondered - would people really pay double for the quality? At that grade not only have the herbs been tested rigorously, the consistency is amazing. There's a couple that I order in harvest season, like the Ba Nui Dan, which is sustainably wild-crafted in the mountains of Tibet. If you get it in harvest season it is at its best. There are no chemicals, no heavy metals, no pesticides - it is so clean. I really believe this is why this product has developed so many uses and 300,000 bottles down the road we haven't had any significant adverse reactions to it. If anything, people seem to get an

antihistamine response. And with the potable alcohol that we use bought from the liquor store, you could pretty much drink it! I feel passionate about all this because I feel like we're in a golden age for making Chinese medicine. There is a fantastic market for us to start producing some of the classic products. That's why I share so much about the actual journey, what is involved in scaling up and how difficult it is. Maybe a couple of people will get inspired. But it's not easy to get hold of really good quality herbs.

DM: The only home-brew I do is a tendon lotion. I grind the herbs and put them in vodka. It works pretty well for chronic tendon problems.

MB: Absolutely. It's patient homework.



DM: How many of the herbs are in the recipe that you use for *Zheng Gu Shui* are unusual - like not in our typical *materia medica*?

DM: Only a couple. But the Gui Pi - cinnamon bark - we use isn't really in there. Because what happens in the cinnamon plant is that at five years old the medicine is in the stems and the twigs. Only after 15 years does it migrate to the bark of the tree. Most people don't know that - they're like 'cinnamon is cinnamon'. The only herb that we don't get imperial grade on is San Qi. We get like A or AA grade. But it

gets really expensive. I told the agent, 'Just give me the grade that you'd feel comfortable using with your grandmother.' So he gives me 'grandma grade' San Qi, which is still big old golf ball chunks.

DM: So how is business?

MB: You know, I wanted this to help our profession. I want you guys to make money. I want it to be like an emissary for the profession, so that when somebody gets a bottle of this weird Chinese medicine stuff it affects them positively and impactfully. And when people ask them where you get it, they reply that you get it from acupuncture physicians. So we only sell wholesale - you've got to order a case of 24. That allows us to focus on growth. I want acupuncturists to be making money, and they are doing the bulk of the advertising and spreading the brand. And the more we spread the brand, the more we all make. We have grown every single year for seven years at a rate of about 35 per cent

each year. We are in over 2,500 clinics in the United States, and in many other countries. The only reason that we're not in some countries is that some of them are prohibitive as far as their laws go and shipping restrictions. For instance Canada has had a real crackdown on natural products. It's almost impossible even to get herbs into Canada. When I've looked into it, it would take about three years and cost about \$500,000 to get a product approved, and even then we would have to use a Canadian distributor. You know, there are laws that protect the public and then there are laws that say they're about protecting the public but they're really about prohibition. We sell to practitioners in Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland (although there's high fees there) and we have a lot of people in South America and the UK. We recently had an order from Israel, and the order made it there in four days.

DM: So what's the best way to use *Evil Bone Water* - when would you use, and when wouldn't you use it?

MB: The high quality of the herbs has made it way more useful than it was intended to be. When I was researching *Zheng Gu Shui* it kept coming up that in China it was known as a national treasure. And I'm like, 'Listen it's good - but it's not that good.'

But made with imperial grade herbs it really is. So it was originally intended for bone, ligament and tendon healing. I've seen it heal bones in half the normal time. I've seen *Evil Bone Water* heal a shattered patella in a 70-year-old diabetic with osteoporosis in eight weeks. I put it on open wounds as it stops bleeding. Every week we hear different uses for it. Some people use it as a deodorant, or for sunburn, infected teeth or haemorrhoids. Somebody said about warts disappearing when they applied it. I don't know if that works because of the antiviral properties or just the principle where you irritate something and the immune system realises something isn't supposed to be here and kind of gets rid of it. We always just say, 'When in doubt, put some *Evil Bone Water* on it.' We've had people use it successfully on the abdomen to stop persistent uterine bleeding. We have people use it in labour applied to the symphysis pubis. It treats inflammation and it has a strong antihistamine effect. It works differently if you rub it in or spray it on. If you spray it on, it's a little more cooling, but if you rub it in it kind of pumps hot-cold-hot-cold. It's not really cooling, it's more moving and venting. So it's not like it's going to make a cold area colder. It's a first-aid type thing.

What happens in the cinnamon plant is that at five years old the medicine is in the stems and the twigs. Only after 15 years does it migrate to the bark of the tree.

DM: I had a patient who got really freaked out, because he said the whole of his arm was tingling, to the point where he got anxious about it. But I was impressed.

MB: Yeah, that was one of my worries, because we use natural camphor and natural menthol so we can put in an amount that you couldn't do with synthetic. Natural camphor has nowhere near the toxicity of synthetic. Because of the numbing effect it really it only ramps up for a few minutes and then stabilises. We have a lot of people who use it with kids, for acne, spots, shingles or sores. I don't know what my kids use it for, but they always ask for more.

DM: My son loves it. He's a mountain biker and he's covered in bruises all the time.

MB: I think it's great to empower people. You're giving them something actionable that you know isn't going to hurt them and they know it's going to be effective, if nothing else, to stop the pain, if not for the healing effect. In my clinic I love getting kids involved with herbs because that as they get older they end up looking to herbs rather than just medication. You can create these positive experiences while they are young.

DM: Are you planning any other products?

MB: Nope. I've said from day one that we will only make *Evil Bone Water*. That's a conscious decision, not just for volume, but also so I can help other people. I don't charge to consult with others on their products. In order for me to do that, I realised that people have to know that I'm not going to steal their ideas. People kept telling me not to show others how I did this, that they're going to try to steal my stuff. But if people actually realised how involved it is ... I've seen master herbalists come in here and see what we're doing and the next day they buy a case because they're like 'No way I'm gonna do that - I'm happy somebody is, but I'm not!' The only product I've given a little bit of thought to is medicinal patches. The FDA has come down on patches because they're not necessarily made to rigorous standards. But all the equipment needed to make them is really old and getting parts or finding people to fix it is really difficult.

DM: Can I ask you more broadly about the profession

- where you think we're at and what we need to be considering to go on well into the future?

MB: Well, I've seen a deterioration. In my work in St. Simon's Island I have easily studied an hour a day for most of my life. But I didn't realise what I knew until I got online and saw some of the questions being asked. I would answer something that I thought was just the most basic of basic information. And people would look at it like it was really important. And I'm like: what are you talking about - this is Chinese medicine 101. So I have an ongoing dialogue with a few people that were trained about the same time I was, and who have a similar experience as me, and we wonder how some of the people we see online manage to get through school and not know this stuff. It's disturbing. And this isn't going to be a popular thing to say, but I think in the past 10 years the schools have really dropped the ball. I saw it starting to happen when we started to get funding for doctorates.


When I was trained the total of my student loans were about 22,000 dollars. That's in old money but it's not the 122,000 dollars that someone has to pay to go to school today. And you're getting people teaching that are less than qualified. I had an intern one time - she was just so bad. A year later I found out she was teaching for the school she had graduated from. And then you have people teaching on doctoral programmes who have never needled anybody. So I've seen a lot of people come out of school with a really distorted view of what effective Chinese medicine is. They're learning all of this crazy stuff and doing what I consider esoteric treatments that sound great on paper. And if you don't learn effective Chinese medicine in school, then when it doesn't work, instead of asking if you're doing it wrong, you look to other modalities. You have to be humble and realise that when you get out of school you don't know much. That's why they call it a practice right? If you're properly trained you should be able to take your licence and do all sorts of things. I think that you should be able to dip into some physical therapy stuff. You should be able to dip into some chiropractic stuff, and you should be able to dip into some biomedical stuff. My licence allows me to prescribe over-the-counters if I want to recommend something like Motrin (ibuprofen). But people feel like our profession is being eroded by the dry needlers and waste a lot of energy on worrying about this instead of learning to do a little manipulation or learning to prescribe corrective exercise. There's not one of those professions going to say anything about it. We should be strengthening our own profession instead of worrying about others, because we are not ever going to beat the physical therapy profession at their own game. They are in bed with the medical profession, way more than chiropractors or anybody else.

So my feeling is that we should stop whining and just get better at what we do. We have all the information at our fingertips. Because acupuncture, herbs, adjustments, massage, cupping ... all work when you combine them in the proper proportions. That's where the real magic is. That's where somebody gets better in three to eight visits instead of three to eight months. I think the secret to getting good is finding the tools that match you. I'm a big guy, so hands-on work matches me. I can get in and do that, and I don't mind hard work. But, you can do a lot of what I do with electroacupuncture, cupping, *guasha* and acupuncture. It's just finding the tools that makes you as strong as you can be as a clinician. But it's not the same for everybody.

DM: And do you have any advice for newer practitioners?

MB: If you're a newer practitioner and you find yourself questioning Chinese medicine, know this: it works, you're just not doing it right, yet. Also, try making something... I think everybody should make something at least once, because there are all these little things that go on in your brain, these things that you see ... We used to sell herb kits to make *Evil Bone Water* at home, and as soon as people saw how difficult it was to make, they just ended up buying from us, anyway. But it's fun to get there.

DM: Well, thank you so much for your time, Mark. I've really enjoyed talking with you. We will try to make this article open-source as there are some valuable messages that will be good for our whole profession.

MB: Alright, fantastic. That's what it's all about, helping as many people as we possibly can. 

Mark Brinson, DOM, LAC, CNMT, has more than 30 years' experience in the field of manual medicine, human performance and TCM family practice. He divides his time between treating patients in clinic and brewing *Evil Bone Water*.

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