

# STARTING UP

by Peter Deadman

**This is the text of a speech made at the first graduation ceremony of the Northern College of Acupuncture, York, England.**

One of the people I learnt a great deal about Chinese medicine from was an old Chinese doctor - now in his 70's - called Dr. Shen. He was brought up in a rich family in Shanghai and had a number of brothers. Since, according to Chinese tradition, one of the brothers had already been instructed to become a successful businessman and another a lawyer, he was told by his family that he had to become a doctor. The only choice offered to him was whether to study modern Western or traditional Chinese medicine. He did some comparative research (I think he counted the books in a Western medical library and then counted the books in a Chinese medical library), and decided that Chinese medicine was much easier to study and chose accordingly. Only after qualifying and practising for a few years did he discover that it wasn't as simple as all that, and he used to say "Modern medicine is difficult to study and easy to practise, but Chinese medicine is easy to study and difficult to practise". Now you may not agree, just at this moment in time, that Chinese medicine is easy to study but you might agree that it can be difficult to practise.

Some of us are naturally confident with a strong sense of our own abilities, whilst others of us are more inclined to doubt our knowledge and skills. However I do believe that in the first couple of years of practice at least, we all face feelings of deep ignorance and self-doubt at one time or another. These feelings can be very undermining and test our spirit, even more so because no one likes to own up to feelings of inadequacy. I am convinced by the response that I have had when I have discussed this with other practitioners that everyone has suffered from these feelings, but that there is a kind of conspiracy of silence that prevents discussion of the subject.

I think there are three interconnected reasons why, especially in the early days of practice, we can suffer from periodic attacks of feelings of inadequacy and ignorance. Firstly, I'm afraid one simple answer is that, yes, we are actually rather ignorant. However well trained we are, and however much clinical practice and supervision we've had, the variety of diseases and symptoms the human body can come up with is virtually unlimited, and there will be plenty of occasions on which we simply do not understand what is going on. As acupuncturists we are in effect in general practice and are expected to treat virtually every kind of disorder there is. All this without the security of the kind of consultant or hospital referral that GP's have access to. The only remedy for real ignorance that I know of, is continued study and, most of all, accumulation of experience - the most precious resource in the practice of medicine.

Secondly, we are fortunate to practice a kind of medicine which is holistic and integrated. This means that we consider not only a patient's primary symptoms, but look for the whole pattern that underlies their disorder. We take account of their physical, emotional and some-

times even their spiritual state in order to discern the meaning of their illness. Unfortunately this can too easily lead to a basic error that I certainly made in the early days of my practice. I used to feel from the moment I first took on a patient, that since I considered all the different facets of their condition, I was somehow responsible for them all. In other words, after I had inserted my first needle, whatever happened to them - any changes for the better or worse - were my doing and my responsibility - for which I took either the praise or the blame. It took me some years to realise that however wonderful acupuncture was, it was only one part of what was happening to my patients and their ups and downs could be due to many reasons other than my ministrations. This realisation helped me to keep a healthy distance between myself and my patients' fate.

The third and final reason stems from the first two. Having a valid reason to feel some degree of ignorance, and being inclined to take excessive responsibility for another's life and health, we can easily begin to operate in a mode in which we continually find further evidence of our own incompetence. Every patient is inevitably going to tell us something, or even many things, that we don't understand. It is very easy to feel undermined by this, in other words to have an internal dialogue that tells us that we ought to understand everything, and that it is our fault that we don't. This is an insidious kind of pattern and far from helping us develop greater knowledge, actually prevents it. The sooner we can develop an antidote to this condition, the better. Luckily I do believe there is an antidote and that is simple curiosity. Curiosity is the positive side of ignorance. It approaches new information and experience not from a position of weakness (I don't understand, how stupid I am) but from a position of strength - (how interesting, I wonder what's happening here). Here's a short quote from one of the classics that I was reading to my children the other day:

"It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, because he is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity. The motto of all the mongoose family is "Run and find out", and Rikki-Tikki was a true mongoose. "There are more things to find out about in this house" he said to himself "than all my family could find out in all their lives. I shall certainly stay and find out".

The classic I refer to is of course not a classic of Chinese medicine but Rikki Tikki Tavi by Rudyard Kipling. I'd like to congratulate every student here tonight who is to receive their diploma. Congratulations are due not only for having successfully completed a difficult course, but also for embarking on the practice of what I believe is one of the greatest and most profound systems of medicine that the human mind has come up with. I think it takes many many years to develop a high degree of expertise in the practice of Chinese medicine but I do believe that cultivating a mongoose-like state of infinite curiosity can speed up the process and above all make it fun.