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What does being a great Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioner mean to me?

I come to the study of Chinese medicine having been a professional musician for 45 years. Like music, there is an immense amount of theory that one needs to memorize and internalize. There is also the aspect of practice or “doing” so that one has the technical skill to deploy that knowledge in a beneficial manner. Although most people view music solely as an art form, there is a scientific aspect to it. The ancient Greeks viewed music as the metaphysical expression of mathematics. Likewise, Chinese medicine is both a science and an art. I quickly realized that most of the philosophical and foundational principles found in Chinese medicine were things that I already knew just in a different form, that of music. So, to a great extent what being a great traditional Chinese medicine practitioner means to me is quite the same as being a great musician.

A great musician creates music that has an effect on the very being of the listener. By drawing from his deeper emotional source, the musician brings forth that which allows the listener to connect to that same source *within them*. Experiencing this allows one to feel, perceive or intuit that same source with other people, and hopefully all things. In this sense it is a universal language. The foundational principles of Yin/Yang, and Wu Xing (5 Phases) are also universal in that they exist within each of us, can be seen in nature and in the cosmos. For me, a great Chinese medicine practitioner is one who not only has the technical skill and knowledge to restore the balance of these systems but one who can create a space whereby the patient connects to them within themselves.

Ling Shu Chapter 55 states: *“The superior physician treats that which is not yet ill. The inferior physician treats that which is already ill.”*

There are many ways to understand this statement. It could imply that the superior physician has a level of perception and diagnostic skill that allows him to see an illness before it expresses. It could also mean that the patient of this superior physician has benefitted in such a way that they now perceive that balance within themselves, live in a healthy and harmonious way, and by virtue of that remain healthy. I believe what we are really talking about is the power of transformation. In my view, this can only take place consistently when the practitioner embodies the very principles of this medicine that we practice. To not do so would reduce the practitioner to a mechanic, and at best temporarily ease the symptoms of their patient. That is good but it is not great! I believe

our medicine points to something much deeper than that. To use a musical analogy, one could perform a piece of music flawlessly but without feeling, without soul, without breathing meaning into the music it will not effect the listener beyond a basic enjoyment.

In a world that is still very much constrained by a mechanistic worldview, our medicine offers a different possibility. One in which all things are in a symbiotic relationship and in a state of ever changing flux and transformation. A great practitioner is able to diagnose if those relationships are out of balance and restore them. To know exactly which of the myriad tools in the Chinese medicine toolbox would be most effective. And perhaps most importantly have a keen intuitive insight into the nature of the person he is treating. What makes our medicine so effective, and by extension a practitioner great, is that we do not treat a disease but rather we treat the person in front of us. How is it that we come to know that person in front of us? Perhaps this is the most elevated of all the skills that a Chinese medicine practitioner can possess. The ability to connect to a patient in a way that that patient feels comfortable enough to show us who they are. This is something that cannot be taught. It is like trying to teach a musician how to play with feeling. I believe it is something that is transmitted and felt. I have felt it as a patient and I have witnessed it from some of the truly great practitioners who have taught me. I hope that with time and experience I will be able to possess this quality.

Like all things, there is a historical and cultural ecosystem that informs how things take shape and express themselves. Chinese medicine is no exception, nor is the treasure trove of doctors throughout history that have taken this medicine and adapted it to the times and circumstances they found themselves in. For me this is one of the most inspiring aspects of being a practitioner of this medicine in the United States. Not only do we have to be skillful and compassionate but in many ways we have to translate a view of the body – and of reality itself – to a people and historical circumstances that is far different from that of the Han or Song dynasties. We live in a culture that has a much different worldview, and to a large degree doesn't concern itself with metaphysics. So we are in that regard translators and decoders. The most powerful teaching of our medicine that we can impart to our patients is that health and wellness are the natural state when we live in a harmonious way. When disharmony occurs, we as physicians, simply give direction and encouragement to what already exists within each patient that we treat. This is the great gift of Chinese medicine and the role of the great practitioner.