

Dr. Shen Seminar, London, August 1979

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This was the second seminar given by Dr. Shen that I attended, but it is only now that I realise what a profound effect his lectures and demonstrations of diagnosis have had on my understanding of Chinese medicine. This report is in four parts. Firstly there is a brief biography of Dr. Shen. Secondly, I have transcribed some parts of the seminar that seem to me to reveal a lot about Dr. Shen's approach to medicine. Thirdly I have transcribed some diagnoses of patients that he performed in front of the seminar audience. Lastly I have attempted to express some of the more important things that I felt I learned as a result of attending.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Shen was born in Shanghai in 1914. Between 1932 and 1936 he attended the Shanghai Medical College. This was a 4 year course (6 days a week, 8 hours a day) covering all aspects of Chinese medicine. During and after his time at college he studied further with Master Tsi Man Ting. Between 1935 and 1937 he was interned at the Tai Tung Clinic, and subsequently established and headed the Shanghai Medical Clinic. In 1948 he moved to Taiwan and practised there for 17 years. In 1965 he was invited by the National Medical Association of Malaysia to work as a consultant, and during this time travelled to Kuala Lumpur, IPOH, Penang, Vietnam, Singapore, Borneo, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan and Korea. During his travels he treated over 50,000 patients. In 1971 he moved to the United States and established clinics in New York and Boston. Up until this time Dr. Shen had worked primarily as a herbalist, but due to the special situation in America practised acupuncture more from this point.

SEMINAR TRANSCRIPTS

This section is made up of edited transcripts made from a tape-recording of the seminar. These have been translated from Dr. Shen's 'Chinglese'. The passages I have included have been chosen to illuminate Dr. Shen's personal history and general approach to medicine rather than his detailed and lengthy teachings on diagnosis etc. The appearance of 'Laughter' in the transcript indicates general merriment on the part of those present.

Beginnings

"Sometimes the obvious diagnostic methods don't tell you what the disease is. You must work it out for yourself by eliminating all the possibilities. Like in the case of the doctor with the swollen legs (see Cases). There wasn't any real disease - just a local problem, heat in the legs. This is the essence of Chinese diagnosis. A Chinese doctor needs practice, experience and intelligence. You must quiet your mind and have no distracting thoughts and worries. If you have a troubled mind then you cannot practise Chinese medicine. You can only use machines and work like a machine. If you want to practise Chinese medicine, you must first quieten your mind, and if you want to really enjoy Chinese medicine you must strengthen your mind - put your whole life in your mind.

Many people say to me, "Dr. Shen, you have a very special understanding - different from other doctors. Why is it?" It is because my mind really is different from other people's. When I began Chinese medicine, I had no other thoughts or problems. I thought only about medicine, I might spend the whole day thinking about one patient, asking Why, Why, Why? If I didn't get the answer, I couldn't eat. If I had a patient with a very difficult disease, I would go to their house 3 to 4 times a day. Sometimes I stayed at the house the whole day, by the patient's bed. If the relatives asked me why I was there so long, I would say that I wanted to observe the changes in the patient. If I gave herbs I wanted to see what happened, and if I didn't give herbs I wanted to see how the symptoms developed and changed through the day and night. Then I would try to understand why they changed. I used to do this all the time, and I would take no payment.

If patients had no money I would treat them free. In this way I gained a lot of special experience. I didn't need to charge patients for two reasons. Firstly my family in Shanghai were very rich and never mentioned money. Before I was 25 I didn't even know what money was. Secondly my

mother very much wanted me to be a doctor, as we had a large family and needed a doctor in the family. At first she wanted me to be a Western style doctor, but I thought that was too difficult - I didn't want to study French and English. She agreed that I study Chinese medicine. I found it very easy. The first time I saw a book of Chinese medicine I only needed to look at it once and I understood it right away. My mother told me to study medicine and not to worry about money. I didn't need to mention it to patients. If I learned medicine well, she would be happy. Thus all I needed to think about was medicine, and keep asking myself Why, Why, Why?

That's how I learned special pulse taking - different from the books. I found my own way which was not even the way of my teacher. When I was 25 I opened a clinic. At that time my approach was to use the 5 Elements and Yin and Yang. But the patients didn't really understand my explanations, and ~ myself didn't thoroughly understand. I felt I had to really understand the pulse. Whereas someone might say, for example " the stomach is weak ", I would find that it wasn't the stomach but the oesophagus. I tried to understand the meaning of each pulse and always asked myself what it meant.

Then I moved to Taiwan. I always used to try very hard to understand each patient. Sometimes I spent 2 hours with a patient. After Taiwan, in 1965 I went to Malaysia. After so many years trying to understand patients' pulses, I decided to try an experiment. I would not ask the patient about their history and their symptoms. I just checked the pulse and told them what the problem was, and what the cause was. I found I could get it right. After one week I was treating 120 patients a day. Whole families came for diagnosis.

Diagnosis by Looking

My teacher and myself were sometimes very busy. My teacher treated 100 patients every day in the clinic, and then went to visit up to 30 more, going on until midnight or 2 am. In 1937 I opened a clinic for poor people in Shanghai. I charged only 20 cents for treatment and herbs. I supported this clinic myself. After 3 months the clinic had over 200 patients a day. I would see most of these myself. The students would write out the prescriptions, and each consultation would take 3 minutes. We had to be very fast. As I diagnosed one patient, I would be looking at the other patients (as was traditional, patients would be seen in the same room as the others waited). Then as each patient came, I would only have to ask 2 or 3 questions, then give the prescription. Looking diagnosis is very important. It gives you the first impression of the problem.

Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine

Any disease at its onset is better treated by Chinese medicine. If it is very serious, Western medicine may be better. We cannot say that Chinese medicine is always best. Many diseases Western medicine finds very difficult to treat and Chinese medicine finds very easy. But some diseases are the opposite way For example I had a lung collapse. I knew I could cure myself by doing nothing for up to 6 months -just lying down and taking herbs. But if I went to hospital I would be cured in 5 days. You have to decide according to the disease which is the better treatment, and you must always tell the patient the truth.

Don't worry

It is very important to know yourself. For example I know how much work I can do and how much I need to rest. One must know one's own body condition. This is very important' No disease is as important as one's body condition. I tell my patients: " If you go to the hospital for a check-up and the doctor tells you that you have cancer or some other serious disease and could die in a few days, don't worry (Laughter). You must say: Now I'm alive and can do something about it - rest and sleep. If you sustain your energy and don't let it disappear you needn't worry about any disease.

In my life I have had many dangerous moments. One time I was in Hong Kong when the Japanese came. I was walking in the street when the Japanese opened fire with machine guns. People either side of me were killed but I didn't worry. My mind was clear. I knew that if I ran I might be mistaken for a soldier and get shot. I have fallen from trains and been hit by a car but I was never hurt because I didn't worry. I was in a car accident when the car took off and turned over. It only loosened my teeth a bit. (Laughter). It is very important to have a clear mind and not

to worry - worry is no use. When I treat patients I always tell them not to worry. Today you're still alive. If you die tomorrow you can worry then. You still have 24 hours. If you worry it makes your whole life go wrong and weakens your energy. If you weaken your energy like this, even if you haven't got a disease you will get one. If you sustain your energy you can overcome any disease. This is most important to understand in medicine.

CASES

The following case histories were taken, with two exceptions, from public diagnosis of patients at the two London seminars. In each case Dr. Shen asked only about general symptoms, and except where obvious had no other knowledge of the patient's life, occupation etc. P: - patient. S: = Dr. Shen.

The patient is female and works as a masseuse and acupuncturist. She wants a diagnosis as she feels she has an ovary problem. Her symptoms are: pain a little before and on the first day of her period, after which it begins to improve. The first onset was 5 months ago, and the most severe occasion was 3 days ago when she nearly collapsed with pains along her whole back. She often feels a blockage at the level of the ovaries. Dr. Shen briefly examined the pulse, tongue and eyelids:

S: Your problem is from your energy. You do too much - work too hard. I don't know what you do, but not only do you overwork, you also work standing a long time. Is that right?

P: Yes.

S: That makes your pain. Generally your body condition is not too good, but there is no real disease. Your lung function is not too strong and therefore the Ch'i is low. Overwork makes the Ch'i even weaker, and standing a lot makes it sink down. The ovaries cannot stand it. During the period the Ch'i and blood have to flow smoothly. Because the Ch'i is low, the movement is not good and you get pain. Once the flow starts there is no pain. This is not a real ovary problem but an energy problem. You have to work less and restore your energy. And because of your lungs you must not do heavy work. I'll tell you: sometimes in the afternoon you feel tired but also hot in the face.

P: Yes I do, but that's emotional.

S: No; this is not emotional. This is weak lungs. Be careful. This is called '5 Centres Hot' in Chinese medicine. (palms, soles of feet and chest feel hot). It means the body is very weak. Usually your hands are cold but sometimes they feel very warm.

P: Yes.

S: The explanation of the diagnosis is as follows: Since her body condition is weak, her pulse is weak - that is normal, The distal and middle positions are weak, therefore the Ch'i is low. But the proximal position is a little tight. Why? Because the uterus is sinking and makes the nerves tight, which results in pain. How can the uterus sink? Because she must be standing a lot, and since she has weak Ch'i, the Ch'i cannot hold the organ in place. In Chinese diagnosis you must pay attention to every small detail. Here the pulse is only a little bit tight, but one must figure out why. And one must consider the case history. If she had pain throughout the period, something would really be wrong. But pain just before and on the first day only means that the energy is not moving well.

Question: What about her diet?

S: She doesn't need any special diet; overwork is her problem.

P: It is difficult to change.

S: No, you have to change. You want a long life, you don't want a short life.

The patient is an Italian male of 30. For 7 or 8 years he has suffered from excessive dreaming at night and tiredness in the morning.

S: What kind of dreams, fearful, happy?

P: Nothing particular - not nightmares.

S: hot happy?

P: No.

Dr. Shen examines pulse, tongue and eyelids.

S: This problem comes from your way of life. Your body condition is alright - only your heart function is a bit weak. Also in the daytime you think too much. But mainly, you changed your eating habits. Do you remember? Before the age of 22 you used to eat more at lunchtime and less

in the evening. After you were 22, for some reason you ate less at lunchtime and more in the evening. Right?

P: Yes. (Laughter) Because I began studying at a library all day and didn't eat much lunch.

S: You all want to ask how I knew (Laughter). I will tell you. The tiredness in the morning is not a disease. It comes from dreaming too much at night. This is normal. Why did I ask him what kind of disease? Because fearful or happy dreams come from organ problems. His dreams have no particular character, therefore there is no organ problem. In the Nei Ching it says: "If the stomach digestion is not good there is unquiet sleep." I know therefore it must be from changed eating habits. Because the stomach digestion is not good, eating too much at night gives him dreams. This comes only from stomach nerves (ie not organ) and also from thinking too much. The only way to arrive at this kind of diagnosis is by detailed thinking and examination. No other way can tell you these things. To the patient: you only need to eat a little less and think less. If you don't think less you will get more trouble. You are now 30. Before 30 you had many problems; little problems you couldn't prevent. Is that right?

P: Yes.

S: Think less and your life will be more clear.

Little problems like this always come from way of life.

The patient is male, 30 years old, and recently began practice as an Acupuncturist. His problems are a) for 1 year intermittent trouble with urination - occasionally dark urine and pain; b) for 5 weeks a swollen knee with nodules but no pain.

Dr. Shen examined pulse, tongue and eyelids.

S: You must be very careful! Watch out for blood in the urine.

P: Yes, I had blood in the urine twice last winter.

S: Do you do physical work?

P: For the last two years I have mainly studied. Before that I did 3 to 4 years of physical work involving a lot of lifting.

S: Your problem comes from 2 reasons: physical work and too much sex. All the time you did physical work and then had sex. Even if you didn't really feel like it you had sex: before work, after work, all the time you liked to have sex (Laughter). The physical work weakened your Ch'i, the sex weakened your Jing. If Ch'i and Jing are low, how can you be well. You must be very careful. No sex for 6 months' You can very easily bleed again. Don't do any heavy work. Rest more. If you do too much work or sex, in one month you will get more bleeding. The pulse is very strong - scallion pulse (hollow) His body condition and face are not strong and he should therefore have a weak pulse. Because the pulse is like this, it means the blood vessels can burst easily, because they are not strong. At present the disease is only in the bladder, but if you get more bleeding it will damage the kidneys and you can end up on a kidney machine. Be very careful, OK?

P: Yes, OK.

S: Look at the tongue: in the middle there is no skin. This means Yin Xu. His 'metabolism' is not good. This comes from the kidneys. If the kidneys are not good, he cannot build up his essence (Jing), and he uses too much. The scallion pulse is just on the bladder. With the scallion pulse in general, the middle part of the pulse is weak and empty. The superficial and deep part is strong, but this is not really strong - just a reaction from the disease. The emptiness in the middle is the true part. The knee is a different problem. This just comes from hurting the knee sometime.

The patient is an Indian man of 30. He is greatly troubled by obsessions, depression, fears, feelings of extreme panic, and inability to sleep at night. He has had this problem since the age of 15. 4 years ago he was put on tranquillisers which made the problem much worse.

S: Were you born in this country? P: No, in India. S: When you were left your family, very young - before you were 15 - you left your family, right?

P: Yes

S: This is not a real disease. It is just because you are nervous. Before you were 15, you did something wrong, maybe against the law, I don't know. It made you very afraid and guilty inside.

P: Yes, that's right.

S: This is the source of the trouble. You must quickly forget. The past is past - it doesn't matter now. It's all finished now - don't worry. Stop thinking about the past and you will get better. Start

again. Don't spend money on doctors, spend it on yourself. Only you can help yourself. If you don't stop worrying, problem. Listen to me. Whenever you try to sleep, your mind automatically goes back to the past, right?

P: Yes.

S: Don't worry.... This is a special pulse - not in the books. It is called the 'shaking/vibrating pulse'. It means the heart nerves are not quiet because of worry. Dr. Shen recommended an acupuncture treatment that he uses a lot to quiet the nerves. The points are: REN-4, REN-6, SP-6, HG6, SP-1, LU-9, HG7, HT7, LIV-3. All are used in one treatment. The needles are left in a long time (1 hour to 1 hour) and the patient must relax as completely as possible during treatment.

The patient is a young man with 2 problems: a) pain in the base of his spine and in his right side; b) scant frequent urination. Dr. Shen checked exactly where the pain was.

S: Which problem came first?

P: The back pain.

S: How long have you had it?

P: One and a half years

S: How old are you now?

P: 19

S: How long have you been having urination problems?

P: I year, but it has improved since I've been having acupuncture treatment. It's not so frequent and there is more of it.

S: Do you urinate at night?

P: Yes, 2 or 3 times; very little each time.

Dr. Shen checked the pulse, tongue and eyelids.

S: Were you at work or at school when you were 19? At work, yes?

P: Yes.

S: This back pain came from your work. One time, or many times, I don't know, you went to pick up something on your left side and you used your right hand. You had to twist. Do you remember?

P: Yes. I used to be a postman and I carried the bag on my left shoulder and took things out with my right hand.

S: The pulse doesn't tell you this, this is experience. This kind of pain can come only from lifting and twisting. It's just muscle pain. But why hasn't it got better in one and a half years, and why does he have the urination problem? Do you have a girlfriend?

P: No, not at present.

S: Do you masturbate?

P: Yes.

S: This custom is the source of your problem. Your body Ch'i is very low and because you masturbate, the Ch'i is weakened more. The Ch'i cannot hold the urine and it comes out frequently and in little amounts.

In New York I saw a patient - a doctor of about 70. Both legs and feet had been swollen and red for many years. He had tried various kinds of treatment but with no improvement. I checked his pulse and asked some general questions, but couldn't find any real problem anywhere - just this trouble with the feet and legs. In a case like this you have to use your mind. Usually in this kind of disease there has to be ~ problem in the body affecting the legs. How can there be a local problem in the legs alone? This means the cause must be external - not originating in the body/organs. In Chinese medicine this redness and swelling is called 'heat poison' - from excess heat. How can you get a local heat problem? It must be from sun-heat. But how can you get sun-heat only on the legs and feet? It must be from the beach. I know some Western people like to go to the beach and walk barefoot in the sand, and so I asked him if he did this. He said yes, he went to the beach every day and walked in the hot sand. I only needed to give him 2 kinds of herbs: Golden Seal and Liquorice. (These herbs take heat out of the blood by promoting urination). He was quickly cured. (Of course he had to stop walking on hot sand as well). In Chinese medicine you diagnose the patient not the disease. You must think step by step and always ask why, and each time you ask you have to answer yourself.

In 1950 I was in T'ai-pei. A friend was visiting, and mentioned that his wife was quite sick. She started complaining about dizziness and double vision. After hospital tests she was told that there could be a brain tumour. Since then she had become nervous and tense, also so weak that she could not walk without aid. I asked my friend to bring her over for a social visit. During her visit, I found out that her dizziness and double vision only occurred when she was working on her feet, but not while she was resting. My examination of her showed that everything was normal, only that she was very weak. I knew then that her symptoms were due to weak kidneys and Ch'i. Because she was told she might have a brain tumour, the shock was a great blow psychologically, making her feel worse. So I explained to her what the symptoms of a brain tumour were, and how scientific tests may make mistakes. As it was getting late, I asked her if she was tired and she said no. This further confirmed that it was more a psychological problem than physiological, ie although she normally got tired very easily, that night she was able to sit up talking with me for hours. Once she understood that, she was able to work again.

REFLECTIONS

Here I have attempted to express some of the most important things that I felt I learned from attending the seminars. They are personal to me, and others attending the seminar may have profited differently.

Cause of Disease

Dr. Shen talks of three levels of doctor. The first, and lowest, does not understand either the disease or the cause, but treats only the symptoms, and his results are not very good. This is the level that much acupuncture in the West and nowadays in the East too, is practised on. The second level doctor understands the condition, but not the cause, and can often treat successfully, but the highest level understands the cause of disease in each patient. Those of us who are seriously trying to practise Chinese medicine and do not treat symptomatically, work mostly on the second level, trying with varying degrees of success to diagnose the condition in each patient - whether we express it in terms of imbalance in the 5 Elements and the meridians, the 8 Conditions, the internal and external evils; or a combination of these. Yet it is easy, especially as one becomes preoccupied with this already difficult level of working, to forget about trying to understand the cause of the disease in each patient.

Dr. Shen says that Chinese medicine 'follows life', and since human life has not in essence changed, neither has Chinese medicine over its long history. Thus the profound teaching of the causes of disease still applies to the present day. These causes are:

- Climate: heat, fire, damp, dryness, cold and wind
- Diet
- Fatigue
- Excessive sex
- The emotions Constitution
- Trauma
- Epidemics
- Parasites and poisons
- Wrong treatment
- Impure air, water and food

More than one of these causes may well apply, eg 'evil' climates can only attack a body if the energy is weakened already, perhaps by imbalanced emotions, constitution, fatigue etc. The art, and the deep enjoyment of Chinese medicine is to try to understand which causes apply to each individual patient, and to study exactly what effect each has had on the patient, revealed in the symptoms, pulse, tongue etc. This is achieved by a complete understanding of all available diagnostic signs, long experience, and a flexible, enquiring and intelligent mind. It is not easy, and it is easy to take a one-sided approach and see, for example, only faulty diet as the cause of most diseases, or psychological problems etc. Watching Dr. Shen at work, one is reminded of Sherlock Holmes, with the seminar audience cast in the role of the rather dull-witted Dr. Watson. Yet the ability to ascertain the cause of disease will often mark the dividing line between success and failure in treatment, since unless the origin of the problem is explained to the patient and they are encouraged to change, the treatment and the patient's lifestyle will oppose each other.

It is interesting to realise that in Dr. Shen's case, his concentration on this aspect of medicine came partly from the conditions under which he worked. When he began his practice as a young doctor, there was a lot of 'competition'. A patient would expect not just a 'herbal prescription' but a detailed analysis of the condition and cause of the problem. If he was not satisfied with the explanation, he would throw away the prescription and go elsewhere. Thus the surest way to impress a patient and win their confidence was to tell them something they had not told you.

Our life in our hands

By understanding the causes of disease, we can see that our life and health is ultimately in our own hands. But to achieve and act on this realisation requires true wisdom and a knowledge of ourselves and others, for it is easy to miss the real problem - especially when we ourselves are involved. To achieve a healthy and long life requires both a higher understanding, for example the ability to keep our emotional life in harmony and to use our energy smoothly and well, and a high degree of common sense. So often watching Dr. Shen's diagnosis, I was struck by how the main problem in a patient lay in the ordinary things of daily life: eating too fast, taking too many cold drinks, doing too much exercise, lifting too much, not taking care of minor injuries and, time and time again, not resting enough. Often, these little things require a complete change in our understanding of what is 'good for us', eg the jogger who shouldn't be jogging, the cold bath fanatic who makes himself ill, the raw food eater who damages his digestion etc.

Be your own master

Dr. Shen demonstrates that in our development as doctors, we must be our own masters. First, of course, we must study extensively and learn fully from both books and teachers, indeed the training generally given in acupuncture in this country, for example, falls far short of a traditional college training in China (often followed by apprenticeship). A qualified practitioner in the days of Dr. Shen's training would be expected to have a mastery of differential diagnosis (Chinese) for every disease ie the main types with symptoms, and probable tongue and pulse qualities. This would include infectious diseases, paediatrics etc.

On this foundation, however, a practitioner must be an acute observer and never be satisfied if he doesn't fully understand. If this means that in time he develops his own understanding that is different from the traditional teachings, then provided it is a real and accurate understanding, this is a sign of his development. In this way also, medicine as a whole develops.

What is possible

By watching Dr. Shen's diagnosis, and hearing his lectures, we can begin to see what is possible in Chinese medicine. A traditional Chinese doctor, working in his clinic, making home visits and, in the case of Dr. Shen going to hospitals to give a second opinion, would have to diagnose and treat every kind of disease, both acute and chronic, minor and potentially fatal. His reputation would depend largely on the accuracy of his diagnosis and prognosis, and so the ability to tell how serious a disease is becomes a major requirement of a traditional practitioner. To achieve this, without using modern diagnostic aids, reveals how far the sensitive development of diagnosis by looking, asking and listening, smelling, and feeling the pulse can be taken. This realisation can act as an inspiration to those of us who practise Chinese medicine in the West, and lead us to extend the scope of our practice to many different kinds of diseases that are not usually treated by acupuncturists here.

Dr. Shen would like to thank everyone for the gift presented to him at the conclusion of the seminar, and also to express his enjoyment of the occasion.