

Everything Old is New Again: Interview with Nan Lu, OMD, LAc

BY DEBRA NELSON-HOGAN

Introduction

The Western world is slowly but steadily rediscovering Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as a way to stay healthy. We talk with Nan Lu, OMD, LAc, founder and president and director of the Traditional Chinese Medicine World Foundation and Tao of Healing Center of New York and New Jersey.

TCM is an ancient medical system that takes a deep understanding of the laws and patterns of nature and applies them to the human body. TCM, a comprehensive system for the assessment and treatment of acute and chronic disorders, as well as preventive healthcare and maintenance, originated in China more than 5,000 years ago and has been offered in the United States for more than 150 years. The practice is based on a paradigm of the body unlike that used in Western modern medicine and centers on the concept of “Qi” (pronounced “chee”), loosely translated as “energy,” and its effect on physiological, psychological, and emotional functions and health.

The Role of Qi

Qi is considered to be the force that animates and informs all things. In the human body, Qi flows through 12 meridians, or energy pathways, that run through the body. Qi can travel over this network, and consequently the body, at the speed of light. It allows the body’s various organs to exchange messages with one another. This is why keeping the meridians clear and Qi flowing is necessary to allow the body’s self-regulating actions to occur. Through proper training, individuals can develop the sensitivity to feel the flow of Qi.

While it is often described in the West as energy, or vital energy, the term Qi carries a deeper meaning. Qi has two aspects: one is energy, power, or force; the other is conscious intelligence or information. Each Organ System has its own unique Qi that allows it to perform its functions, both physical (which Western medicine can



Nan Lu, OMD, LAc performs an acupuncture treatment on a patient at the Tao of Healing Center.

describe) and energetic (which Eastern medicine can identify). This energetic function also includes an Organ System’s relationship with other Organs. (Organ is here capitalized to distinguish the TCM concept of an Organ System and its broader functions from the Western concept of the physical organ.)

TCM frequently references several major Qi, or energy, function problems, such as an overall “Qi deficiency,” which is often described in Western medical terms as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). TCM also has the knowledge and ability to pinpoint which Organs are experiencing an energy deficiency. Another major condition is described as “Qi stagnation,” which means energy and information cannot move smoothly to or from its appropriate location. For example, TCM considers pain, headache and stomachache the result of Qi stagnation.

Many people seek TCM or acupuncture because they are in pain and other modalities have failed. Like other integrative practices, pain management is considered part of the greater whole, not a separate discipline, which becomes abundantly clear in speaking with Dr. Nan Lu.

Q: How does TCM regard pain?

DR. LU. There are three essential levels of pain: physical, emotional, and spiritual. When you ask me about pain, I need to know which level you are asking about. All pain emanates from the spiritual level. Everything is energy. All energy is conscious. When TCM deals with pain, it deals with energy, not just the physical symptoms of pain.

**Q: Isn't that where you lose a lot of people?
Talking about injury from a different perspective?**

DR. LU. Yes, sometimes. We are still talking about a science, but now we are talking about physics as opposed to medicine. Quantum physics states that everything is energy. Science has already proved everything is energy. Energy is a function of the speed of light.

Q: Can you describe what you mean about the Organ Systems and their relationship to the time of day?

DR. LU. We believe that people must follow the laws of the Universe to achieve harmony and total health. The Yin/Yang and Five-Element theories are actually observations and descriptions of Universal law, not concepts created by man, that have been in existence for more than 2,000 years. In ancient times, TCM practitioners discovered that these complex sets of interrelationships exist on deep energetic levels below the material surface. TCM practitioners may use these tools to maintain health.

Yin/Yang is the most important theory of all. It states that everything is composed of two complementary energies; one energy is yin and the other is yang. They are never separate; one cannot exist without the other. The Five-Element theory states that the five major Organ Systems (Liver/Gallbladder, Heart/Small Intestine, Spleen/Stomach, Lung/Large Intestine, and Kidney/Urinary Bladder) are each related to a particular element as well as to a broad category of classifications: from a season of the year to a time of day, to particular colors and foods, etc. Both the Yin/Yang theory and the Five-Element theory reflect the entire Universal law in one complete, comprehensive system of related categories.

When someone has pain, we don't just treat it; we treat balance and harmony. As long as the body can stay in balance and harmony, disease cannot enter. Pain or discomfort is the sign that the body is not balanced. There is no such thing as pain management per se in TCM. Instead, we use various modalities, like acupuncture, acupressure, and Qigong, to help make

energy flow, help the body get balanced, and allow the body to discover its own healing wisdom.

In Chinese medicine, each Organ has its own emotion and energy frequency; its meridians also run through specific areas of the body; so location is a very important indicator of the source of pain. Different locations of pain deal with different Organs and different meridians. All physical pain is manifested by an internal energy imbalance first. Even though you might have a sport injury, we believe that injury originates with an internal imbalance.

Q: Is all pain energy stagnation?

DR. LU. Yes. If energy does not flow freely through the body, stagnation will result, and stagnation brings pain or discomfort.

When a TCM practitioner deals with pain, we ask where the pain is and, as in real estate, it is a question of "location, location, location." We look for the root cause of the pain, not just when the pain is felt physically. Chinese medicine is energy medicine; it is truly based on Qi, or vital energy, and on a deep understanding of the body's energy channels or meridians – energy pathways that allow the body to connect the physical structure to Nature and the Universal order of things.

Q: How do you assess pain?

DR. LU. I would not only ask where the pain is, but I would need to know when it occurs—does it relate to time of day or does weather affect it? That some pain, such as arthritis, is related to the weather is pretty well known, but the time of day is an equally important factor and relates to Universal energy changes and how the body responds to them.

So first we ask about the big picture—season, time, nature. Each of us is "a part" of Nature. We are not "apart" from Nature. You are connected to Nature. Different times of the day are controlled by different Organ Systems and different times of the day relate to the sun and the Earth. When the sun changes, so do temperature and energy, and so the body responds. Then we ask the location. When did the pain start? We do a history and ask the pain frequency and nature. Is it dull, or like needles, or throbbing? Different pain means different energy vibrations. Based on all these things, then we determine which Organ System is out of balance. What Organ System is not doing its job here?

Remember, different locations of pain are related to different Organs and different meridians. Each Organ has

its own emotion and energy frequency— even today’s Western medicine recognizes that different organs have different tissues, so even cancer has different tissues and different energy vibrations.

TCM says all physical pain is manifested by internal pain first. Even sport injuries, although they appear to happen because of a specific event, come from an internal imbalance of Organs; otherwise, the injury would not have happened.

Q: So if an athlete’s body is balanced, he or she would not get injured in the first place?

DR. LU. That is the beauty of it. In Chinese medicine the understanding of the body is based on the meridian system. The only system in Western science that perhaps can help people better understand this concept is the holographic theory, which means that the entire whole is seen in every part and every point connects with everything. How is the knee connected in TCM’s meridian system? Where does it connect? Chinese medicine connects the knee to the Kidney. If the Kidney functions well, you will never have a knee injury. Ankles are connected to the Gallbladder, so if your Gallbladder functions well, you won’t have ankle problems.

Q: What about chronic pain, like neuropathic pain?

DR. LU. Again, we need to know more specifics; TCM is a medicine of the individual. What kind of pain is it and where is it? Is it muscle, tendon, or what? All the muscles are related to the Spleen. Joint and nerve pain is related to the Liver. Although the whole body is made of nerves, you still have to think about the location. Wrist pain is related to Lung. The beauty of the human body is that we cannot isolate a body part; we have to look at the whole. The parts are dependent on the whole. If we only treat one part we don’t have the best outcomes. Look at Western medicine, which often will treat one part of the body with cortisone shots or nerve blocks. You can block the nerve, but the cause of the pain is still there.

Q: What about pain on an emotional or spiritual level?

DR. LU. We have a holistic way of understanding pain; you also need to understand the pain’s purpose. Looking at pain beyond the physical is frightening for many people. You might ask to which Organ the pain is related, and which energy vibration is related to which emotions? What kind of consciousness lies behind this pain? If you don’t

think you want to go to the spiritual level, maybe you just go to the emotional level, but without going beyond the physical aspects of pain, you can never really affect a cure. You can fix it, but the pain can always come back.

Q: Where does the practice of Qigong fit into health?

DR. LU. Essentially, Qigong is a powerful self-healing energy practice and an important modality of TCM. Within this practice though, there are literally thousands of systems. Some are “instant” systems, created by modern masters; some are ancient, passed down from master to student in a lineage over many millennia. The spiritual traditions that have influenced Chinese culture— Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism—have left their imprint on Qigong.

At my Tao of Healing center, I teach a very ancient form, which we call Wu Ming Qigong, whose ultimate goal is to open the Heart. In TCM, the Heart is considered the Monarch, the ruler of all the Organs and is never just considered as a physical organ. The Heart, or Shen, is home to all our emotional and spiritual faculties. The goal of the Wu Ming Qigong system is to teach students how to have every faculty under the loving rule of the Heart, because it is the Heart that is able to see and evaluate all things in a true way. We can never do this with our minds. Our minds see things according to the needs of our egos—to protect, justify and support the false self that we have created according to the dictates of our lives and culture. The Heart wants us to see the big picture that we are all a part of, to connect with all the loving energies of the Universe and to feel at one with everyone and everything.

Q: How do you open the Heart?

DR. LU. You have to empty your mind. Ideally, the Heart and mind should function harmoniously; the Heart should lead and the mind should follow. But because of human nature, this is seldom the case. Only the Heart knows the true nature of life; only the Heart can “be” in the present moment. The mind relies on past experiences to interpret the present, and worries about the future based on the past. Only the guidance of the Heart can focus the mind on the present moment.

Often we can’t accept the present moment because of anger, fear, and disappointment over our present situation. Everyone today wants something that he or she doesn’t have. When you want something too much and

you don't get it, you're let down and disappointed. We believe that if the Universe wants something for you, it will happen. If you don't get it, it means you're not ready. Having the attitude, "My Heart is in the right place; whatever happens is for the best," opens us to the flow of life. However, this type of attitude requires a change in the mind. Many people think that the postures are the most important part of Qigong. This is not true. The major task is to empty the mind and to try to see things in a different way. This the short cut. You can build the required energy level from your practice of the Qigong postures, but if there are blocks in your Heart and mind, you will never be able to progress. After a few years, most students have reached the energy requirements needed to maintain good health, but that is not the ultimate goal. To progress further, you have to change your Heart.

Q: How does practicing Qigong help maintain good health?

DR. LU. Qigong builds up your Qi so that you are not left in an energy deficit situation. Think of it as a bank. Just living depletes your Qi, or vital energy, so you need to keep building it up so that you are not left with insufficient energy. The more and the deeper your practice, the better your Qi reserves.

Most Westerners today accept the idea of acupuncture and it is used quite frequently. Needles and herbs can treat the symptoms, but even they cannot truly fix the knee. When you add Qigong, you discover your own healing power, and then you are mentally and emotionally free. It is difficult because life is unbalanced and there are so many areas that require you to spend additional energy of all kinds—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Whatever energy reserves you can gain with 20 minutes of daily practice, you have a lot of places you have to spend that energy. It's a high interest rate.

Q: Especially in New York.

DR. LU. Yes! If you lived on the side of a mountain in nature it would be so much easier. Everyone in New York is a little crazy.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about the center you founded in New York?

DR. LU. I started 15 years ago in Chinatown. I taught whole body medicine, how people can heal themselves. Only energy can help you connect to everything else, which, of course, is also energy. $E=mc^2$. Think about the concept.

Q: It is a hard sell?

DR. LU. Yes, most people want the easy fix—you're the practitioner; you do it for me. They don't want to do it themselves.

Q: Can practitioners of traditional Western medicine begin to incorporate Qigong into their practice?

DR. LU. Yes. Qigong has the ability to help patients reach more effective levels of healing. Through Qigong practice, the patient's body, mind, and spirit become one and then take charge of the healing process. Eastern or Western medicine relies on the patient's body response. The best results come from a relaxed body and a peaceful mind. That's the first requirement. If Western practitioners can teach their patients to do this in their daily lives, then even if they take Western medications, they will have better results, because the patient's body is participating in the healing process. ■

NAN LU, OMD, is a classically trained doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and a NY state-licensed acupuncturist. Possessing a gift of cross-cultural communication, he is asked to speak frequently at leading mind-body-spirit forums, such as the Association for Comprehensive Energy Psychology, Integrative Healthcare Symposium, and National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine. He is also the creator of several self-healing programs based on *Wu Ming* Qigong. His work involves partnering with doctors of Western medicine using a preventive and complementary approach. In 1995, he founded the Traditional Chinese Medicine World Foundation (www.tcmworld.org), the only center of its kind teaching *Wu Ming* Qigong in the US. Dr. Lu's specialties include women's health, cancer, immune system disorders, and stress management. His Foundation's mission is to "build bridges of understanding between East and West in the areas of the role of consciousness in healing, traditional Chinese medicine, natural healing, and internal martial arts.

Dr. Lu is the founder of *Building Bridges of Integration for Traditional Chinese Medicine*, a landmark conference for healthcare professionals and serious health seekers. He has served as an advisor to the Rosenthal Center for Alternative and Complementary Medicine at Columbia University, College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. Dr. Lu has been featured in *Newsweek* (special issue on alternative medicine) and was featured in the PBS documentary *Harmony and Spirit: Chinese Americans in New York*. For more information, please visit www.taoofofhealing.org