



Five cases of depleted **yin**

By Nghia Thanh Tran

Traditional Chinese medicine has turned a big corner in the last century. Such was the turn that now we can barely see the road behind. Personal experiences handed down through generations have been wiped out by China's whirlwind cultural revolution, while new practitioners have only a very limited number of ancient textbooks to resource.

ON A POSITIVE note, Westerners are becoming increasingly interested in TCM, and information is becoming increasingly available. The original method of transferring experience from master to disciple has been replaced by hundreds of textbooks written in English. Unfortunately, these textbooks have all evolved from the same few ancient works, and subsequently, as a student once remarked to me, "all TCM books are the same". We continue to see translations of the same classics, but very few are based upon the experiences of present practitioners addressing the TCM patterns of the current time.

In my opinion, TCM is no different from any other Chinese art: simple in theory, yet requiring extensive practical experience. Perhaps this is why TCM was traditionally conveyed by master to apprentice. Perhaps the current TCM curriculum should have a larger practical component.

I remember reading a quote from Ante Babic in *The Lantern*. In writing about practising TCM, he wrote: "I think, therefore I am wrong."¹ This is so true, and I believe that serious TCM practitioners think the same way about the importance of intuition in TCM. Intuition is not scientific, it is not measurable, not tangible and can't be taught. Practitioners require constant self-cultivation to achieve it, and long-term practice is part of that cultivation.

The health problems of today reflect the stressful way we live. We work longer hours and in more stressful occupations than previous generations, and our children work even harder than we do. Excessive work without adequate rest leads to yin depletion, and this, I believe, is one of the main TCM patterns of the modern world.

Therefore, I would like to share my experiences in treating cases of depleted yin. These cases will demonstrate how one TCM pattern – yin deficiency – can manifest in a variety of presentations.

Case 1: Muscle inflammation

A 33-year-old female was referred by an open-minded GP. The patient was a registered nurse with three children, aged between four and 12 from two separate marriages. Her build was petite, and she spoke with a gentle but firm voice. When she arrived at my clinic it was obvious that

walking caused her pain. She presented with a red, swollen and painful left lower leg that was hot and tender. I noticed the heat was more intense at several spots under which I could palpate hard subcutaneous nodules.

This was the third time that this patient had developed this illness. The first time was after giving birth four years earlier. The second was after she changed her contraceptive pill one year ago. The current presentation began eight weeks ago after she recovered from severe influenza. The first two occurrences were successfully treated by Western medicine. This time, however, multiple anti-inflammatory medications had failed. The pain had worsened and was so severe that it disturbed her sleep.

She complained of constant fatigue requiring an afternoon nap. She also complained of a dry throat and a bitter taste each morning. She was on the contraceptive pill but still her period was heavy and very painful. Her bowel movements were not regular, often being constipated for many days. Her appetite was normal and she felt a slight fever on occasion.

I explained that her leg pain was a manifestation of an imbalance in her body. I find fuller explanations help my patients feel more comfortable, increasing their trust in TCM.

On examination, her pulse felt like a fine thread at *cun*, *guan* and *chi*, but could only be felt at a deep level that vanished with minimal pressure. Her tongue was pale and slightly red at the edges without coating. Her eyes appeared tired with several small red capillaries in her sclera. I could feel her forehead was warmer than normal as I examined her eyes; her breath had no odour.

The history and examination was consistent with an empty heat condition resulting from yin deficiency. I prescribed a herbal formula based on the classic *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia Pill). I added *Jin Yin Hua* (Lonicerae Flos), *Pu Gong Ying* (Taraxaci Herba) and *Zi Hua Di Ding* (Violae Herba) to resolve toxic heat, and *Gou Qi Zi* (Lycii Fructus) and *Ju Hua* (Chrysanthemi Flos) to calm the Liver. She took the herbs three times a day for 10 days. I also prescribed *Da Huang* (Rhubarb Root and Rhizome) cream for external

application to draw out excess heat in the affected area. With acupuncture, I used *Quchi* L.I.-11 and *Xuehai* SP-10 bilaterally to resolve toxic heat, *Taixi* KI-3 bilaterally to strengthen yin and *Yanglingquan* GB-34, *Jiexi* ST-41, *Neiting* ST-44 on her left side to promote qi and blood circulation.

I saw her nine days later. Her leg had gotten better within a few days, but then worsened. The nodules were less painful and hot, but two new nodules appeared close to the knee below the *Yanglingquan* GB-34 area. I noticed the skin on her leg had begun peeling and several red dots had appeared randomly. I modified the herbal formula to increase the dosage of the toxic heat clearing herbs and again used *Quchi* L.I.-11 and *Xuehai* SP-10 for clearing heat and *Taixi* KI-3 to strengthen yin. I gave her a different cream, which I call “trauma cream”² for external application to resolve qi and blood stagnation and promote healing.

She came back three days later. Her leg looked a lot better, less swollen and hot. The pain was reduced and there were no new lumps. She told me that she had stopped taking analgesic medication, and came back to see me early because she thought the acupuncture was helping. I gave the same acupuncture treatment with an addition of *guasha* and cupping along the Bladder meridian of her back.

I continued seeing her every three days for the next three visits. Her leg got better after every treatment until the third time when she complained of myalgia and fever. Her pulse was faster and appeared more superficial. Several new nodules appeared closer to the knee. I removed *Pu Gong Ying* (Taraxaci Herba) and *Zi Hua Di Ding* (Violae Herba), and added *Lian Qiao* (Forsythiae Fructus) and *Fang Feng* (Saposhnikovia Radix) to deal with the exterior wind-heat. I repeated the same acupuncture treatment.

Four days later her leg was almost normal. I could only locate the nodules by palpation; they were small and hard but painless. I suggested she continue using the trauma cream, and prescribed *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia Pill) for oral intake. I reminded her that this would be a long process.

Six weeks after her initial visit her condition was eliminated.

■ Nghia Thanh Tran learnt Chinese medicine in Vietnam, where he lived and trained daily with a monk, and became familiar with herbal formulas and acupuncture methods. He also learnt the Taoist treatment methods and way of living. He continued his Chinese medicine apprenticeship in Saigon with another practitioner, and practised for several years until South Vietnam was taken over in 1975. Tran later completed formal studies at the Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine and now practises in Melbourne.

Case 2: Menopausal symptoms

This woman, 51, had first seen me three years previously with a wind-cold headache. Coming from a Greek family she was short in stature and full of energy, a vibrant and happy person. I often sat and listened to her life stories for 20 minutes each time we met. This time was no exception. She almost forgot the reason she came to see me.

She reported that her period did not come last month. This was unusual as her period was as regular as clockwork. She had also experienced some hot flushes and night sweating. One problem that bothered her most was a lack of sleep; either she found it difficult to fall asleep or was wide awake at a very early hour. She was also concerned about her libido, which was low, with vaginal dryness and painful intercourse. She worried that it could affect her marriage. Additionally, she had recently developed a short temper and her moods changed rapidly, which was unlike her.

She still had her usual vibrant voice, but under her bright smiling face I could see a tiredness due to sleepless nights. Her tongue was short with slight teeth marks on the edge, no coating and slightly dry. Her pulses were full and slightly tight at the *guan* and *cun* position, and the *cun* pulse disappeared at the deep level.

I explained to her that she had a depleted yin condition: “When yin drops down to a certain level it will lose its function to control yang, which then flares up causing hot flushes every so often.”

“Why do some people get hot flushes and some don’t?” she asked. I ran through a quick course in yin and yang for her. “Kidney energy is the one that keep us living. It gradually depletes as we get older. If we live a balanced life, then both the yin and yang parts of the Kidney will deplete evenly and menopausal symptoms do not exist. When we over work and do not spend enough time resting, then yin depletes more than yang, which results in your condition”. She was a very practical person so she did not stop there as most of my patients do. She continued, “How do we fix it, Tran?”

I suggested she should consider changing her lifestyle, such as learning Tai Chi or yoga, having a 15-minute compulsory rest

every day, and introducing more yin foods in her diet such as soy products.

I used *gua sha* and cupping along the Bladder meridian on her back, acupuncture at *Taixi* KI-3, and prescribed two weeks of *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* (Anemarrhena, Phellodendron, and Rehmannia Pill), which consists of *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia Pill) plus *Huang Bai* (Phellodendri Cortex) and *Zhi Mu* (Anemarrhenae Rhizoma).

She returned to the clinic two weeks later with a smile. She told me that she enrolled in a Tai Chi class and really enjoyed it, had started to eat more tofu and drink soy milk. All her symptoms were better, from hot flushes to mood swings. She was especially happy to have her sleep back, and most of all her libido back to normal.

Case 3: Chronic psoriasis

This patient was a 76-year-old retired widow, who used to work as a medical receptionist for a surgeon. She came to the clinic with a very sceptical mind. “A very close friend of mine said that you can help me”, she said reservedly. She showed me her palms and wrists, which were almost fully covered with raised red patches. She did not show me, but I noticed, the rashes on her neck despite her high collared shirt covering most of them. She informed me that she had some trouble in life seven years previously which started the psoriasis. I discovered later that her husband died at that time. I spent 45 minutes explaining to her how TCM understands her case. “These rashes come from an imbalance of the internal situation. Applying external medication can only relieve them for a while. It will come back if we do not treat the internal,” I said.

She did not want acupuncture, as she did not believe it would help. I focused on getting her trust by explaining what she could do to help herself. We had a discussion about diet and lifestyle. I gave her recipes on how to cook cabbage soup to cool down the blood, and also explained how some nuts, chocolate, alcohol and spicy foods could generate internal heat and contribute to her problem.

Finally I got to feel her pulse. As expected

Jing Fang in modern practice

By Michael Max

Walk into any reasonably sized bookstore in China and you will find shelves full of the experience of Chinese medicine doctors. Case studies are the bones and blood of furthering one’s skill as a doctor. We all gain a foundation, a skeletal structure from our textbooks and first years in medical school. But it is the actual application, the use and practice of medicine, that allows us to distill meaning from our experience.

Here in the West we have plenty of books rich in theory and heavy with fundamentals; we all need a foundation from which to work.

But to really understand how medicine unfolds in the clinic, how to engage the conversation between patient and practitioner, connect the dots between symptom and treatment, and navigate between knowing and discovering, it is within the case study literature where we really see medicine come alive.

This book seeks to bring into focus the use of the classic formulas of the *Shang Han Lun* and *Jin Gui Yao Lue* in modern practice.

This is an invitation to contribute to a diamond-faceted look at the clinical application of the classic formulas, an opportunity to contribute a more multi-dimensional view of those formulas in modern clinical use.

As well, it is an opportunity to add to the discussion that has been going on for 1800 years about how to help our patients with these often simple but effective formulas.

If you would like to submit a case study for review and inclusion, please write to me at michael@classicformulas.com. I will send you a submission package with further details.

An update on herb farming

By **Brian May**

The collaboration between the City of Whittlesea, RMIT and farmers continues to research the production of Chinese herbs in Victoria. Some 20 different herbs are being grown on three farms and some have produced harvests the excess of which we have been selling to practitioners.

Some of these are available for sale to practitioners (see table). Others require more growth time.

We believe the quality of these herbs is well above the imported product. We have tested the herbs using HPLC and/or GCMS and compared the local produce with samples from the herb market. We found that our herbs had higher concentrations of phytochemicals.

They are also fresher and contain less low-grade material such as stems and dead leaf. For example, comparing our *Yi Mu Cao* with the imported product, we include leaf, tops and soft stem but no woody stem. There is very little phytochemical in the woody stem, so this part is not much use in a formula but it weighs a lot. So the imported product may appear cheaper but you are not getting the same thing.

Another factor in quality is the drying method. If the plant is dried in the sun, the overall quality is damaged by the sunlight. Drying in the shade allows the best preservation of the herb so the overall quality is better. Also, our herbs are not sprayed with agricultural chemicals or fumigated for preservation.

<i>Huo Xiang</i>	Available (dried)
<i>Yi Mu Cao</i>	Available (dried)
<i>Qing Hao</i>	Available (dried)
<i>Jing Jie</i>	Available (dried)
<i>Yu Xing Cao</i>	Available (dried)
<i>Xian He Cao</i>	On request (dried)
<i>Bian Xu</i>	On request (dried)

Now in the field are *Jie Geng*, *Dan Shen*, *Shan Yao* and *Gou Qi Zi*.

Details: whittleherbs@yahoo.com.au

from my experience with many psoriasis patients, it was very deep and fine in all positions. She told me she used 20ml of aloe vera on her skin every day. Her appetite, bowel movements and sleep were all normal.

Judging from her age and petite build, I had no doubt that this was a case of deficiency, even though her condition looked so excessive. "This is a difficult case" I said to myself. The difficulty was not how to treat her condition but how to build her trust. TCM does not work the same as Western medicine, where a treatment is a treatment regardless of whether the patient believes it or not. In TCM the treatment does not end when the patient walks out of the clinic. Rather it is just the beginning, requiring the patient to adhere to dietary advice, and in some cases lifestyle changes.

I told her my family story growing up in a TCM tradition with Western education. From a very young age I was told that certain food could cause excess heat internally. She seemed very interested in life from a different culture as she told me of her interest in Aboriginal arts. From that moment I knew I had her trust, and thus believed that I could fix her condition. I did not want to use anything too extreme in her first visit. A herbal drink did pop into my mind, which my Dad often made us drink any time we ate too much mango, nuts or curry. It was a simple drink of three common herbs: *Sheng Di* 9g (*Rehmanniae Radix*), *Xia Ku Cao* 6g (*Prunellae Spica*) and *Gan Cao* 3g (*Glycyrrhizae Radix*).³ She promised that she would drink the herbs and try some cabbage soup.

I saw her two weeks later with a smile on her face, as her condition had improved a little. This time she confessed that she had not slept well in the seven years since her husband died and had to rely on drugs to sleep. She was happy to try acupuncture this time. I used the standard four-point combination to clear blood-heat: *Quchi* L.I-11 and *Xuehai* SP-10 bilaterally. I prescribed a herbal formula based on *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia Pill) with the addition of *Gou Qi Zi* (*Lycii Fructus*), *Ju Hua* (*Chrysanthemi Flos*), *He Shou Wu* (*Polygoni multiplori Radix preparata*) and *Fang Feng* (*Saposhnikoviae Radix*).

She continued seeing me every two weeks for five months. I kept the same acupuncture treatment and modified the herbal medication, removing *Fang Feng* (*Saposhnikoviae Radix*) if the itch was relieved or *Ju Hua* (*Chrysanthemi Flos*) if there were no heat symptoms. I alternated *He Shou Wu* (*Polygoni multiplori Radix preparata*) and *Dang Gui* (*Angelica sinensis Radix*) as a blood tonic. The psoriasis was completely cured after six months.

She came back and saw me three years later for knee pain. Her psoriasis had never reappeared.

Case 4: Alopecia

This patient was a girl, six years old, one of identical twins in a set of triplets, the result of IVF. She walked into the clinic holding her mum's hand and appearing hesitant. Her mum explained that she had several bald patches on her head: one big patch at the back and three small patches on the top. The hair had suddenly fallen out in clumps several months ago. They had been to the Western doctor but the hair did not grow back and new patches kept appearing. The next step would be steroid injections into the scalp to promote hair growth, which is quite a trauma for a little girl.

She appeared quite small for her age. I talked to her as she sat on her mum's knees about school and her favourite friend. She seemed like a happy confident young girl who loved school and enjoyed the company of her friends. I noticed her hair wasn't shining, but rather had a dull texture. After a few more questions I got a smile from her, so I took an opportunity to look at her hands and feel her pulse. There was no dark blue vein on her index finger. Her pulse was slightly fast with a touch of wiriness. Her mum informed me that her appetite had been poor. On examination of her bald patches I noticed her scalp was slightly dry. The bald patch at the back of the head was the biggest of the four, about the size of a 50-cent piece. I noticed a new patch further to the back about to form.

I explained to her mum about yin and yang. In her case the Kidney yin was weak so it could not nourish the hair properly. It also influenced the Liver and the Spleen

which resulted in lost appetite. The imbalance was congenital and possibly the result of being a triplet. I reassured her that young children often respond to TCM treatment very well.

I prescribed *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia) herbal formula plus *Gou Qi Zi* (Lycii Fructus), *Ju Hua* (Chrysanthemi Flos) to calm the Liver, and *He Shou Wu* (Polygoni multiplori Radix preparata) to increase the hair nourishing function.

I saw her every two weeks. Her hair continued to grow back slowly without any new patches appearing. Her appetite came back within two weeks. I prescribed the same herbs for the next two months.

After two and a half months her hair grew back fully and looked shiny and vibrant. I saw her six months later after she asked her mum to bring her to see me because she had a cold. Her hair was still full and shining.

Case 5: Chronic migraine

This man, 30, an electrician, came to see me after a series of migraines, which could last up to six weeks at a time. This had been happening on and off for 12 years. He had tried many different drugs but the condition had not improved. His episodes were often triggered by long working hours, from which he could not wind down, especially when he worked nightshifts. Every so often, though, he had a good break, which could last up to 18 months without a headache.

He was right in the middle of a migraine episode on his first visit. The pain was extremely intense behind his left eye. He said it started at 1 am that night. Noise and light did not bother him much. His pulses were weak and slightly wiry. His tongue was pale with teeth marks around the edges.

I explained to him his condition was the result of an imbalance of yin and yang. Yang is active, raising and working while yin is passive, sinking and resting. When we live according to nature, as in settling down and going to sleep when the sun sets, and getting up when the sun rises, then yin and yang stay balanced. When we balance our work and rest our yin and yang are balanced. If we stay awake and active past midnight

then yin will be injured. If we stay in bed after midday then yang will also be injured. In his situation, he wasn't only awake past midnight, but also was working, which depleted his yin, leading to migraines and headaches. I suggested to him not to drink alcohol or eat too much spicy foods, as they would increase his problem.

I prescribed *Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* (Six Flavours Rehmannia Pill) plus *Gou Qi Zi* (Lycii Fructus) and *Ju Hua* (Chrysanthemi Flos) to calm the Liver. I needled *Fengchi* GB-20 and *Taichong* LIV-3 bilaterally to subdue Liver wind, *Taixi* KID-3 bilaterally to nourish yin, and *Sizhukong* SJ-23 on the left side for the pain behind the eye.

He returned a month later, reporting that the migraine had diminished about an hour after the last visit and had not come back until today. He confessed that it was due to extra work he had to do the night before. This time the migraine was not as severe as that of a month ago: he rated it as three out of five. I prescribed the same herbal formula and acupuncture treatment.

I saw him again a year later. He had no recurrence but wanted some herbs because he was about to start a nightshift. It was such a pleasure to find a patient that used TCM the way it should be used – as preventative medicine.

Author's notes

In all five cases, the signs and symptoms presented themselves as a known TCM pattern, yin deficiency, and were clear enough to base a treatment on.

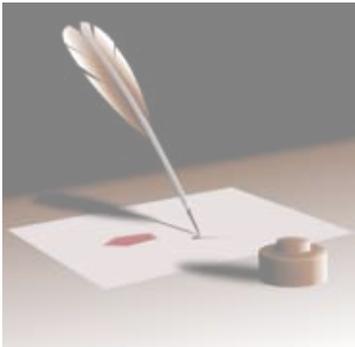
The herbal usages and acupuncture treatments in my case studies are simple. I do not think we need to complicate TCM treatment to make it more effective. Herb dosages are standard as in classical formulas. All herbs were prescribed as granules unless referred to as herbal drinks.

It should go without saying that in these cases I am treating the patient, not the condition, be it “muscle inflammation”, “menopause”, “psoriasis”, “alopecia” or “migraine”. These cases are all on a background of depleted yin, and by treating that basic imbalance, whatever “condition” they may have can be at least improved and sometimes, as we have seen, cured.

Endnotes

1. Ante Babic (2008), *The Lantern*, Vol. 5 No. 2, p. 44.
2. Trauma cream consists of *Dang Gui* (Angelicae sinensis Radix), *Ru Xiang* (Olibanum), *Mo Yao* (Myrrhae), *Tao Ren* (Persicae Semen), *Hong Hua* (Carthami Flos), *Yan Hu Suo* (Corydalis Rhizoma), *Chi Shao* (Paeoniae Radix rubra), *Mu Dan Pi* (Moutan Cortex).
3. Put three herbs in a pot with four litres of water and soak for half an hour then boil it for 15 minutes. Pour the water into a separate container to keep. Add two more litres of water and boil again for 15 minutes. Pour the water into the container mixing with the previous lot and discard the herbs. Keep the water in the fridge and drink four to five glasses a day.

蜀諸葛亮誠子曰：	In Shu [today's Sichuan] Zhuge Liang advised his son [by letter]: ⁵
夫君子之行，靜以修身， 儉以養德。	The practice of a cultivated man is to refine the self by quietude, and develop virtue by frugality.
非寧靜無以致遠。 非澹泊無以明志。	Without serenity, there is no way to get far. Without detachment, there is no way to clarify the will;
夫學須靜也； 才須學也。	If you wish to learn, you must be serene; to become accomplished, you must study.
非學無以廣才； 非志無以成學。	Without study, you will not broaden your abilities; without strength of will, you will not attain knowledge.
慆慢則不能勵精 險躁則不能治性	If you are arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence. If you are impetuous and impulsive, you cannot govern your nature.
年與時馳。意與歲去。 遂成枯落。悲歎窮慮。 將復何及。	The years run off with the hours, aspirations flee with the years. Eventually one ages and collapses. What good will it do to lament over poverty?



Nan Huai-Chin discusses Zhuge Liang's **Letter to my Son**

Excerpted from the book *Chan yu Shengming de Renshi* (Understanding Chan and Life)¹ – a transcription of a series of lectures delivered at Taihu Great Learning Centre in 2006.

Translated by Steven Clavey

MASTER NAN HUAI-CHIN is a very influential author of books in Chinese and English. While most of his works remain in Chinese, several excellent ones have been translated into English, notably by J.C. Cleary. Master Nan is unusual in being thoroughly versed in the schools of Vajrayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Chan Buddhism, and thus able to express realisations in a wide variety of ways, not encumbered by sectarian limitations.²

Zhuge Liang was a famous strategist at the end of the Han dynasty, as China entered

the period of the Warring States. Portrayed as one of the prominent and colourful characters in *San Guo Yan Yi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)³ Zhuge is the ideal of Confucian statesmanship. Yet, at the same time, he is spoken of quite seriously as a Daoist Celestial who chose to return to the world of men to assist the re-ordering of a chaotic world.⁴

Nan Huai-Chin introduces the discussion

If you want to learn refinement, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism or Zen are all equally valuable. Remember, if you can return to normal life after this half hour and maintain the spirit and energy we had here, then you are truly talking learning and refinement.

[The first lines of Confucius' *Da Xue* – *The Highest Order of Cultivation* – say:]

“The Way of self-cultivation, at its highest level, is a three-fold path:

it lies in causing the light of one’s inner moral force to shine forth,
in bringing the people to a state of renewal,
and in coming to rest in the fullest attainment of the good.

“Only when one comes to understand this point of rest can one reach a state of unwavering stability.

Having reached this unwavering state, one can then enjoy an unruffled quietude;
having attained this state of quietude, one can then achieve an inner calm;
once one has achieved this inner calm, one is then in a position to exercise one’s capacity to deliberate clearly.

“And it is the capacity of deliberation that provides the basis for all moral attainment.

“Just as all existing things have, by definition, both a fundamental core and peripheral aspects – their ‘roots’ and ‘branches’ – so too, all human affairs have their endings as well as their beginnings. To grasp fully the grounds for the proper sequential ordering of things, from first to last, is a precondition for coming closer to the Way.”⁶

The first step in this *Great Learning* is to teach sons, younger brothers and later generations that they should learn the skill of stopping in quietude.

Zhuge Liang’s famous letter

This is the reason that I have, for a number of decades, brought up Zhuge Liang’s *Jie Zi Shu*. Zhuge Liang is not a Daoist, he is completely a Confucian. The essence of his life of study and learning is in that letter to his son. As always, he himself was still at the front, leading the troops, and all of his instruction for his [seven-year-old] son is contained in one letter. How many times have I discussed this over the past decades! Who among you can completely recite the letter from memory?

The practice of a cultivated man is to refine the self by quietude and develop virtue by frugality.

Seeking for quietude is the refinement of self. Our present practice of meditation is

just to learn this *jing*: internal calm.

Without detachment, there is no way to clarify the will; without serenity, there is no way to get far.

This encapsulates the learning of Confucius, Buddha and the Dao.

If you wish to learn, you must be serene.

To seek for learning requires the practice of settled quiet, the study of serenity.

Zhuge Liang admonished his son: *To become accomplished, you must study.* Whatever you choose to do in life, whether it is business, or government, or anything, one will only have ability if one has searched out knowledge. His letter, his essay, is very simple; although the knowledge Zhuge Liang had gathered over his life was so vast, all we have left of it after two thousand years are the two memorials to the young emperor and this letter.

Everyone forgets, because his letter is so brief, and while he was so knowledgeable, he was so occupied dealing with affairs of state, that when he wrote this letter he could only write several simple clear sentences. But in those sentences there is a great deal of learning. *If you wish to learn, you must be serene, to become accomplished, you must study.* Your innate talents depend on study to bring them out from within.

Without study, you will not broaden your abilities.

You need to have a grasp of every type of learning, be it religion, philosophy, science, commerce, economics, finance, sociology or education, otherwise your talents will not reach their full expression.

Without strength of will, you will not attain knowledge.

In the search for knowledge, the first requirement is learning to be settled and quiet. Many of you have gained your PhDs, or studied overseas and returned, but your state of mind is not even a little bit calm, and thus your knowledge is not great. I am talking to you young people—who actually are now over middle-age—all of you great professors, renowned doctors, all of you are my old students, and I am scolding you. I am invariably polite to outsiders. But now I am reproaching you among my old students: pay attention to the line that says *if you are arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence.* Several decades now you have been slothful, not exerting yourselves,



Many of you have gained your PhDs, or studied overseas and returned, but your state of mind is not even a little bit calm, and thus your knowledge is not great...



If you want to achieve great things, there is a certain method to be followed, you can't just flippantly play around and think you're clever.

too much empty talk, too many banquets, too much bragging. Lazy, disrespectful, haughty and full of yourselves: you achieve a little and think it is fantastic: *arrogant and lazy, you will not achieve excellence.*

This letter I have memorised since my teens, and have used all my life. When I was at the military college for officers, everyone was strictly required to memorise this letter before being allowed to lead troops. If you regard every word as gold, it has great power.

If you are impetuous and impulsive, you cannot govern your nature.

What is *impetuous*? Lack of patience, looking for the easy way all the time, you hear something and automatically assume you understand, taking risks, flighty and rash, not at all stable and peaceful, and utterly unrefined. Zhuge Liang warned his son to take care not to be this way.

Impulsiveness likewise prevents an ordering of your nature, and will make you unable to learn how to clear your mind and perceive your essence. The refinement of the mind cannot be accomplished by craft, or rashly; if you want to achieve great things, there is a certain method to be followed, you can't just flippantly play around and think you're clever. The word *impulsive* in Chinese has a *foot* radical, implying jumpiness or flightiness.

What he is saying to his son are crucial aspects of education and cultivation.

The years run off with the hours. Time flies, and we age; time is like a wild horse, hard to catch and hard to hold. *Aspirations flee with the years.* All of the hopes and dreams of our lives, our intentions, our will, all age with us; we get old and lose our courage. *Eventually one ages and collapses.* He directs his son to study well, because he will be old before he knows it, like a dried up leaf soon to fall. *What good will it do to lament over poverty?* Once you are old, looking back in regret, it is too late, there is no road left to travel.

There is a Tang poem that has the line *youth and strength not exerted lead to old age spent in vain sorrow.* This is based on the same concept. When I taught in university, the central military college, the very first assignment for the very first class would

always be for the students to memorise this letter. It expresses the aim and goal of Confucian and Daoist education in Chinese culture. I can still recite it perfectly for you now, all of you who call me *Teacher*, but who among you, men, women, young or old, can do it?

I never imagined that the whole class would come up with a great big “zero”! I have mentioned this many times in my books, you know. Go, and memorise it!

Endnotes

1. Nan Huai-Qin, 2009, *Chan yu Shengming de Renshi Chujiang* (禅与生命的认知初讲, Understanding Chan and Life, first lectures). Beijing: Dongfang Publishing. A transcription of a series of lectures delivered at Taihu Hall of Great Learning in 2006.
2. This ability is greatly welcomed in a world where sectarian differences are emphasised. Over 20 million of his books have been sold in a variety of languages. Nan, like Liu Yi-Ming and many Daoist and Buddhist authors, strongly emphasises the idea that “The Three Religions are One”, referring to Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.
3. A book well worth reading. One of my Malaysian Chinese classmates at language school in Taiwan was there only because his father insisted that he learn Chinese so that he could read this book before going into business.
4. Lin Tung-Chi. 1947. “The Chinese Mind: its Taoist Substratum.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 8:3, pp. 259-272. Also T. Cleary points out many instances of Zhuge's direct quotes from the *Dao De Jing* and other Daoist works, and concludes: “as this testament shows, there is a strong undercurrent of Taoist thought in Zhuge Liang's attitudes toward life and work.” (*Mastering the Art of War: Way of the General*). Thus when Master Nan declares that Zhuge Liang is not a Daoist, he is thoroughly a Confucian, he is simply emphasising a certain point of view important for the context of his lecture.
5. Translation of the following lines of Zhuge Liang's letter to his son is based upon that of Thomas Cleary in his *Mastering the Art of War*.
6. Translation from Andrew Plaks, 2003, *Ta Hsueh and Chung Yung* (The Highest Order of Cultivation and the Practice of the Mean), Penguin Classics, London.