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Cover

This image, entitled *Eye Medicine*, is from an anonymous painter of the Song dynasty.

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Photographs by Davina Martin

Ah! A traditionalist...

By Steven Clavey

AT OUR HERB PHARMACY, we use traditional scales when we weigh out the herbs for a prescription. Patients waiting and watching assume it is for the spectacle, which is not untrue, but the basic reason is more important: the traditional scales are faster and more convenient. They are lightweight, designed to be carried, and with the moveable fulcrum the desired weight can be rapidly set; you can have several of them going at once, and fill a prescription twice as quickly as you could with the fixed-fulcrum Western scales. It is a bit like Chinese medicine itself: everything good nowadays is up-to-date and shiny and modern, so a lot of people think it would be nice to throw out that old medicine and just keep the new one ... if only that old one wasn't so darn useful.

The thought occurs however that we are in fact more than useful, we are crucial: as rep-

resentatives of a type of thinking that is desperately needed in order to balance attitudes and assumptions that have led human society to catastrophic levels of consumption and waste. Interestingly, these attitudes are rather new in human history, but have demonstrated their destructiveness in an unprecedentedly short time — less than three or four human lifetimes. I am speaking of course of certain ideas and values that have driven the West to consider unlimited expansion, production, consumption and discard as a survivable strategy. Linked to greed and short-term vision, those ideas and values appeal to the worst in human nature; coupled with a loss of the discipline and restraint previously developed in traditional societies, they have spread around the globe.

Most traditional societies have (or had, until seduced) a longer term view, a feeling for balance, and a more realistic view of their own precariousness. We in TCM are crucial because, as Westerners, we are no longer daz-



The Lantern is a journal of Chinese medicine and its related fields, with an emphasis on the traditional view and its relevance to clinic. Our aim is to encourage access to the vast resources in this tradition of preserving, maintaining and restoring health, whether this be via translations of works of past centuries or observations from our own generation working with these techniques, with their undeniable variability. The techniques are many, but the traditional perspective of the human as an integral part, indeed a reflection, of the social, meteorological and cosmic matrix remains one. We wish to foster that view.

zled and tempted (so much) by the glitter of modern science and technology; at the same time, we have learned via our own experience that the traditional disciplines are indeed useful in a practical sense. Like our functionally superior herb scales, those disciplines are based on a world view that values balance, harmony, restraint, and calm:

To fill until bursting is not as good as stopping; an edge sharpened to razor thin never lasts; gold and jade to the rafters soon disappears; the rich and famous bring about their own downfall.

When your work is done, step back into the shadows: that is the way of heaven.

– Lao Zi chapter 9

We can exemplify those values in our own work and life, gently re-introduce them to our patients, and do what we can to ameliorate the excesses in our local milieu. Readings in the philosophy that underpins the world-view in Chinese medicine not only help clarify those values to ourselves and those around us, but also are helpful clinically. *Lao Zi* is so fundamental: simple to read (even in Chinese) and yet of profound depth.

It is not that the West does not have, or did not have, any balancing factors. Science, for example, used to mean the disciplined search for knowledge for its own sake. Now, we no longer measure in order to *know*, but in order to *control*. As the thirst for “progress” became less restrained, and more male, dominating and destructive, pure science has become less visible than industrial science, and inevitably linked to money. This, as an attitude, has filtered all the way through the society: “So what are you studying at university? What?! What kind of a job can you get with *that*!?”

Study and learning are valued only for the financial reward at the end.

And how about motherhood? (Since this issue of *The Lantern* is pregnant with articles on gynaecology!) The traditional domain of Earth, of **Being**, which accepts seed without fuss, and quietly nourishes that seed within itself until it swells, bursts its shell, and grows, reaching upward and outward from its yin-natured womb towards the yang realm of brightness, **Doing**, and action. The *Yi Jing* says *yang initiates, yin completes*—and so the cycle goes around again.

This is all changed, now. You cannot **Be** a mother. Nobody questions the idea, now, that you have to **Do** it: you have to *do* temperature measurement, you have to *do* the cervical mucus dip-sticks, *do* urine and blood tests,

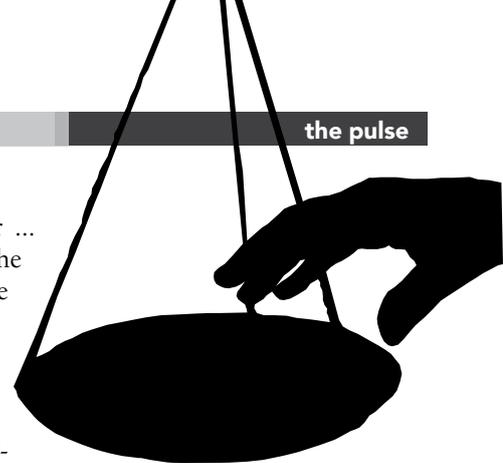
plan intercourse down to the last hour ... you have to be in control and dominate the process. You have to grab Nature by the throat and *wring* this pregnancy out of it, and if that does not work, you are obviously not trying hard enough.

This very male attitude, this “dominate nature” Western industrial-scientific approach that has been pushed onto women, desperately needs balance: a reminder that there are other ways to *be* in this world than having to control and dominate, ways that make you less of a subject, less of an object, and more of a treasured and supported part of a whole. Is “treasured” an anthropomorphism here? No, and for this reason: why the intense urge to procreate? We are designed for this, among other things, and are given deep and extensive resources that foster this function.

What we can bring to our patients is an understanding that attempting to *control* usually has the result of blocking the action of many of these resources. Here is a possible example: it is not unlikely that pheromones are released at times when a woman could become pregnant, and these pheromones act subtly upon both the woman and the man to encourage sexual attraction and a harmonious, loving intercourse at just the right time for conception to occur. And what if that time is not limited to the current bio-medical understanding of “the right time”? Contrast that idea with the mechanical, anxiety-driven, “might miss the time!” sex-by-the-numbers approach apparently insisted upon by every expert and their book. Of course, such an attitude completely negates any subtle help the body tries to give.

Much better is assisting patients towards a cultivated relaxation and a sense of basic trust: a trust that the universe *does* want them to fall pregnant (or recover from their illness, or otherwise flourish) and that their best course of action is to grow more sensitive to, and harmonise with, the subtle rhythms and flows of nature, to fit in harmoniously so that its currents strengthen and enhance them. We may come to find that what is best for an individual mother is also the best course for species survival as well.

Yang as action, yin as completion — we cannot just have yang action and not take the feedback: yin’s reaction to the yang action. We cannot play against Mother Nature in this game of survival, because if we try—despite our hyper-inflated view of our own importance—we can and will be swatted out of existence, like the proverbial fly.



You have to be in control and dominate the process. You have to grab Nature by the throat and wring this pregnancy out of it ...

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