

Tomorrow Zlata's journey: from Sarajevo to Dublin

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LifeFeatures



Treating the 'myth of illness'

There are no incurable diseases, only incurable people, Chinese herbologist Jeffrey Yuen tells Arminta Wallace

Humanity's attitude to healing is startlingly ambivalent. We're fond of a quick fix, but suspicious of people who describe themselves as "healers". We cling to our prescription drugs of choice, even when tests suggest they're better avoided. Few of us - especially those who've spent any time in hospital recently - believe in miracles. Fewer still, despite the accumulated evidence of years of research from cognitive psychology and neuroscience, imagine that we can do anything much to heal ourselves.

Jeffrey Yuen, however, has no doubts

about the latter. And it might come as a surprise to many people that when he comes to Dublin to give a two-day workshop in Killiney on June 9th and 10th, the internationally acclaimed herbologist, acupuncturist and expert in t'ai chi chuan and chi kung will begin by exploring the topic of spiritual development for healers.

On the phone from his clinic in New York, Yuen is chirpy and articulate, his rapid, Chinese-inflected English peppered with the occasional blast of Noo Yawk. Why, I ask him, is the focus on spirit when he's primarily concerned with healing the body? "Well," he says, "the Chinese medical classics say that all diseases involve the spirit, so to heal them, you must go all the way down, or

up, to the spirit level. The problem then is that everyone tries to define 'spirit'. Which is a somewhat elusive concept. There are a lot of traditions that talk about 'spiritual growth' and 'spiritual development'. But the question is: what, exactly, are you trying to develop?"

One of the most basic ideas which needs to be teased out, Yuen explains, is the nature of the relationship between illness and its polar opposite, wellness. "First of all," he says, "we need to confront the myth of illness. We tend to construct a belief system around what a disease basically consists of; and then we buy into this belief. We expect that if we have this disease, then certain things should emerge from the disease process. So,

in a way, what we're really doing is validating the disease. In the healing process, on the other hand, what we need to do is validate how we feel when healing occurs."

Among his many other qualifications, Yuen is an ordained Daoist priest who defines "spirit" as, quite simply, freedom. "It's about a sense of liberating ourselves. If I focus on the disease, I'm not doing that. I'm really trying to find out who I am with this disease, rather than who I can become when the disease begins to heal."

This applies, he insists, even - perhaps especially - to life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, which often come with a large label marked "scary". Yuen specialises in the treatment of people with cancer, many of whom, he says, arrive on his doorstep in a state of shock.

"Think of the physiological process which someone undergoes when they're afraid," he says. "At a very acute level that's called anaphylactic shock - and you can die from that. So just imagine someone having this on a very slow scale. That means you could die from the fear of cancer rather than the cancer itself. If a person is not afraid, it will help them. Some people say this is a placebo effect - but even if it is placebo, it shows the power of the mind."

Which is, of course, precisely what conventional medicine, with its emphasis on physical-healing processes, tends to shy away from. "It should be something we seek to nurture," Yuen insists. "How do we change the mindset of someone who is ill? If you change the consciousness, you can change the condition."

YUEN TAKES A RELAXED approach to the conventional/alternative debate, treating his clients with traditional Chinese medicine alongside their own medications if that's

what they feel most comfortable with. "It's not up to me to put down something they believe in," he says. "That doesn't help any patient. Healing is about having faith in what you're doing, regardless of what someone else may or may not believe."

How does being a Daoist priest fit into the equation? It doesn't, it turns out. Rather, it is the equation. Yuen was taught the traditions of Daoism by his grandfather, Yu Wen, and had been ordained as a priest by his mid-teens. Students of Dao are trained in five major disciplines: religious rites and liturgies; Daoist literary classics; the healing arts; divination, which includes the I Ching; and cultivation practices, such as meditation. Each trainee shows a natural inclination towards one or more of these areas: Yuen gravitated towards healing. Or, as he puts it, "I just seem to draw a lot of people who need some advice about health and illness, and so that became my calling."

Though it may seem exotic and alien, he says Daoist philosophy is really very simple. "Everyone is familiar with the terms yin and yang, which are Daoist concepts. Once you define something as yin or yang, you automatically create its opposite because one implies the other - just as you can't have darkness without light or fullness without emptiness. But most people get so aligned to one side of the picture that they either refuse to see the other side, or they're not even aware of it."

Daoism uses a variety of methods, including t'ai chi chuan, meditation, visualisation, herbs and acupuncture, to help people find their own balance. And the results, if the lives of Daoist masters are anything to go by, can be impressive - Yuen's grandfather, for instance, lived to the ripe old age of 108. "The famous Daoist statement is that flowing water never decays," Yuen says. "This is the dynamic of life. So when you work

with an individual, you try to see what aspect of their lives has stopped - where they've become stuck. The pathways that help us to understand these movements are the acupuncture pathways." Hence the second day of his workshop will be devoted to the detailed study of acupuncture pathways, and the evolution of acupuncture over its 3,000-year history.

"Chinese medicine is really a collective term that refers to many traditions of the practice of medicine, all of which share common ideas and principles," Yuen explains. "But they can have very different approaches."

The situation has been further complicated by wholesale changes wrought in China at the time of the Cultural Revolution. So much of what we Westerners accept as "traditional" Chinese medicine is relatively modern, says Yuen, who prefers to describe himself as a "classical" practitioner. The distinctions will, no doubt, be teased out over the two days of discussion and debate in Killiney.

Meanwhile, if Yuen had one piece of wisdom to offer to the public at large, what would it be? "That there are no incurable diseases," comes the prompt reply. "Only incurable people."

Jeffrey Yuen's first Irish conference will be at Fitzpatrick Castle Hotel, Killiney, Co Dublin on June 9 and 10. Further details and registration forms are available from the Academy of Classical Chinese Medicine of Ireland at www.accm.ie

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