



Karen Charlesworth

Member: North Yorkshire

REVIEW

I approached this book with the prejudice that it was going to be a kind of 'Maciocia-lite'. So much for prejudice. It seems to be the fashion these days, but shame on me: this is an excellent introduction to acupuncture that stands in its own right.

While it is most obviously of use to acupuncture students, it's also an excellent summing-up of the basics for experienced practitioners: as Ching says, our understanding of Chinese medicine should be iterative, 'like a corkscrew... returning to the same spot with each rotation, but each time at a deeper level'. I can see some of my more interested patients finding the explanations fascinating too.

Nigel Ching (whom students may be surprised to learn is a Cornishman by birth, and who now lives and practises in Denmark) has never been scared to question the 'rules' and, where necessary, to break them and reform them in a more effective mould. When I read his 2014 Chinese herbal medicine MSc dissertation for the Northern College of Acupuncture, it was a case in point: it queried whether what we're told in the textbooks about how to treat menopausal hot flushes is actually correct. He found that many practitioners agreed with him and were, in fact, ignoring the textbooks and using their own approaches.

So you might expect a Nigel Ching textbook to be a bit of a shot across the TCM bows. But it isn't. Instead, as Charlie Buck says in his wonderful Foreword, this book simply sets out the 'standard model' of acupuncture basics in a digestible, easily-understood form. Ching gives a sympathetic nod to the western acupuncture student's experience of non-linear, synthetic reasoning: 'In order to understand a concept, you have to have a simultaneous comprehension of two or three other concepts. This would be fine,' he writes, 'apart from the fact that these other concepts in themselves cannot be understood without having a knowledge of either the first concept or of yet another separate concept.' Teachers of Chinese medicine will recognise the frustrations of their students, and students themselves will appreciate Ching's understanding of their bafflement.

From there, the book proceeds to set out the basics of acupuncture, beginning with a quick canter through Chinese philosophy, yin and yang, five elements and the vital substances. From there Ching launches into the zang fu, whizzes us around the channels and on to the acupuncture

points. There's a look at needle technique, and a broaching of the tricky waters of aetiology right at the end, whetting our appetites for more.

One thing I would have liked to see in this book was more referencing, partly to signpost students to other sources and help them build their knowledge, and partly to acknowledge Ching's debt to his scholarly predecessors in the Chinese medicine tradition. Much of what is set out in *The Fundamentals of Acupuncture* originates in the classics, but it owes

more to modern classics, including Maciocia, Deadman, Kaptchuk and Larre/Rochat de la Vallée, and it would have been good to reference these. A one-page bibliography at the end of the book felt a bit inadequate.

I would also have liked JKP/Singing Dragon to have taken a more visually appealing approach to some of the purely reference material, such as the acupuncture points, actions and indications. Simply dumping a lot of text across the full width of the page in the same font and size as the rest of the book doesn't encourage the student to use this as a points reference resource; Deadman is a lot easier to use. It's a shame, because Ching's words – particularly on indications – are helpful.

Throughout, I liked the fact that Ching uses his own translations of the Chinese words and concepts; individuals' own translations always add to my understanding. And one of the best aspects of the book for me is his rich use of metaphor, which is superbly done: he has a real talent for helping his readers understand the esoteric in terms of the familiar.

In fact, Ching's talent as a linguist and a boundary-breaker is the unsung power of this book for me, humming like a powerful machine in the background and informing his understanding and approach. He likens learning acupuncture to learning a new language, but in his introductions to each chapter he steers his students into an appreciation of a whole new culture. He sums this up brilliantly: in learning acupuncture, he writes, 'you think you are going to learn a new way of treating the body and end up discovering a new way of comprehending the world.'

I wanted more of Nigel Ching in this book. But that's not its purpose. Ultimately, this is a fine foundational text; if I'm left hoping for more Ching-ness, that's my wish and not his stated, well-executed intention in this book.

One of the best aspects of the book for me is his rich use of metaphor, which is superbly done: he has a real talent for helping his readers understand the esoteric in terms of the familiar