

Chinese Medicine Newsletter - Spring 2007

Welcome! Normally in these newsletters I discuss an aspect of Chinese Medicine, whether it be the benefit of acupuncture and herbs, the subtleties and sophistication of diagnosis, the correspondences that our organs and functions have to the cycles of the season and to our emotional and mental states, etc. I've talked about how proper breathing is essential to well-being.

Today I want to deviate some and discuss something that recently came to my attention and which has lately gotten some national publicity. It can have implications for our health and balance.

Last night I watched a DVD with a friend about "The Secret." Apparently this is a best selling book and DVD that has been discussed on "Oprah" as well as on several other venues. I was curious about it given the amount of attention it has generated. I don't know how many of you are familiar with this, but it is a product that has been vigorously promoted and endorsed by some popular leaders in the self-help/inspirational movement.

First let me say that I feel that there are some very useful and positive perspectives communicated that can be quite helpful. Conversely, I want to emphasize that what I saw also generated some significant concerns.

"The Secret" is not a new concept. It is described as the "Law of Attraction." Basically the message is that everything that happens to us is a result of our thoughts, whether conscious or subconscious. If we are preoccupied with negative thoughts, dwell on what is not working in our lives, we basically keep attracting these unwanted scenarios over and over again, since what we think is what manifests in our lives. They give the example that if we dwell on how poor we are, we keep ourselves locked in poverty. The solution presented is to actively imagine and "feel" ourselves already having financial abundance, not sometime in the future, but right now, for it is only if we imagine our goals as already achieved do they have the power to actually manifest. I have no quarrel with this as an exercise that anyone can practice and simply notice the results.

What is obviously relevant and important here is the recognition that our thinking influences our experience of reality. What we experience is filtered through our conditioned patterns of perception, feeling and thinking. There is an old saying, "When a pick pocket meets a saint, all that he sees are his pockets." When we are hungry and walking down the street we notice the restaurants. When we are looking for a jacket we notice the clothing stores. If we are feeling insecure we sometimes focus on our deficiencies. When we are feeling happy and secure we are more aware of and grateful for the blessings in our lives.

Having said this, it is an enormous leap to imply that we are responsible for everything that shows up in our lives. We are, however, responsible for our “interpretation and response” to what shows up. If we cannot control events, we have the real possibility of managing our reactions to them. This is not to categorically imply that our internal environment has no influence on external events. We have all had experiences of synchronicity when we have felt “aligned” with forces larger than ourselves that seemed to produce situations and events that were beyond coincidence.

My concern is that this approach can be interpreted too simplistically and can thus promote a form of “magical thinking.” For example, I have heard people take this perspective to the conclusion that if someone has cancer they are the cause of it since we alone are responsible for our reality. I have even heard people say this to a cancer victim with the intention of empowering them to take charge of their illness. This potentially can cause undue stress and guilt to someone already in a challenging situation.

Of course, becoming aware of dysfunctional habits and corrosive thinking allows us the opportunity to transform them so they are not a drain on our energy and immune system, thus enhancing the capacity to heal. But this is very different from proclaiming that all that happens to us is self-generated. There are many reasons, known and unknown, for example, why someone gets cancer. Some of it may have to do with stress generated by one’s attitudes, beliefs and emotional responses to life. However, there are also environmental and heredity factors, as well as possible influences of viruses and all sorts of other agents. And, having said this, in many cases, it is still a complete mystery.

Another example is what about children who suffer in countries that are poverty stricken and at war? Are they responsible for their situation? Have they created their reality?

I don’t know how the advocates of “The Secret” would respond to my concerns, but I do feel that for anyone adopting this perspective it is very important to clarify how one sees the ramifications when taken to their logical conclusions. Hopefully one could distinguish what is valuable and useful and be clear about the potential pitfalls.

I hope this may be a stimulus for discussion. I’d enjoy hearing what some of you think.

The transition from one season to the next, as is happening now, can be a time when our energy can be a bit unstable. If you’re doing fine with it, congratulate yourself. If you find you are struggling in some way in adapting to the spring, sometimes an acupuncture treatment can facilitate a more balanced transition.

Be well,
Bob