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FEATURED ARTICLES



Professor J R Worsley (14 September 1923 – 2 June 2003)

Allegra Wint

The author writes about the life of Jack R Worsley (JR), who died on 2nd June 2003, who was the founder and teacher of a style of acupuncture now known as Classical Five-Element Acupuncture®. The following is an extract: "The story of his life reflects the extraordinary nature of this pioneering and innovative man. His students are indebted to JR for the gift of this work which involves engaging with nature in all its variety and richness. For me and many others, he drew aside the veil and enabled us to experience the spirit that infuses all form. He showed how the more we find our compassion, the more sensitive and accurate are our perceptions. He taught us how to sense the stultification which arises when nature is out of balance and how to encourage the quality of boundless freedom that is characteristic of health."

Jack R Worsley (JR), who died on 2nd June 2003, was the founder and teacher of a style of acupuncture now known as Classical Five-Element Acupuncture. The story of his life reflects the extraordinary nature of this pioneering and innovative man.

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He was born in 1923 in Coventry. He was the fourth child of parents who lived in a house where in winter the only source of warmth was a few burning coals that would be carried on a shovel from room to room as the family went about its different activities. His mother suffered a breakdown following his birth and felt unable to care for him, so he was brought up by his two older sisters. He grew up to become someone with a profound appreciation of, and sense of compassion for, the struggles that beset human life. During the war he was with the St John's ambulance through the Coventry bombings after which he joined the army in a teaching role. It was possibly then that he discovered he had a natural talent for holding his audience spellbound. He overflowed with crazy, irreverent jokes interspersed with subtle, tender descriptions of the extremes of the human condition that we have all encountered, but which we so often turn away from as too painful to face.

After the war he trained in osteopathy and naturopathy. He began studying acupuncture during the 1950s at a time when a small group of people would travel to Paris to learn from a handful of French and German teachers. Various missionaries and others had learned aspects of acupuncture while in China and had brought back what they knew to Europe. JR had a life long passion for attempting to piece together and make sense of what he discovered, and this led him to make several trips to the East to seek out teachers from whom he could learn, until he felt he had grasped the key to acupuncture. By this time JR was married to Ellie, and had two small children, Hilary and John. He put into practice what he was learning, treating patients in a shed at the end of his garden. He soon discovered that he was often able to bring about remarkable changes in people's health, and word began to spread of his ability.

In 1956 he gathered together a group which eventually led to forming a college in Leamington Spa to share with others what he and his colleagues were discovering. It was during these years in the late 1950s and 1960s that he began to formulate a system of practice of acupuncture which at that time he called Traditional Five Element acupuncture.

In 1970 two Americans, Bob Duggan and Dianne Connelly, arrived in London suffering from various ailments that they had developed while travelling around the world. In the Far East they had been intrigued by acupuncture but had never managed to find anyone who could explain it to them. In London they heard about JR and decided this might be their chance. They duly ended up on JR's doorstep in Kenilworth and were so amazed by what he did for them that they arranged a lecture tour for him in the US. This was 1971 and the circuit started at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California during its heyday. Where many a speaker became intoxicated by the no holds barred human encounters being explored, JR held steady and offered a context and a meaning to the highly creative new perspectives emerging at that time. The result of the tour was a troupe of rather eminent Americans who arrived in Kenilworth to learn how to practise acupuncture from JR. At that moment the organisers Bob and Dianne held their breaths: whatever JR's genius as a practitioner, they had no idea whether he could impart his skills to others. From the first day to the last he had them all gripped.

This was the beginning of an extraordinarily prolific time in JR's teaching career. Bob and Dianne created a base in Oxford and a constant stream of Americans would come and colonise every bed and breakfast in the town to study with him. For several years he taught the Licentiate course and then post-graduate courses single-handedly, before some of his students gained enough experience to form a faculty around him. In the mid-1970s he found premises in Leamington Spa and took on classes of English students. Throughout the 70s and early 80s the numbers of English and American students increased exponentially.

JR was an inspirational teacher. He infused his students with wonder at the beauty and simplicity of nature. We learned how it is nature that creates and maintains health and that our role is to facilitate nature wherever we can. JR was a remarkable diagnostician and it was a delight to witness how he would identify and reveal the seat of the imbalance in a patient, whether this was at the level of the body, the mind or the spirit. It was very empowering to observe his methodical approach to the task of determining which acupuncture points would most enable the patient to return to balance. Many of the hours, particularly on the post-graduate courses, were spent with JR guiding his students in making a deep contact with, and entering into, the internal world of a patient. Ultimately he taught us how to follow our intuition and to use our common sense. For JR this meant paying attention to every detail presented by a patient and sensing which threads to follow. He engaged with the patient with such a delicate sensitivity that he could often enter into the most protected and hidden places within a person.

The 1980s brought enormous changes. JR suffered a very severe heart attack in 1983. Sadly, as he was recovering, his wife Ellie died. He carried on working as much as he could. In different parts of the world JR's students, who by now had gained much experience, were opening colleges to train people. Increasingly JR's role became one of lecturing in the different schools that were springing up in Europe and the US. He was constantly in demand as a consultant for practitioners with their more baffling patients. He wrote articles and published several books and textbooks about acupuncture. The early 80s was a time when it became possible for westerners to train in acupuncture in China. Since 1956 a style of acupuncture had been developed in China, within the framework of TCM, which was now being taught throughout the country. Many Chinese textbooks were being translated into English. This resulted in a time in the West of much questioning and discussion as to what was traditional acupuncture.

JR's teaching centres on the concept of a particular core elemental imbalance, called the causative factor, or 'CF'. This underpins all disturbances within the person. When treating the CF, all aspects of the patient benefit. Patients characteristically report an extraordinary change in their sense of well-being; it is as if the improvement begins at the level of their spirit and then spreads through their mind to their body. The diagnosis of the CF depends on the skill and sensitivity of the practitioner in discerning the patient's imbalance. This is done through identifying the subtle colour around a person's face, the quality of sound in their voice, the odour emitted from their body, and the most inappropriate emotion that dogs a person's life and lies at the heart of the difficulties that the person gets into. It is both very simple and immensely difficult.

JR used every acupuncture point on the body and showed how each carried certain possibilities for restoring balance within a patient. The range of human experience addressed by the points is indicated in their evocative and often poetic names. JR taught that the greatest change occurs when we treat the heart of the imbalance. We need to make room for nature to work, rather than do too much interfering ourselves. When we find the minimum intervention that brings the maximum change, this leads to the most powerful and far reaching improvements. This is a spontaneous and natural process that sometimes leaves the practitioner more amazed than the patient.

JR stressed the need for each of us to attend to our inner development. The practitioner is the instrument for bringing about change, and the more aligned we are to nature, the more effective is our work. He taught us the importance of the use and awareness of intention as we practise.

JR taught that each person is unique, and seeks wholeness, and that symptoms are distress signals expressing an imbalance. Father Claude Larre SJ., the Jesuit scholar of the Chinese medical classics, considered that it was JR's ability to use colour, sound, odour and particularly emotion, to diagnose the patient's imbalance that made him a true practitioner of classical Chinese medicine. JR was uncompromising in this approach. He taught that any other means, such as by the pulses, symptoms, or a person's description of their internal state, was always a second or third rate guide and unreliable in terms of diagnosing the person's CF. I asked him how he came to recognise the importance and supreme value of this method, when he first met it in Korea and Japan. His reply was that as soon as he encountered this way of working it seemed deeply right and familiar to him.

It was his teachers in Japan and Korea, who worked with the five element style of practice, who conferred on JR the title of Master of Acupuncture and the role of preserving and carrying forward this lineage. Other key aspects to this style included certain blocks to treatment, such as the astonishingly effective treatment for 'possession' using the internal or external dragon points; the treatment of two conditions that create life threatening states, the husband-wife imbalance and aggressive energy; and the use of entry and exit points to clear blocks which can arise in the flow of a person's qi.

JR often told us that if we wanted to understand acupuncture we should go and look at a tree, and then really look at the tree.

As a practitioner of the Five Element lineage JR taught us to observe the nuances of change in a patient according to the season, the climate and the time of day. In Chinese medicine the external causes of disease include all the conditions that we encounter: the weather, the food we eat, the shocks, the traumas, the toxins in our environment, the rigors of our life-styles. JR taught, however, that the majority of illnesses stem from the internal causes of disease. These are due to disturbances within the person, which then affect the spirit, the mind and the body. Such disturbances may arise when a person is unable to flow with the ever-changing nature of life because they have become attached to, or stuck in, an emotional, mental or spiritual position. It is necessary to diagnose the level (body, mind or spirit) at which the imbalance has arisen in order to treat the person effectively. Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee has described JR as a charismatic figure whose practice was close to the spirit of the Chinese medical classics.

JR taught that the only form of self-protection that does not diminish our capability as a practitioner is to work with an open and loving heart. Other forms of protection can make us vulnerable, because of fear, and also produce some degree of barrier between us and the patient.

In 1991 JR married Judy Becker. Judy had searched America for the kind of teaching that she finally discovered in JR. She became his student in 1973 and as time passed the two of them became inseparable as a working team, a creative partnership that continued for the remainder of his life. He has designated Judy to inherit the title of Master.

In 1996 he had another huge heart attack. Despite the best care in the world, from then on his heart was operating on a 10% ejection function. To the disbelief of his doctors, his devotion to acupuncture led him to carry on working for another seven years, up until the month before he died. Even then he saw a few patients from his bed in the hospital ward.

His students are indebted to JR for the gift of this work which involves engaging with nature in all its variety and richness. For me and many others, he drew aside the veil and enabled us to experience the spirit that infuses all form. He showed how the more we find our compassion, the more sensitive and accurate are our perceptions. He taught us how to sense the stultification which arises when nature is out of balance and how to encourage the quality of boundless freedom that is characteristic of health.

JR leaves a wonderful legacy to the world.

Allegra Wint

Allegra Wint started training with JR Worsley in 1974 and received her Doctorate of Acupuncture from him in 1984. She was on the teaching faculty of the College of Traditional Acupuncture in Leamington Spa and is a consultant on point location for the College of Integrated Chinese Medicine in Reading. She has promoted the use of acupuncture for childbirth. Her present interest is in the development of the use of the faculty of intuition. Her practice is in Oxford.