

Dr. Richard Tan's Balance Method

I met Dr Richard Tan during the TCM-Kongress in Rothenburg in 2005, where I was first introduced to his work. The concepts he calls "Balance Method" and his inspirational lessons gave a whole new impulse to my ideas on acupuncture.

Dr. Richard Teh-Fu Tan, born in Taiwan, lives and works in San Diego. As a young man in Taiwan he was educated by several acupuncturists, studying the science of herbs, the five elements, zangfu syndromes and the meridian system. During his military service he treated hundreds of patients with acupuncture next to Western treatments while working at a Chinese military hospital. For many years now he has been teaching in the United States and increasingly in Europe as well. One of the most remarkable observations of Richard Tan's teaching are his hands-on treatments, during which he presents that the placement of a needle must have a direct effect. These immediate changes, especially when treating pain, are not only a welcome result for the client and for the acupuncturist; they provide immediate feedback and confirmation that diagnosis and approach chosen are correct.

An important feature of this method is that, when treating pain, points on other locations of the body are being chosen instead of points in the affected area. Maciocca writes about this approach in "The Practice of Chinese Medicine" when he talks about the treatment of bi-syndroms of the knee for instance, by choosing points on the elbow, or treating complaints of the ankle through the wrist, or using points in the shoulder to address hip problems. Richard Tan's method is similar but his strategy is much more elaborate and offers many more possibilities. You could compare it to the use of the computer operating system "Dos" and now, 30 years later, the use of Windows Xp or Vista; more opportunities, accessible and much more user-friendly. This method of working Dr. Tan calls the Balance Method. Formulated around the meridian system, the essence of the Balance Method lies in the diagnosis and the treatment.

Dr. Tan's way of teaching defines itself by a systematic approach, which allowed me to immediately implement the basis into my practice the day after attending his seminar. Ever since, treating complaints of pain has been something I do very often! Because the placement of the needles virtually always gives an immediate result, clients rapidly gain faith in acupuncture and implement my recommendations for follow-up consults (a series of treatments is needed to make the complaints disappear permanently) and instructions on, for example resting or, quite on the contrary, exercising.

The following are two case examples taken from my own practice, where I applied the Balance Method for treatment:

A 62-year old woman seeks treatment of the left knee for severe arthritic pain. She can't walk without pain but refuses surgery due to the subsequent months of recovery that don't suit her life at the time. After the first treatment, during which I treat points in her elbow, she has, much to my amazement, no pain anymore and can walk her dogs again. With two more treatments her pain disappears for good. The remaining space in her knee joint due to the arthritis and the disappearance of the cartilage is further treated by muscle-strengthening exercises under the supervision of a physiotherapist.

A 25-year old female student complains of pain for the last 10 months near the attachment of the left heel as a result of an injury to her Achilles tendon. The rest prescribed to her by her treating physician hasn't alleviated the pain, leading her to search for alternatives such as acupuncture. Because she hasn't been to a physiotherapist before I advise her to seek an evaluation first, and possibly obtain a beneficial treatment for her complaints. The physiotherapist diagnoses a chronic infection of the Achilles tendon, probably as a result of walking on shoes that are too flat. The resulting prognosis suggests that recovery is possible, but that it can take up to 6 months. Using Dr. Tan's Balance Method on her wrist I am able to generate more than satisfactory results through 7 treatments in only 4 weeks, to the extent that she is ready to go back to work as a waitress at her favourite cafe.

The Balance method enables you to treat much more than pain alone. For complaints such as fatigue, fibromyalgia, respiratory problems, allergies or stress the diagnosis and treatment strategy are based on the meridian system. In spite of its straight-forward application, mastery of the Balance Method requires more than a day and a half of learning. So for the past few years I have travelled to Berlin and Rothenburg several times for supplementary schooling.

After gaining experience in the use of the Balance Method for the last three years I decided last summer to travel to California for an internship with Dr. Tan.

A comfortable KLM jumbojet flew me to San Diego, a chaotic town with highways everywhere, and the descending and climbing of airplanes right above your head every six minutes. It wasn't exactly the ideal place for a relaxed holiday, but then again, that is not what I came for...

A few days later I report to Dr. Tan's practice. Eileen, his assistant and an acupuncturist herself, warmly welcomes me and shows me around the practice. The waiting room/reception leads into five treatment rooms. Most of the treatment rooms have three or four relaxing arm chairs and a couple of rooms have one massage table. The decoration and the furniture have obviously been there for some years, but Dr. Tan doesn't care much about appearances. Indeed, it doesn't affect his clientele. Thirty to 40 clients per day are not exceptional - the treatment results speak for themselves.

Eileen points me to a chair and hands me a pile of files of clients who are on this day's schedule, so I can get acquainted with their treatment notes. They are short and not very easy to read because of the many abbreviations and the unclear handwriting. At the end of the first morning I feel overwhelmed; the working pace is high, the treatments themselves take about ten minutes each and in only a few hours Dr. Tan has seen 20 clients already. Dr Tan advises me not to bother about his choice of points but to reflect instead on which treatment strategy he uses.

After the first day I get the hang of it and I can follow which system Dr. Tan uses. I regularly recognize treatments which I have learned during extra schooling and which I myself use in my practice. There are treatments of which I don't fully understand the system but in between I can ask Eileen questions and at the end of the day Dr. Tan is always available. I need to focus well to clearly note my question, because there is no time until the next client is ready to be treated.

For the majority of the clients, it is not an issue to be treated in a room with others. The needles are placed on arms and legs, the back and the head, so undressing is not necessary. To obtain positive results, rest and relaxation are important. A treatment usual requires thirty minutes to an hour, which clients tend to spend listening to their I-pod, falling asleep or reading a book after the needles are placed.

The majority of Dr. Tan's clients complain of serious conditions; severe obesity (nutrition is very unhealthy in the US), cancer, neuropathy, oedema, diabetes, hernia, orofacial pains, severe joint complaints. Now and then a young and healthy person walks into the waiting room, usually it involves a torn ligament of a surfer or a dislocated shoulder as a result of water polo. Because most patients come back twice a week for treatment, and some even more, I get the chance of seeing clients more than once.

Dr. Tan is very focused during the treatment and sensitive to what his clients want. I notice peace and serenity hanging around him. He works fast, yet without a trace of rushing. He takes the time to answer questions, for example on the combination of acupuncture and regular treatments and gives advise on nutrition and lifestyle. In between, he composes herbal recepies and crushes and mixes several herbal pills so that clients can bring their recipes with them immediately. I understand from the questions that are being asked that they have a lot of faith in him and feel understood.

While I sit in the noodle-restaurant next to the practice during my lunch break on my last day of my internship, Dr. Tan joins me for lunch. Through our conversations I find out he likes fast cars and likes it best to spend his free time at home with his family and sitting in his garden. His personal life hasn't been easy the past year, but when I question him about this he replies: "Times are rough for me this year, but that happens in everyone's life of course."

A whole experience richer I got into my rental car the next day (what a ride) to enjoy my holiday in the more quiet areas of beautiful California.

Begga Pistorius

Member NVA – The Netherlands

Want to know more? The book 'Acupuncture 1,2,3,' written by Richard Tan is an introduction to the Balance method. A few times a year, Richard Tan teaches in Europe where he discusses, among others, the "basic balance" and the "global balance". These two subjects provide a good start to using the Balance method. More information can be found on Dr. Tan's website at www.drtanshow.com