

## ON THE NATURE OF HOMEOPATHY

*by Steven Cartwright, Ph.D., R.S.Hom.*

Last year I was awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Travelling Fellowship to visit the Amazon rain forest and stay with the Shipibo, a tribe of Indians who live near the Ucayali River in Eastern Peru. My hope was to learn about their healing practices which are essentially shamanic. At the end of my trip there, and on my way up to Ecuador to visit the Shuar Indians for similar studies, I was involved in a road accident in which I sustained a badly broken leg, necessitating flights back to this country, an operation, and two weeks stay in hospital here in Oxford. Lying in bed during those days I had ample time to reflect on what had happened to me and what I had experienced in Peru.

I had been staying with traditional healers who sing to the sick, converse with spirits, have an intimate knowledge of the plants and animals of the forest, and are a profoundly spiritual people who believe that everything that happens is of significance and that all is holy - the land, the sky, the rivers. Within forty-eight hours I was in a high-tech hospital with doctors in white coats, machines everywhere and an atmosphere completely lacking in spirituality. The joy, colour and vitality of the Shipibo were so emphatically replaced by the coldness and sterility of a British medical institution. The contrast was so loud and so demanding to be acknowledged that I could not help spending the days after my operation contemplating the differences between shamanism, homeopathy and orthodox medicine. And I came to these questions. What really is the difference, fundamentally, between homeopathy and orthodox medicine? What is homeopathy in fact? I've been practising homeopathy for eight years, but what is it that I actually do?

I then recalled something the Director General of the Winston Churchill Trust had said to me at a function some time following the award of the fellowships. He said this - that no homeopath they had interviewed could adequately explain what homeopathy is. That should have been a shock, but actually it did not surprise me, as no-one has adequately explained what homeopathy is to me either. And I have not been happy with this state of affairs. That homeopathy works is not sufficient, for at some point we will have doubts if we do not have a faith born of understanding, and the deeper our understanding, the deeper our faith, and the greater the flexibility and intelligence of our prescribing. "What is homeopathy?" is in fact a very deep and important question, and one we should clearly

continue to ask if those not familiar with homeopathy are not be be dismayed.

Over a period of some days, glimpses of answers to this question started to appear, and then one day suddenly I could 'see' the fundamental difference between homeopathy and orthodox medicine.

I had gone to Peru (and previously to that I had been looking at, and involved in, shamanic practices, for about four years) because I knew intuitively that there were important connections between shamanism and homeopathy. Suddenly I saw that the shaman and the homeopath were essentially much the same: different clothes, different techniques, but they are both in a search for meaning - the meaning of illness - whilst the orthodox physician is looking at the mechanism of illness.

Meaning and mechanism; spirit and matter. Therein lies it all. From then on things fell into place.

I looked through the journals I had kept whilst in Peru - the cures I had witnessed, conversations with shamans, strange events - and I was drawn back to a conversation with Don Mateo, a Shipibo shaman who lives in a small village on the banks of Lake Yarinacocha where I was staying. Through an interpreter he told me about what happens when a sick person comes to him. On the first visit he will look, and listen and understand a little of the person, perhaps a lot; and perhaps the person will go away cured or perhaps only helped. The person returns for a second visit, a third, or even a fourth. On one of these visits, perhaps even the first, the shaman 'sees', he understands, he 'knows' what is wrong with the person. The shaman would say that the spirits have shown him. And in that moment of 'seeing' the cure takes place. The singing that follows, the plant infusions that are given, all help; but unless the shaman has 'seen', no cure can take place.

The parallels with homeopathy were unmistakable. A patient can come several times to the homeopath, but only when we 'see' the nature of the patient's sickness, only when we understand, can and does, cure take place.

It is that moment of 'seeing', of understanding, that is absolutely crucial, and if we don't 'see', if we haven't understood the patient's predicament, they are unlikely to be cured. And what is it that is 'seen', what is it that is understood in that moment? It is the *meaning* of the illness. Meaning is the domain of both the shaman and the homeopath. Both ask "Why?"

For the shaman it is the spirits who help him to 'see'. The homeopath has only symptoms to help him or her to 'see'. And intuition.

Perhaps like many students (and, dare I say, practitioners) of homeopathy, I have wondered about the word “totality”. What actually is the “totality of the case”? This elusive totality, which we must match to an appropriate remedy. Now it is clear to me - the totality of a case is its meaning. The holistic approach is the approach that addresses meaning - address the meaning of an illness and you can cure it. As a homeopath I know I am looking for the most similar remedy. But most similar to what? To the symptoms? No. To the meaning? Yes. I realised that homeopathy is not about matching symptoms or matching symptom pictures at all - it is about matching meaning. Symptoms are simply pointers to meaning. Homeopathy is about giving a remedy sickness that has the same meaning as the sickness being suffered by the patient in front of us.

How many times have we given a curative remedy that is not listed in any materia medica or repertory as being associated with a particular complaint, yet on giving that remedy the complaint resolves?

Symptoms *per se* are not important. Symptoms are only important in so far as they point to meaning. It is meaning that must be matched, not symptoms. And actually if meaning can be perceived directly (which we will come to later), symptoms may play little or no part in our search for the curative remedy.

I would like now at this point to put forward what I have come to feel is a working definition of homeopathy, which avoids the confusing and unnecessary use of the word ‘symptom’ and phrase ‘symptom picture’ which other explanations of homeopathy rely on.

*“Any state of ill-health, howsoever it arises, can be transformed into a state of health, by the administration of any preparation, whatever its source - or by the following of any procedure - which is known, from collective experience, to induce a similar state of ill-health to the one observed.”*

Each and every state has its meaning and arises out of that meaning. Matching state is matching meaning, but any one state can produce many different symptoms, some of which will be common to other states, so to try and match symptoms is often to fail to match state (meaning) and hence fail to cure. There is a Zen saying that “teaching is like pointing a finger at the moon. The inquirer must look at the moon, not the finger.” So it is with symptoms. Look to where they are pointing, not at the symptoms themselves.

A proving produces many symptoms, yet in truth provings are not about gathering symptoms *per se*, for symptoms are there to point us to the meaning of the remedy sickness. A proving is about coming to know what the state a particular substances

induces, *feels* like. When we know a remedy in its being, we can use it flexibly and intelligently, but if a remedy merely remains a collection of symptoms for us, we can at best only prescribe it mechanically and consequently often inappropriately.

Having come to an understanding of the central importance of meaning in homeopathy, I was drawn then to question the actual process of cure, which I would now like to turn to.

From what Don Mateo, the Shipibo shaman, told me, it was clear that for him the act of 'seeing' is curative.

In the Organon, Hahnemann talks of similar illnesses being curative and he also draws out attention to the fact that a particular situation or procedure can be curative - whether fortuitous or deliberate - where that situation or procedure induces a similar state of ill-health to the one observed. And of course the medicine known as 'the similimum' is curative. What might be the connection between these four curative scenarios? I believe it is this.

A person is sick, yet they are stuck in that sickness. They cannot 'see' (understand) it, so they continue to be sick. The meaning and purpose of the illness drives the illness on. The spell is broken only when the meaning is 'seen'.

The shaman 'sees' the meaning of the illness, understanding is shared (consciously or unconsciously) between the shaman and the patient, and the person is cured. In my experience as a homeopath that moment of understanding, if and when it occurs, is magical; it is as if understanding happens and the patient and I partake of it. It is in some way sacred and outside of anyone's control.

When the similimum is given the patient is faced with the meaning of their illness suddenly intensified. They 'see' it at the deepest level, often not even able to verbalise it, yet it comes out in dreams and feelings and in the symbolism of the symptoms that are aggravated. And the sickness is cured.

A sick person is faced fortuitously, or by the design of a practitioner, with a situation carrying the same meaning as their sickness. Again they 'see' at the deepest level and cure ensues. A sick person is confronted with a second illness carrying the same meaning as the first illness. Meaning is intensified, the person 'sees' and cure takes place.

What must be emphasized here is that 'seeing' is about feeling, perceiving, 'knowing', and that often cannot be put into words - in fact usually it cannot, it can only be expressed in terms of symbols and images. 'Seeing' is felt with one's being; it is a

'knowing'. 'Seeing' is not intellectual and it cannot be worked out; it is a moment of grace. There are techniques and practices that can help one to 'see' but it is essentially a moment of revelation. For the shaman, meaning is seen directly in feelings and images shown to him by the spirits in an altered state of consciousness. For myself, not being a shaman, I use certain symbolic systems (which I shall touch on later) that help me divine meaning, but to do this I have found myself quite automatically going into an altered state of consciousness - an alpha state of openness and receptivity. I don't think it's possible to perceive meaning in a normal (beta) state of consciousness with its much more active, analytical and logical approach.

During my enforced stay in hospital I kept returning again and again to this central distinction of meaning and mechanism. I have discussed meaning, but what of mechanism? Where does orthodox medicine, with its clearly mechanistic approach, fit into one's understanding of homeopathy? Does it have anything to offer us?

Is there also a side to illness which is mechanistic? If meaning is the essence of illness, then meaning pervades or suffuses the whole person, as does spirit. Both homeopathy and shamanism treat the sickness of spirit (meaning). They are both spirit medicines. But what then of orthodox medicine with its mechanistic approach? There the body is seen as a machine - biochemistry, physiology, pathology - and only seen as a machine. The questions orthodox medicine asks are 'how?', never 'why?' For 'why?' is the province of meaning and of spirit. Orthodox medicine does not recognise the existence of spirit and hence neither does it recognise the existence of meaning, nor therefore the importance of the individual.

Should then the mechanistic approach be dismissed? Actually I think not. Mechanism is important. The body operates by certain rules and laws. Body is pervaded by spirit and is affected by it (first the spirit is sick, then the body becomes sick) but the body also has its own mechanisms. If stress is put onto a certain organ or tissue it will react in predictable pathological ways. This is the nature of the human body - the species as opposed to the individual. So in any illness one has the individual, their sickness of spirit and hence the meaning of the illness; *and* one has their body, which is of the species and reacts in largely predictable, mechanistic ways, according to the stress upon it, eg injury, infection, toxins and so on.

In other words, in any illness one will see symptoms of the sickness of spirit (meaningful symptoms - the striking, characteristic individualising symptoms) and one will see symptoms as a result of the stress put on the body by the sickness of spirit (common, general, predictable symptoms - symptoms so essential to the diagnostician but

useless for the homeopath). The gravity of these common symptoms will depend upon the intensity and duration of the sickness of spirit, whether that be in acute or chronic illness.

Common symptoms can be associated with, and given rise to by, functional problems or degenerative tissue changes.

When there are only functional problems and the spirit is cured, the problems and their associated symptoms naturally and spontaneously resolve according to the principles of homeostasis (that is, in health all processes in the body are in balance and, on removal of the stress, will return to balance). But if the stress on the body has been such that degenerative tissue changes have occurred, then natural and spontaneous resolution does not occur when the spirit is cured. This is, I believe, because certain equilibria of the body have been pushed beyond the point of spontaneous reversibility. In these situations one requires specific medicines such as organ remedies, mother tinctures and sarcodes in order to treat the tissues and organs directly.

In a paradoxical way, homeopathy and orthodox medicine are complementary. Spirit and body, meaning and mechanism. The problem is to know when a symptom is of meaning (spirit) and when it is of mechanism (body). Orthodox physicians do not, and can not, make this distinction for they treat all symptoms as arising from mechanism. We as homeopaths can make the distinction, however, and are therefore much better placed to treat sickness intelligently, flexibly and effectively. To reiterate then; sickness of spirit gives rise to characteristic and striking (meaningful) symptoms, both in the mind and body. Sickness of body, whilst resulting from sickness of spirit, gives rise to common (non-meaningful) symptoms, both in the mind and body. Sickness of spirit requires spirit remedies - homeopathy, for example; sickness of body, if it does not spontaneously and naturally resolve when the spirit is cured, requires physical medicines - mother tinctures, organ remedies and so on.

As a homeopath I have always sought to find the medicine that addresses the sickness of spirit - the medicine that addresses the meaning and hence the totality of the case, although until now I would not have been able to articulate it so. What I now feel I am able to do with confidence, and based on understanding, is to know *when* a remedy is needed to address a particular problem that is clearly a product of mechanism rather than spirit.

Whilst still maintaining my integrity as a classical homeopath, I can now see the place for organ remedies, sarcodes, nutritional supplements, herbal tinctures and so on, when required. Yet first and foremost and always I ask "Why? What is the meaning of this illness?" and, having addressed that, then it is time to address mechanism, if it is

necessary.

For in truth meaning is all-important. We cannot cure without having understood, and we cannot address mechanism fruitfully without first having addressed meaning.

But how do we 'see'? How do we discover the meaning of an illness? Meaning is not available to the rational mind, only mechanism is. Either meaning is 'seen' or it is not. Meaning can be intuited directly, and there are approaches that can help us to 'see', but meaning can never be worked out. Meaning uses patterns, images and symbols to display itself and these are the languages we must look to in a case to discover the meaning. For instance, every meaning has a pattern of manifestation and sometimes we are able to see the meaning of a case by looking at the pattern of the case - generals, mental disposition, repeated issues, qualities. Sometimes we are led to the meaning of a case through looking at the symbols and images in the case - dreams, elements, humours, colours, shapes, numbers. But if we could access meaning directly, would that not be of great value? The shaman, in an altered state of consciousness, is shown images that speak directly of the meaning of an illness. For those of us who do not follow the way of the shaman, there is a symbolic system above all others which is so versatile and which tells us so much about a patient and their state of being, including their heredity, even before they tell us their story, that it is invaluable as an aid to coming to the meaning of sickness; and that symbolic system is astrology. Astrology gives us access directly at the level of meaning, rather than manifestation, and that, to my mind, is its great value.

A patient's story can be consistently referred to their natal chart, which is in essence a map of their state of being, a map of their spirit. Space does not permit here to go into how I use astrology, but suffice to say that there is a clear and definite correspondence between the balance of planetary energies (archetypal forces) depicted in a person's natal chart and their 'constitutional' remedy; and a correspondence which is practical and usable. It is also possible to see what miasms are present in a patient from their chart. Also because astrology addresses meaning directly - and meaning is prior to manifestation - it shows us susceptibility; that is what illnesses are likely or possible. Also, because the chart depicts meaning directly, it circumvents symptoms and so avoids the confusion that so often arises from deciding what symptoms to take for repertorisation. I rarely now repertorise a case. I listen to what a patient says, take note of their symptoms, and refer it all back to their natal chart and choose a medicine that reflects the balance of planetary energies (archetypal forces) depicted in the chart, i.e.: I choose a remedy that has the same meaning as their chart. I realise that this approach requires an in-depth exposition and discussion, and that I hope to undertake in a future article. What I am hoping to show here is that meaning can be perceived directly and that in so doing there are extraordinary possibilities for cure. There are no doubt other divinatory systems which are applicable to

homeopathy, and that is an area I am currently working on, but I am now convinced that because cure requires understanding, and understanding requires an open and receptive mind, all we need to do is to be open to what is possible.

*Steven Cartwright, Ph.D., R.S.Hom.*

*Practises in Oxford*