


# Editorial

Daniel Maxwell

 I have long found it somewhat disquieting just how differently acupuncture can be practised - often to the point where what different practitioners are thinking and doing in clinic becomes virtually unrecognisable as the same discipline. One practitioner might balance an element with one or two needles, while another goes full orthopaedic with motor point and nerve-focused needling; some practitioners insert needles according to cerebrospinal pulsations while others calculate the right points according to an astronomical chart or the trigrams of the *Yi Jing*; one practitioner E-stims every patient in sight while another engages qi with the subtle touch of a teishin; yet another chooses to die on the hill of pulse diagnosis whilst to some the pulse is a parlour trick akin to cold reading. Adherents and teachers of these different approaches and teachers tend to be - by definition - committed to their own method, and of course they all enjoy a certain amount of success in the clinic. 'Let one hundred flowers bloom!' we might chorus ... but such multiplicity brings problems, not least in terms of public perception, regulation, intra-professional communication, education and so on.

In the past I have dealt with my confusion about such matters by seeing them in the context of how all arts exhibit diversity: for instance a Picasso political abstract and a Constable landscape may both be rendered with brush and paint, but are otherwise worlds apart. In the musical sphere, who can find the intersection of the minimalist calm of Eric Satie and the aggressive thrash metal of Lawnmower Deth? When it comes to acupuncture, if I as a seasoned practitioner find it hard to navigate the diversity of our profession, what hope has a patient, a prospective student, a researcher or a regulator?

I recently found a helpful perspective in a book written by the Dalai Lama, in which he explains that the Buddha, after becoming enlightened, adapted his teaching significantly to suit the radically different mindsets and aptitudes of his students. Out of these different teachings sprang a multitude of approaches

to Buddhist practice. His Holiness explains that the individuals who practice these teachings all believe that their understanding is true and authentic. This, however, sets up a gnarly problematic in which a myriad of different understandings are all held to be true, correct and authentic by different people. What to do with this? The Dalai Lama suggests the solution lies in accommodating competing truths simultaneously: there is one truth that is entirely valid for each individual, whilst at the same time there are many true and authentic paths.

When it comes to acupuncture we might see that some practitioner's minds are inherently mathematical, while others have a poetic, storytelling bias. These people will naturally be inclined to different ways of understanding and styles of practice. Some practitioners seem to bring a mechanical, engineering bent to working with their patients' qi, while others bring a rarefied spiritual perspective to the treatment room. Some are more sensorially attuned and perceptive, while others have a highly developed compassionate heart. And inevitably, some practitioners are intellectually more able to hold and process clinical complexity. Such inclinations and capacities inform engagement with our medicine in different ways.

The Dalai Lama signs off in a typically positive fashion by recognising that the different understandings are wonderful in that they serve to help many people. Taking this perspective with acupuncture may not help the regulators much, but it does help us to appreciate those bloomin' flowers. 