

ACUPUNCTURE THE FIVE  HEALTH CENTRE ELEMENTS

I am aware that for some of you, especially current students at ICOM, Dr. van Buren may have become something of a legend in his own lifetime, and I hope that something of what you have heard at the church, and here, will help make him more real to you.

Dr van Buren's birthplace was a Theosophical Centre in Djakarta in Indonesia, and he was the only child of Dutch parents. His father was a ship's Captain, his mother was a very intelligent woman who spoke 7 languages and travelled a lot, lecturing in esoteric subjects. He lived with them for 4 years, and was then sent to boarding school in Holland during his parents' divorce. That would have been a tough few years for a little boy, especially as during this period he had two minor operations performed with only chloroform. A nurse, he told me, was very kind to him, and much later he treated her for cancer in his clinic in Holland. With his mother's re-marriage to an Englishman they moved between Holland and England, and when he was 14 they settled near Madras in India. Learning the languages and history of three countries presented him with quite a challenge. These and other events in his early life helped create a self-made, independent and practical young man – qualities that were going to prove very beneficial throughout his life. His parents and stepfather were all theosophists, which gave him a deep grounding in eastern philosophy from the cradle. It was through the President of the Theosophical Society, also Commissioner of Scouts for the Madras Province, that Dr van Buren became very active in the Scout movement. He set up a group at his school and in his town. He also learnt from this same man, Dr Arundale, the practical application of Indian philosophy, especially Yoga.

The Second World War broke out and at 17 he was called up to serve in the Dutch army. By 20 he was a Sergeant Major in charge of 76 men, and became an expert in anti-tank

guns. They became prisoners of the Japanese for nearly 4 years, and were constantly being moved around the islands of South East-Asia (the slogan amongst the men was “become a prisoner of war and see the east”). He received visions of their future moves, and knew two years before they were freed how it would happen. He and his men were mostly building aerodromes, or “putting hills into holes”, as he put it. Once the runways were turfed over the grass had to be cut by hand. Being elephant grass, it cut their hands to ribbons before they found a way to handle it. The few who survived did so on what became known as a rice sandwich: Rice in the morning, rice in the afternoon, and rice in the evening (fortunate if you were a vegetarian, which Dr. van Buren was!). But that rice happened to be brown, with the husk that contained the Vitamin B complex, so their captors were inadvertently prolonging their life. Eventually though, the men were in very poor shape and very few in number, as dysentery was claiming their lives. Dr van Buren found himself in what was known as the Death Barracks, and third from the door that led to the graveyard, when he elected to try a bitter herbal remedy offered by an indigenous tribesman. Although he had a very painful reaction, he was completely cured. Another local man showed them how to treat tropical ulcers from the sap of a tree. That same remedy also helped their malnutrition symptoms.

Weighing in at only 7 stone, he was liberated by the British in Singapore, sent home to India and finally repatriated to Holland.

Here he was faced with the existentialist’s question of “what to do now”. In 1947 he chose to go to England, and began his training as a nurse, eventually becoming a senior staff nurse at the Whittington hospital in north London on the neuro-surgical ward. (So That’s where he learned his cranial nerves so well! – and sought to understand them from a Chinese perspective, which he continued to do with all western anatomy, physiology and pathology). This was followed by a four-year course at the British School of Naturopathy and Osteopathy, and on completion in 1954 was taken on as an assistant to the Vice Dean, who taught him Homeopathy.

It was at this point of transition between student and practitioner that he attended a lecture in acupuncture, and thought that "as it had been in existence for three thousand years, there must be something in it". Soon after, a well known French acupuncturist called Lavier came to this country to give to a small group of the interested, which included Dr. van Buren, the fundamentals of Chinese medicine - in only 14 consecutive days, 9 am to 9 pm. Were they aware they were breaking new ground and that 2 or 3 of them would become the future pioneers? It is fascinating to reflect on that small band of people listening to this material, most probably utterly mesmerised, in an era when this kind of medicine was so new (although at the same time so old!). And to compare it with today's training - 4 years of lectures on Chinese philosophy and pathology, point location and massage classes, clinical training, practitioner development, tai chi, qi gong, a thesis, portfolios - not to mention three years of western medicine!

Dr. van Buren continued studying and seeking on his own, while observing patients very carefully in his osteopathic clinic, and only much later began using the needle. He went to Taiwan in 1972 and attained a Doctorate from Wu Wei Ping, a Chinese Master. Again, this was another marathon - ten days, all day and even during some nights he was woken to treat a patient. So be grateful, students of ICOM, that he didn't incorporate this practice into his college in the west! In 1974, and in Korea, he was given a text on the traditional teachings of Stems and Branches, which are the roots of the philosophy behind Chinese medicine and which emanated from, but were banned in, communist china. A man called Chang Bin Li wrote this book, and Dr. van Buren set about developing the practical side, in order to treat patients more effectively and preventatively. The preservation and application of this material became the driving force of his life, and he continued researching it rigorously, even until the beginning of this year, while on holiday in Portugal.

In between these two forays to the east, groups of students in various countries asked him to teach them, and he subsequently founded colleges of acupuncture in England, Holland, Norway and Australia. So began another huge and prodigiously hard-

working part of his life, as he regularly traversed two hemispheres. Hundreds of students from around the world availed themselves of his knowledge and encouragement, many going on to become eminent practitioners, scholars and teachers. Many of you are here today and many more, too many to mention, have sent moving testimonials. One, a now elderly graduate, wrote of him:

“I somehow thought of Dr Van Buren as someone who would survive me, and perhaps the passage of all time. Such was the power of his presence in my life and memory. I followed this dedicated master of the medicine for four years during my frequent and extended trips to his clinic, and later to his school that came into being two years later. His work and his mind fascinated me. He worked ceaselessly to explore the aspects of the medicine that were suited to his perspective of life. That perspective was invaluable. He shared his knowledge with me generously and without stint. The principles and practice I received from him continue to work for me and for others to whom I feel privileged to likewise inform. He opened his home, his mind and his heart for which I am everlastingly grateful. For me he will always be a heroic figure”.

Another older graduate, who moved with Dr. van Buren from the class in Kenilworth to his college at Gerard’s Cross, wrote:

“Being there in the first year that the International College of Oriental Medicine was established gave us the privilege of taking part in the creation of the ‘new baby’. Studying and working with Dick in those days taught us a lot of his friendly and fatherly character. He treated us with care and affection, while we were taking our first steps in such a new (and old) field. In his own special way, he showed us The Way, and implanted in each one of us the love for Chinese medicine”

And from another, more recent graduate practicing in Israel:

“To live without you is a lesson. Your style of teaching was not understood by many, but we all knew that behind those quiet moments that you were famous for,

there was a lot of energy, the energy that if one day we would be able to listen to, we will get the answer that is right for each of us. There is a Chinese saying, “bi yan zi jiao” – conclusion of silence.

NOW I can understand that your way of teaching is the right way and it is the only one that gives the person the possibility to be who he is. To be connected to his inner being and to act from his inner being, the being that has been given to us by Heaven and made us human through the interaction with Earth.

Your way of being and not being, guiding but not forcing, and looking but not interfering, is to be able to let go, for me it is to know the heavenly laws that guide the Earth. The Chinese say Tian jing di yi – meaning, ‘The old heavenly texts give rise to earthly justice’. That is Dr. van Buren for me for ever.”

Most of the early students were taught in small groups, and observed him in clinic, which was an inspirational experience for both students and patients. During my training, in the mid-eighties, students at ICOM fought for clinics with him; rumours abounded of how to acquire VB clinics on the black market! But that was where I and many others experienced the Healer and Master. They were intense days, as patients with inoperable brain tumours, Aids and cancers came to him from far and wide, some from Europe and even South America, because they believed, trusted, and had faith in him. The patients felt better by just being with him, and he showed great humanity towards their suffering.

To enter that oak panelled treatment room of his, I felt I was stepping across a threshold, and it was with awe and wonder that I watched his dedication to the pulse and body diagnosis, assessing both afresh every treatment. Watching those wonderful hands of his gently and intuitively palpate the body, locating the points without measuring and needling with such expertise and authenticity, are images that will never fade.

And we as Practitioners, at all stages of our development, rang from wherever we were in the world seeking guidance with difficult patients – or should I say patients with difficult pulses! So we have lost our Consultant and Mentor too.

Dr. van Buren was very much his own man, and wasn't impressed with class or status. He was tough and uncompromising with himself, and this was most clearly expressed in the manner he coped with his own ill health over the last few years. He refused all intervention by western medicine, putting his body where his philosophy was, and I can only reflect in awe at the conscious and courageous exit he took from this world, at home, with his devoted partner and companion, Pauline.