

**Acupuncture Education International** is a four-week elective designed to give students an introduction to Traditional Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture. The dorms and classes were all located in the China Beijing International Acupuncture Training Center in **Beijing, China**, and the clinical days involved working at a nearby hospital. Classes on the theory and practice of TCM were held in three-hour blocks every morning and afternoon in Chinese followed by English translation. In the second and fourth week, the knowledge was applied in clinical settings through treating patients.

It was absolutely eye-opening to learn of the theories that have survived thousands of years and still govern how people treat and view health and illness. The basis of TCM is grounded in the belief that all organ systems are connected such that imbalance of qi, the vital life-force, such that one organ can affect the function of another. In generality, this sounds very reasonable, and in fact is quite similar to Western medical doctrines. It became more difficult to accept that diseases of the liver dictate the manifestations in tendons, eyes, and nails, but problems of the heart are seen on the tongue and face. We were told from day one to simply absorb the theories as if we were learning a whole new language, and not to attempt to reconcile the differences between this novel way of thinking with our Western training. Once you are able to keep an open mind, the lessons become a fascinating window into a different culture.

During one of our very first classes, the professor handed out small cloth-wrapped bundles and instructions to buy the right needles. Returning to class with our purchases, we had our first taste of acupuncture using the bundle to simulate human flesh. Soon after, we attempted to practice on ourselves. It was incredibly difficult to actually pierce the skin and push the flexible needle down 0.5-1.0 inches. After many attempts, the skin of our hands and elbows were sensitive and red, but unsuccessfully punctured. It did not help that I've never eradicated my fear of needles either!



However, with more practice, both in our dorm rooms and at the clinical sites with real patients, we finally gained the confidence to rapidly pierce the skin and find the acupoint. It did not take long to learn that it only hurts if we let the needle dangle in superficial tissues. Once the needle has reached deeper and hit the acupoint, there is a curious tingling or numbing sensation. It is said that we've tapped into the qi flow at this point.