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THE HOLISTIC APPROACH OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE ACUPUNCTURE

In this article I wish to give an account of acupuncture, emphasising the holistic approach that is fundamental to traditional acupuncture. It is important to stress the term traditional acupuncture since many practitioners have taken parts of acupuncture out of the original context and used it in a symptomatic - and hence a non-holistic way. By now the techniques of acupuncture have become familiar to the lay person but for completeness I start with a brief account.

The acupuncturist mainly uses two techniques: **acupuncture** and **moxibustion**. Both of these affect the energetic balance within the body usually by acting upon the energetic pathways called meridians at specific acupuncture points. **Acupuncture** acts through the insertion of fine needles, **moxibustion** by the burning of small cones of the herb moxa at specific points. Although other techniques are available to the acupuncturist these two are the most frequently used.

With this brief introduction I now turn to a comparison of the philosophical traditions that underlie Western and Chinese médecine.

The Western philosophical tradition

In our Western civilization the mainstream philosophical tradition from the Greeks to the present day has encouraged our viewing the world as being made up of separate entities susceptible to being analyzed and understood in isolation. Among the Greek philosophers, Heraclitus - with his emphasis upon the flux - stands as an isolated figure. He believed the world to be in constant change - perhaps his most famous saying is "You cannot step twice into the same river for fresh waters are always falling upon you". Not only did he see constant change, he also saw the world as a process of dynamic change where there is a synthesis of opposing forces. Or to use Heraclitus' startling imagery "It is to be understood that war is the common condition, strife is justice and all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife".

Such a philosophy might have supported a holistic approach in the field of medicine - and such an approach was present and highly influential in the writings of the most famous Greek physician Hippocrates.

But Héraclitus, with his cryptic and enigmatic sayings did not initiate a school of thought and had little influence on subsequent philosophy. The main schools in Greek philosophy paid greater attention to static models of reality. These were the philosophical roots for the emphasis upon an atomistic conceptual framework. This conceptual framework, which viewed the world as being made up of separate entities, can be traced through subsequent philosophers and came to a definitive statement by the French 17th philosopher René Descartes. His method of analysis proved most effective in describing and understanding the world of the physicist and engineer. Due to its success in this area the model came to dominate other fields through a process of cultural hegemony. In particular it came to be applied in the medical field, where practitioners shifted their focus from the patient in his entirety to particular parts of the body, to organs and to yet lower levels such as cells and molecules. Thus through the influence of the philosophical conceptual framework Western medical practice shifted from the holistic approach of Hippocrates to one that focused on disease entities and the amelioration of symptoms.

The traditional Chinese world-view

Traditional Chinese acupuncture flourished in a markedly different philosophical tradition, that of Taoism. This saw the world as a complex whole. Instead of isolating parts of reality and understanding them as independent entities they saw the world as being made up of inter-dependent parts.

The most far-reaching instance of this complementarity of parts is given by the notion of Yin-Yang. These terms, so fundamental to Chinese thought, mean literally "the dark side of the mountain" and "the sunny side of the mountain". By extension this can produce various complementary ideas -

- . dark - light
- . feminine - masculine
- . yielding - assertive
- . and many more.

These are not to be seen as final categories - rather tendencies to be more or less Yin or Yang. Nor are they in any sense static since change is constantly present, the Yin or Yang tendency increases till it reaches a limit, then flows into the opposite.

This pattern, this flowing changing relationship of two complements, is represented in the ancient Yin/Yang image.



Here Yin (the dark) or Yang (the light) flows from its minimum to its maximum - it contains within it the opposite represented by the small circle of the opposite colour.

The emphasis is thus upon functions or processes where these have to be understood as a whole which is constantly changing. There is thus a dramatic shift in focus away from the Western approach which attends more to fixed static separate entities. In making this shift in our conceptual framework it is though we had changed our very language from one based primarily upon nouns to one based primarily upon verbs. We must now attend to the acting rather than the actors.

The traditional acupuncturist's viewpoint

The acupuncturist who practises acupuncture within this tradition will view his patients and their symptoms from a holistic point of view. They are viewed not as having a body and a mind and a spirit but as a whole body/mind/spirit.

Individuals are made up of various inter-related systems - the respiratory system, digestive system and so on. In describing the human being the Chinese writers focus more upon the functions of these systems rather than the associated organs. One way of doing this is to describe these as officials - as though they were officials responsible for specific functions within the empire of the body/mind/spirit. By this means the Chinese writers have - by a vivid image - made an insightful analogy.

An official is important in having certain responsibilities and duties - it is what he does rather than who he is that is important. This authority resides in his office rather than his person. Thus the officials associated with the functions within the empire of the body/mind/spirit extend beyond the organs of the body. Like officials in an empire their responsibilities are coterminous with the empire of the whole person - in all the new material dimensions of the body/mind/spirit.

The officials must relate with each other. If any one of them is incapable of performing his function, then this will lead to strains being put upon the other officials. In terms of a patient, malfunction within one function will lead to malfunctions in other functions.

Thus acupuncture - when practised in the traditional manner - is to be understood as a thoroughly holistic approach.

Applications in diagnosis and treatment

In the traditional method of diagnosis, the acupuncturist would not observe isolated symptoms but always in the context of the whole person. He gives a more thorough description and recognizes distinctions that are either not apparent to Western doctors or considered unimportant. For example he will investigate a symptom such as a pain in great detail finding out when it occurs; if it is better or worse at different times of the day; if it is better or worse at different times of the year; the precise location of the pain; how it manifests itself and so on. He attends also to the patient's history of illness and to the pattern of his life as a whole.

In questioning the patient, the acupuncturist attends not only to the words the patient uses but relies heavily on communication that transcends words. How does the patient respond to him? What is his predominant emotion? Are any emotions not present in his life? What is the quality of his voice? What is the colour of his complexion? All these have been correlated by acupuncturists as indicators of imbalance and are highly significant means of diagnosing the patient's condition and monitoring his progress through treatment.

Another diagnostic tool is the pulse - or rather the pulses since there are pulses at the wrist corresponding to the organs (or more correctly the officials) of the body. These give a direct insight into the quality of the functioning of the whole person and in the case of an experienced practitioner becomes the single most important mode of diagnosis.

In diagnosis and subsequent treatment the acupuncturist sees his patient as being a body/mind/spirit that is essentially a self-healing system. Treatment works with the natural healing processes of the body. The intention is never to forcibly "make" the person better but always to re-establish the internal harmony that leads to the body healing itself.

Suggested further reading

Rather than attempt to draw up a full bibliography, I have identified three books that are invaluable for a fuller understanding of the issues raised in this article.

1. **The Tao Te Ching** of Lao Tzu. The classic statement of Taoist thought. An edition I am fond of is that published by Penguin translation by D.C. Lau.
 2. **Ways of Health** edited by David S. Sobel. A collection of essays on holistic approaches to medicine. In particular I would refer the reader to three chapters:
 - i) **Chinese Medicine: A traditional healing science** by Manfred Porter
 - ii) *Excerpts from the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*. (This, also known by its Chinese title **The Nei Ching**, is the classic statement of acupuncture)
 - iii) *Excerpts from the work of Hippocrates*.
 3. **Chinese Medicine: The Web that has no Weaver** by Ted Kaptchuk. A comprehensive exposition of acupuncture theory and practice.
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