

The Nature of Cure and Healing

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After ten years of the study of [medical] books [one believes] that there is no incurable disease. After ten more years of study of [medical] books [one is certain] that there is no curable disease.—Huai Yuan

Generally, when people think of the word “cure,” they take it to imply that a specific condition is treated to the point it no longer exists. In truth this is rarely, if ever, the case. The manifestation of any given symptom indicates by its presence an a priori constitutional weakness that allowed it to be expressed. In other words, the patient had either a genetic and/or karmic predisposition that allowed this symptom to become manifest. The inner tradition focuses on constitutional issues which comprise that aspect of self that can never fundamentally be changed because it comprises one’s inborn nature. Medicine can help compensate for our constitutional weaknesses but cannot ultimately change what has been present from conception. Hence the inner tradition does not focus on achieving a cure as an end point of treatment. Rather, the focus is placed on guiding the patient through the process of healing. A condition is considered to be healed when it no longer limits a patient’s self-expression or hinders quality of life.

Even after substantial improvement, all symptoms, like habits, have a tendency to return. After all, the constitutional basis that allowed them to manifest in the first place is still present, and all people tend to fall back into their old patterns of behavior. When a patient initially comes for treatment, he or she may be suffering from migraine headaches four days a week. The condition may be so debilitating that the patient is virtually unable to function. After a successful course of treatment, the patient may have only one or two migraine headaches a year. The patient whose quality of life is now greatly improved may tell friends that the headaches have been cured. It is clear, however, that the patient still has the same inner disposition that created the headaches in the first place.

Ultimately, symptoms are warning signs of deeper imbalance. Patients must learn to recognize their symptoms in their early stages before they become

fully manifest. They may then learn to make the appropriate internal shifts necessary to avoid becoming ill. As people heal, they must be encouraged to think of their symptoms as signs that some internal matter needs attending to. By taking responsibility for maintaining their own health, patients are less dependent on the healer and should need treatment with decreasing frequency.

The Three Levels: Body, Mind, and Spirit

Using the language of classical Chinese medicine it is impossible to talk of the separation implied by the English words body, mind, and spirit. Hence the character *xin* refers to the physical, emotional, and spiritual heart. The Chinese language uses one term, *xin*, that has a multitude of meanings implicit within it. On the other hand, the English language uses three terms, body, mind, and spirit, to address what is implicitly thought to represent a unified whole, namely, the human being. Think of each of the five elements as comprised of spiritual, emotional, and physical realms of being. For example, the spiritual aspect of the wood element corresponds to the *hun* and its ability to be in contact with *jing* in a way that informs one of his or her life plan. The mental aspect of wood involves the decision-making faculties of the gallbladder which transmit the potential of that plan into the world. The physical aspects of wood are comprised by the actual organs of the liver and gallbladder, as well as all material aspects of being associated with these officials such as the tendons, ligaments, eyes, and the course of the liver and gallbladder meridians.

The functional basis of disharmony may emanate primarily from the physical, emotional, or the deeper realms of spiritual being. For example, a lack of benevolence and the presence of belligerence indicate dysfunction in the spiritual and emotional realms of the wood element. It is quite possible, however, that at the time of the assessment the patient exhibits no physical symptomatology in the wood element. A patient diagnosed with hepatitis C, a severe physical illness of the liver, however, may be perfectly healthy in the spiritual and emotional domains of liver function. Hence the patient may be tranquilly benevolent and possess healthy self-esteem. Identifying the level of being that perpetuates dysfunction in each patient is a primary task for the practitioner of the inner tradition.

Of the three depths, the spirit possesses the capacity to move most quickly. In just one moment, the spirit may heal in a way that binds one again to true self and one's life purpose. Healing in this way is signaled by increased

experience of the virtues associated with one's constitutional type. Hence a person who is wood constitutionally will be better able to experience the virtue of benevolence as it exists at his or her core. Increased contact with one's source of virtue corresponds to a restitution of the basis of one's capacity for intuition.

The mind's capacity to heal is somewhat slower than the spirit's. Although profound insight may occur in a moment, the tendency of the mind is to continually fall back into habituated patterns of thought and belief. Only commitment to manifesting innate virtues paired with conscious vigilance can prevent the mind from seizing control and motivating one's attitudes and actions. Healing of the mind is signaled by an increase of behaviors that reflect one's constitutional virtues. While the spirit may know virtue, it is the mind that governs the movement of qi and wills actions that are consistent with fulfilling destiny.

Of the three depths, the body takes the longest to heal. Once a functional imbalance has manifested physically, it is relatively more concrete and harder to influence through treatment. Spirit is that which allows us to be in contact with virtue, and mind is that which allows our actions to reflect virtue. After original nature is lost and one is separated from the source of virtue, it takes many years of dysfunctional thought and behavior for illness to become embodied. Although spirit and mind may move toward healing relatively quickly, it will again take years for correct thought and action to be once again embodied as physical health.

This last assertion may contradict what some believe to be true about acupuncture. After all, many people experience long-lasting relief from chronic pain with just a few acupuncture treatments. One such example is John discussed in Chapter 10, whose pain associated with eight years of polyneuropathy disappeared after only one session. However, immediate relief of this nature is predicated in large part on movement of spirit and mind and often does not reflect a true physical healing at all. Despite his decrease of pain and renewed positive outlook, any objective measure such as a test of nerve conduction velocity would have revealed that my patient still had polyneuropathy. Imbalances of spirit and mind take years to become embodied as physical illness. Rectification of the spirit and mind may lead a person to feel better long before the physical embodiment of dysfunction is actually healed. It is therefore imperative to guide people to live in a healthier way so that true healing is promoted and the tendency to recreate one's illness is mitigated.

This preceding discussion illustrates an important premise in the inner tradition: Therapeutic measures administered with the intention of promoting healing will be received by the deepest aspects of self that perpetuate dysfunction. Of course, the focus of constitutional diagnosis is to direct healing toward the deepest aspects of the patient's being. One's constitutional dynamics are the basis for all expressions of true self in life. In directing treatment to this depth, the practitioner lays a foundation for subsequent healing by attending primarily to the most essential aspects of being. These principles are also present physiologically. Functional imbalances often begin with excessive physical and/or emotional work and then proceed to qi, blood, yin, yang, and ultimately jing deficiency. Deficiency of jing signifies the physiological depth of an imbalance. If a patient is jing deficient one must tonify this root of the imbalance to promote substantial healing.

If the symptoms of dysfunction are suppressed, illness will be driven deeper into the level of being that perpetuates imbalance and subsequently increase dysfunction in the other levels of being. If an imbalance of spirit is treated in a way that suppresses its expression, then the root of the imbalance will continue to perpetuate dysfunction as the patient becomes increasingly distanced from original nature. Eventually what began as a spirit-level dysfunction may become embodied as physical illness. For example, a patient who has been physically abused and subsequently experiences rage and depression may be given antidepressants as a long-term intervention. These drugs do not address the root cause of the problem, however, that may be located in the spiritual depth of the liver official. In time, the spiritual dysfunction that has been unattended to will undermine the functioning of the mind and body, ultimately leading to physical illness.

In contrast, illness may begin in the physical realm with the invasion of an external wind/cold pathogen. In this case antibiotics may be administered that eliminate the bacterial source of the infection but do nothing to eliminate the wind/cold. Excess heat generated as the body attempts to move the stagnation of cold will, over time, consume fluids. Depletion of fluids, in turn, will predictably lead to the more serious state of lung yin deficiency. By the time the yin of the lungs is injured, the imbalance is likely to have entered the spirit and emotional realms and the patient may evidence grief, longing, and difficulty receiving quality in life. Note that the suppression of symptoms is not limited to the inappropriate use of Western medical interventions. Treatment in any modality that eliminates pain but does not educate the patient has the potential to perpetuate ignorance and drive illness deeper.