

Approach & Chinese Herbs

How we approach things can be very important. By approach I include intention, attention, awareness, expectations, and assumptions. The word approach helps me tune into these aspects in a very subtle way, as if I were physically approaching a wary dog, skittish cat, or lost child. A poor approach can be detrimental in those situations.

I'm reminded of a lesson I learned about approach while in Shanghai, biking through the city along with, literally, thousands of bicyclists. For the first month I found myself getting increasingly angry with the Chinese and was almost in two very serious accidents. Then it dawned on me that I was approaching riding a bicycle in Shanghai as if I was still in Portland. As soon as I started riding as if I were Chinese, everything went smoothly.



I am learning more about how approach influences our lives. In this article I will explore how approach influences our use of Chinese herbs.

People approach Chinese herbs according to their understanding of health, medicine, and healing. For most of us, this is heavily influenced by assumptions accumulated during our lives through common experiences in the medical system. Most of our approach is conditioned by these experiences, which we unknowingly bring to a very different context with Chinese herbs. Here are a few general observations about some of these conditioned assumptions.

The Silver Bullet. This is a dominant feature of the Western drug approach that isolates one cause and introduces an antagonist chemical as treatment. The early success of this approach led to a continual search for that 'silver bullet' which spilled over into all aspects of our culture, looking for that one thing to turn things around, whether that one thing is a drug, herb, food, exercise, relationship, spiritual path, etc.

Equal Effectiveness. The assumption is that a drug that is 'successful' for treating a condition will do so equally well for everybody. The focus is on the relationship between the drug and the cause of the condition. The simplicity of this approach is very pervasive, but it doesn't allow much room for the amazing diversity that exists among people.

Complex & Technical. Because of the complex development of the Western technical sciences, like chemistry, it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to understand the diagnostic and treatment information for a condition. Within the medical profession this results in multiple layers of specialists who know a very limited area well. Over generations, this has led to technical specialists becoming the key decision makers.

Wait to Intervene. This makes most sense if treatments have large risks, side effects, and invasiveness to preclude them being used in mild or uncertain situations. Unfortunately this can result in many of us not responding to early symptoms, when they may be most easily remedied.

Anything Else is Not Valid. Over generations, a combination of all the above results in a general assumption that anything that doesn't fit these conditions can't be valid, useful or true. Because of the entrenched research process, anything that doesn't meet the above requirements is not likely to get the attention or dollars needed to 'prove' effectiveness.



Like most assumptions, the above examples may have never been verbalized, and yet we've been exposed to and absorbed them our entire lives. They form the context with which we approach health and

disease, healing and treatment.

I want to state clearly that the above assumptions are not inherently wrong, but they may not be appropriate when applied to a very different healing modality, like Chinese herbs. Much like my bicycle riding approach was useful in Portland, but created problems in Shanghai.

The problems I see with using the standard Western approach to Chinese herbs is that it limits effectiveness. For example, it is not useful to just substitute a single herb for a pharmaceutical and expect the same results. Here are some general, deeper values of Chinese herbs that can be lost with a Western approach.

Personalized Formula. One of the strongest elements of Chinese herbology is the ability to create a combination of herbs which reflects the individual, not the symptom or disease. This is very different from putting all people with similar symptoms in a category that is then treated by a single drug. A personalized formula offers the ability to account for many more variables that may more accurately reflect the whole person.

Formulas Change. Another strength of Chinese herbology is the ability to change the formula over time. Rather than one ingredient for a condition, a formula may include four to twenty ingredients. Over time these may be changed depending on effectiveness and changing symptoms. Formulas may also be changed as the individual changes. Again, the focus is on adjusting the herbs to match the person, rather than make the person fit a category.

Early Use. Because there are few, if any, side effects and very little invasiveness, there is no need to wait for a deteriorated condition to intervene. In fact, the effectiveness of herbs is, generally, highly dependent on getting started earlier rather than later in the process. For example, with a common cold, herbs are more effective taken preventatively, or on exposure, or on first subtle symptom, rather than waiting until a person can't work and has a whole list of symptoms.

Herbs as Food. Some very effective herbs are common foods: garlic, cinnamon, licorice, ginger. Many herbs are common to the Chinese diet, but are little known in the U.S., except as medicine. I consider this a powerful aspect, as many ingredients for healing are so well known that they are integrated into daily diet without the need for highly trained and technical professionals.

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.

~ Albert Einstein

It is curious that even with extensive training and enthusiasm for Chinese herbs, I still find my mind can be influenced by an accumulated Western approach. I want to reiterate that it is NOT that the Western mind approach is wrong, but recognize how it limits the natural effectiveness of Chinese herbs. It is just as true in the reverse, that drugs shouldn't be approached in the same manner as using herbs.

I can sense our culture is beginning to explore and understand when to utilize one form of health care or another. Bringing awareness to approach and those usually unconscious assumptions, helps me choose an appropriate option that leads to better harmony and balance.

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