

Chinese Medicine: How Does It Work?

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Westerners have grown up with certain basic assumptions about how we view and understand our bodies. Because most people only have experience with Western medicine, it is sometimes difficult to accept that there are other possible approaches. Understanding other approaches can be difficult because the terminology and descriptions are different. These approaches can offer new insights and understanding because they have a different way of viewing things. This section will compare some of the major aspects of Western and Chinese medicine.

Western medicine is focused on the physical aspects of the body. By contrast, Chinese medicine looks at the same body and focuses on energetic flow and balance. It is important to understand the differences between these two approaches. Neither is right or wrong; however, the choice of perspectives plays a large role in how health and disease is defined.

Western medicine has evolved over the last 100 years with the advances of medical technology. With the increasing sophistication of observing and measuring material aspects of the human body, western medicine has become solely focused on physical aspects.

Chinese medicine has a continuous history which spans 3000-5000 years. Without the current technology to explore physical structures, early Chinese doctors sought to explain the function of the human body in energetic terms. For example, Chinese doctors, in general, did not use dissection of human cadavers to learn about the internal organs. Instead, they built their theories on the functions they could observe and explained it all by a sophisticated system of energy which nourished, supported, and influenced the physical structures of the body.

The Chinese Medical Perspective - Understanding Qi

The beauty of Chinese medicine lies in its ability to distinguish between different subtle levels of conditions, and utilize techniques or therapies which are specific to that condition. This ability to distinguish different types of energetic patterns within a similar condition is a very valuable tool because the therapy can be much more refined and targeted.

For example, in the West we think of the common cold as caused by a virus and view all colds similarly. In Chinese medicine, the common cold can be broken down into several different types depending on energetic factors, such as: heat, wind, cold, or damp.

The Chinese term used to describe the various types of energies in our bodies is called "qi." Qi (sometimes spelled "chi") is much more refined than the English word "energy." Qi is a very subtle vibration that can be felt, but not seen or measured.



Because energetic terminology like qi is somewhat difficult to grasp, the use of analogies can be a useful aid. Remember that the analogy is not an exact description, but a picture that helps explain the concept.

In general, the qi in our bodies can be compared with the flow of water. Water flows through a region via lakes, rivers, and streams. A balanced water flow describes a good, normal flow of water throughout the region, with no flooding or drought in any area. The cleanliness of the water is also a factor. Water which is stagnant, blocked, or does not flow well becomes unclean and tends to develop problems. For the general good health of the region it is important to have enough volume and a good flow of clean water.

Qi circulates through the body in much the same way as water. Having enough qi and a good flow of qi are the general factors of good health. When there is a problem with the quantity or flow of qi, the beginnings of disease occur. Again, the water analogy can be useful.

If, by chance, a large log were to fall across a stream it would block the water flow. What would happen?

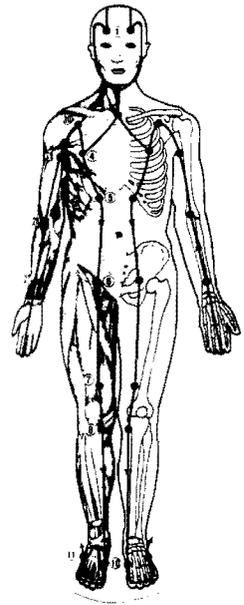
At first, the results would not be obviously bad. The stream would continue to flow; however, the water would begin to back up behind the log. Although there is not anything wrong with this, over time it could develop into a worse situation. The basic imbalance is an impeded flow which creates too much water upstream from the log and too little water downstream. The problems that could develop if this situation were left unchanged might include flooding, stagnant water which would result in an increase in bacteria and moss, becoming a breeding ground for mosquitos etc. While downstream, not enough water would lead to vegetation drying out, losing habitat for insects and wildlife.

In the body, qi can also be blocked, impeding the flow through the body. These blockages are defined in energetic terms, such as too much heat, cold, damp, etc..... which hinders the flow of qi through that area. The degree of impact that the blockages can have varies greatly, from a very slight disruption of energetic flow, to a major disruption. ***The goal in Chinese medicine is to deal with the imbalance at a very subtle and early stage, before stagnation and major physical symptoms develop.***

The focus of each therapy is to encourage the flow of qi. This can be done in a variety of ways from boosting the level of qi (adding water to the stream) to focusing on removing blockages which impede the flow of qi.

In the stream analogy, after the log blocking the stream is removed, the water begins flowing again and eventually restores balance to the area, decreasing flooding, relieving drought, and purifying the water. Thus the saying, "Running water purifies itself."

In the case of the human body, a major way to assist the body regain balance is to promote a good flow of qi and the body will purify itself of any stuck or imbalanced energies. This is the focus of Chinese medicine.



Recommended Books about Chinese Medicine:

General Overview:

Beinfeld, Harriet; Korngold, Efrem (1991) *Between Heaven and Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine*

Kaptchuk, Ted (1983) *The Web That Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine*

Bodywork:

Teeguarden, Iona (1978) *Acupressure Way of Health*

Emotional Aspects:

Teeguarden, Iona (1987) *Joy of Feeling*

Qi Gong (meditation):

Chia, Mantak (1993) *Awaken Healing Light*

Chia, Mantak (1985) *Transforming Stress into Vitality*

Diet:

Lu, Henry (1986) *Chinese System of Food Cures*

Pitchford, Paul (1993) *Healing with Whole Foods*