

Why Study Traditional Chinese Medicine?

In *Foundations of Herbalism*, you will explore and learn a system of herbalism that is emerging today. Learning some of the holistic concepts of the ancient system of traditional medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), you will become acquainted with many of the important ideas of all person-centered and nature-centered systems of healing of the world. Whether the east Indian system of healing, Ayurveda, the Arabic system of Tibb medicine, or native American Indian shamanism, all humanistic systems of healing have important points in common.

Becoming familiar with these universal concepts of traditional medicine can help you focus more on “person-centered” herbalism, as opposed to “process-centered” herbalism. This is related to the concept of “treating the branch,” “treating the root.” In other words, when you are attempting to use herbal remedies to treat disease you can consider treating the symptoms or working with some of the processes and factors that went into creating disease. Both are useful and necessary. One is not inherently better than the other, but in the western world we tend to focus on treating the branch because we often want to get rid of the symptoms as quickly as possible. In our accelerating world we sometimes do not take time to reflect that deeper and wider forces, including our own inherited nature, interplay to create health or disease. When considering a person with arthritis for example, we want to know the pathways and processes active in an individual that led to the inflammation and eventual pain, stiffness, and even degeneration in the joints. Treating the branch is like giving a person standardized willow bark extract. The natural salicylates may help reduce inflammation and pain, but they do little to interact with the deeper processes that created the inflammation and pain. If we can borrow concepts from traditional medicine like “hot and cold” or “too metabolically active” (yang excess) or “not enough metabolic activity with stagnation of cold” (yang deficiency), then we can add other herbs along with the willow bark extract, as well as dietary and other lifestyle changes that may help to start the process of reversing the immune dysfunction and chronic inflammation that is at the core of the problem.

TCM looks at the big picture like how do we fit into our environment and how are we influenced by different external factors and changes such as the seasons. Western medicine looks at the minute processes of the body’s enzyme systems and other mechanisms. In a sense, the latter is mechanistic and the former vitalistic, though these are only labels. In practice both systems interact in ways that brings us a more three-dimensional picture of health and healing and how they affect the human organism.

Interestingly, many of the concepts of traditional medicine and its diagnostic methods like pulse and tongue diagnosis and herbal energetic principles (the flavors and temperature—hot or cold—of herbs) were also an integral part of western medicine up until the last two centuries or so. Galen, the famous physician from the 1st century A.D., wrote about many pulse types, constitutional types, and herbal energetics. This is where herbalism started,

even in the west. In a way, by studying traditional systems of medicine and healing like TCM we are attempting to restore the complete system of western healing and herbalism. Though this integration is really only just starting in North America, Europe, and other western countries, the process is vigorous and exciting and will change the way we practice herbalism. As this happens, a new system of integrated medicine and herbalism is occurring because of the internet, the unprecedented ability to travel on jet planes, and the ability to store vast quantities of information, distribute this information, and interact with it. And don't forget that the spirit of herbalism is about paying attention to the health of all life on earth and beyond that, the entire planet. Ultimately, nurturing the health of every aspect of the whole of which we are a part will bring us greater health and happiness.