

Healing, Oriental Medicine, and Nature

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Welcome to the first installment of a new column exploring one of the most important issues facing humanity today: the symbiotic relationship of man and the earth. What we want to do in this column is examine how Oriental medicine can be a tool to help assist in healing and strengthening that relationship. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and the man responsible for Teddy Roosevelt starting the National Park System, said, "Pull on a chord of nature somewhere and the whole thing moves." Oriental medicine is a part of that fabric, and can be a way to affect the whole. Ted Kaptchuk epitomized this idea by naming his famous book "*The Web That Has No Weaver*."

Many environmental issues we face today are more than just "issues." Greenhouse effects, global warming, deforestation, endangered wildlife, energy crises, changing weather patterns, invasive species and pollution are factors that will not only influence the future, but already threaten our way of life. As acupuncturists, practitioners of Oriental medicine and health care providers we have the unique opportunity to become catalysts for change, not only for our patients, but for the larger view of mankind as well.

Much of Oriental medicine has its origins in Taoism, Shamanism and *qi gong*. These, in turn, all have common roots in the observation of Nature. Be it feng shui, Hua Tou and his five animal frolics, or Lao Tzu leaving town on a water buffalo, the driving force is the desire to live in harmony with Nature. I personally feel that the rising trend in complementary and alternative therapies is parallel with humanity's rising consciousness about our environmental responsibility and spirituality. It is apparent that we cannot live separately from the earth. Therefore, as we injure the earth, we injure ourselves, and as we heal the earth, we heal ourselves.

The *Tao Te Ching* (#25) states:

Man follows the Earth
Earth follows the Heavens
The Heavens follow the Tao
And the Tao follows Nature.

The *Tao* follows Nature. You would think it would be the other way around, but there you have it. Essentially, everything has its own Nature, and the Tao is no exception. Mankind also is following its own Nature. Our environmental problems are the result of great progress such as the automobile, the airplane and the expansion of cultures. There always have been thinkers and inventors. It's now up to us to follow our Nature and come up with some real solutions if we are going to continue to thrive as a race.

Natural health and environmental medicine is now a hot topic. We all know about natural health, but what about environmental medicine? This is a branch of medicine that deals with risks posed by contaminants from your home, your workplace, the food you eat, the water you drink, the air you breathe and from anywhere in the environment. Essentially, anything you do, inside or out, places you at risk. Why shouldn't Oriental medicine be at the forefront of this movement? After all,

it has the long-est history and the least side-effects, is based on natural principles, and has the ability to work on many different levels (including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual).

So, how can Oriental medicine help with this? The saying "Think globally, act locally" can apply to patients that lie down before us every day. As we educate them of the powers of energetic medicine, we have the chance to shift the paradigm of traditional Western drug, surgical and medical thought to a more holistic view, incorporating the many levels of health that need to be addressed for true healing to take place. This holistic view is exactly what is needed to be practiced with regard to the environment. In fact, fragmentation of ecosystems, which comes from things like roadways and clear-cutting of forests, is one of the largest threats to animal species and habitats today.

The main questions needed to be asked are: How do we achieve optimal health in a polluted environment? How do we achieve it for ourselves? How do we achieve it for our patients? And how can we achieve it for the earth? Polluting the earth pollutes our health in many ways. We can see it manifest as asthma, allergies, nerve damage, chemical sensitivities, lung and liver damage, hormonal imbalance and even cancer. I would go one step further and even say that what is happening in the world creates stress, anxiety, depression - even addictions and suicide. These are things that we all treat naturally and successfully.

Let's look at a specific issue that was a controversial topic this winter: the flu vaccination and the fear of a pandemic avian bird flu. The regular seasonal flu was estimated to affect 150 million Americans this year. Last year, over 200,000 people were hospitalized and 40,000 people died. The World Health Organization estimated that if the bird flu hits, it could kill 7.4 million people worldwide (*Newsweek*, Oct. 31, 2005).

These are large numbers that everyone agrees should be taken seriously. How does Western medicine handle it? With a controversial flu shot. Not only is the safety of vaccinations questionable (due to possibly higher chances of Alzheimer's, autism and chemicals in the shot such as mercury), but many experts believe the flu shot doesn't even work because of what is called antigen shift. The flu vaccination is based on last year's flu. Since these viruses mutate daily, you are being injected with a useless vaccination that might even make you sick.

Oriental medicine has a completely opposite view of the transmission of disease. It has to do with the opposition of right (*zheng*) *qi* versus evil (*xie*) *qi*. Oriental medicine claims there is a constant battle between our internal right *qi* (our immune system) and the external evil *qi* (a virus or bacteria). The Yellow Emperor claims in the *Nei Jing*, "When the *qi* is present and sound no pathogen can invade a person, even when the cycles of nature are disruptive and plagues are near." We as practitioners should be treating and strengthening the immune system with acupuncture, herbs, diet and *qi gong* as the main course of preventive medicine. This would save thousands if not millions of lives, and millions if not billions of dollars in health care costs. (The *Environmental Health Perspective 2001* reported that between \$568 billion and \$793 billion a year is spent in Canada and the U.S. for environmentally caused disease.)

By understanding the true nature of disease and its etiology, we allow the body to become stronger and fight the flu itself. This is a far less costly and superior way to treat patients. This can help the environment in many ways. Herbs would be used instead of chemicals and drugs, allowing fewer side-effects and less waste. It would raise awareness of the power of natural medicine, and it would save money that could be diverted to more holistic, preventive and environmental causes.

Some other concrete examples of what we can do include the acupuncturists that helped provide care for victims and relief workers at 9/11. You also might have been following the stories of using

acupuncture for relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, a new organization, Acupuncturists Without Borders (www.acuwithoutborders.org) rushed in to help in the wake of Katrina; a perfect example of exactly what I am talking about. Why can't we become part of the Red Cross or Peace Corps, traveling the world and providing natural health and good will? Do you know how John Muir got Teddy Roosevelt to start the National Park System? He took him out camping in Yosemite, just the two of them, and let Nature speak for itself. All President Roosevelt had to do was see it and be inspired. There are now national park systems all over the world.

I would appreciate all thoughts and feedback about this exciting concept of how to incorporate the healing power of Oriental medicine to make not only people, but the earth, healthier. In *qi gong*, we say that the mind leads the *qi* and the body follows. Very simply, if I want to scratch my nose, my mind says "scratch," the energy goes down my arm, and the arm follows. Now, if we say, as Confucius did, "what can I do to make this world a better place," and we put our minds and energy toward it, what would follow?

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